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Art Education at Bank Street College, Then and Now

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Art Education at Bank Street College, Then and Now

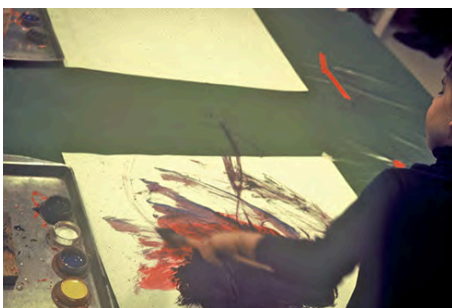
by Edith Gwathmey and Ann-Marie Mott

Beginnings

One of our constant joys of teaching art in Bank Street’s School for Children and its Graduate School for the past 40 years has been witnessing children’s curiosity—and adults’ for that matter—while they explore the sensorial nature of art materials. Just as fascinating is seeing how their discoveries emerge into developmental patterns that change and become more complex and differentiated over the months and years. We think that the founders of the School for Children (originally called the Nursery School) and later, of the Graduate School, must have felt this joy, since the visual arts were a vital component of the daily experiences offered to children during the school’s early years. Lucy Sprague Mitchell, who in 1916 founded the Bureau of Educational Experiments (which later became the Bank Street College of Education), and her colleagues, Harriet Johnson and Caroline Pratt, believed that the arts were central to children’s developing understanding of their world.

After teaching children and adults at Bank Street for so many years, we wanted to investigate how our present thought and practice relate to the history of art education in our institution. We were fortunate to have Lois Lord as our mentor and teacher from our beginning years at Bank Street through the end of her long life. We researched the archives located in the Bank Street Library, including pamphlets and books that documented the founders’ thoughts and practice. Antler’s biography of Lucy Sprague Mitchell (1987), Cenedella’s doctoral dissertation, *The Bureau of Educational Experiments* (1996), and Nager and Shapiro’s book, *Revisiting a Progressive Pedagogy: The Developmental-Interaction Approach* (2000), were three other important resources.

In the school’s beginning years in the West Village in New York City, Mitchell, Pratt, and Johnson wrote about how they provided two- to five-year-old children with open-ended art materials such as unit blocks (invented by Pratt), paint, clay, and wood. From their observations of young children, they understood that the “work” of childhood is all about playing with these materials. Their classroom



The basic materials: Paints, clay, blocks, and woodworking materials.

was filled with the sights, sounds, and industry of young children’s imaginative inquiry about their world. Mitchell (1950) referred to the combination of young children’s inner excitement when making a discovery and their creative acts as “interest drives” (p. 6) and wrote that young children “approach the world creatively, full of active impulses to do: they are young artists, young thinkers” (p. 6). Children were encouraged to freely experiment in their block buildings, wooden constructions, drawings, paintings, and clay sculptures.

Two Pioneering Early Studies

Using what was an unusual method for educational research in the 1920s, Mitchell, Pratt, and Johnson combined the roles of teacher and researcher as they worked with children at the Nursery School (Antler, 1987; Cenedella, 1996). Influenced by the emphasis on quantitative data collection at that time, they accumulated massive amounts of scientific data and information about children’s physical growth, IQ, and behavior during the early years of observing children in the nursery school. However, they became overwhelmed with the quantity of information they were collecting and discouraged that these measurements offered little understanding about patterns of children’s growth. Mitchell was thinking of abandoning the research element of the Bureau.



Archival photo from the Nursery School

Fortunately, during that period Johnson and Barbara Biber were also pursuing another methodology for researching children’s behaviors that was influenced by John Dewey’s belief in studying the whole child in child-centered situations. Along with their quantitative data collecting, Johnson and Biber had been observing and recording children’s interactions with the teachers, other children, and open-ended materials. Instead of viewing children’s behavior in discrete segments or compartmentalized categories in artificial isolated settings, the two of them focused on observing and recording children’s play with materials. Johnson studied children’s block play, and Biber collected and analyzed children’s drawings. These observations led to ideas and plans for curricula based on children’s interests and abilities. Mitchell came to believe that these two studies were just as scientific as measures of quantitative

norms. These research efforts were critical in confirming Mitchell, Pratt, Johnson, and Biber's belief in Dewey's psychological and social view of the child in society.

During Johnson's study of children's block building, she discovered patterns of development in their structures. In *The Art of Block Building* (1933), she articulated her view that children's work with blocks revealed aesthetic decision making. She saw children as artists as they repeated and varied the shapes in their progression of explorations, arrangements, designs, and representations.

Johnson's block sequence



1. Exploration



2. Control of the material; patterns



3. Design



4. Representation: Shea Stadium

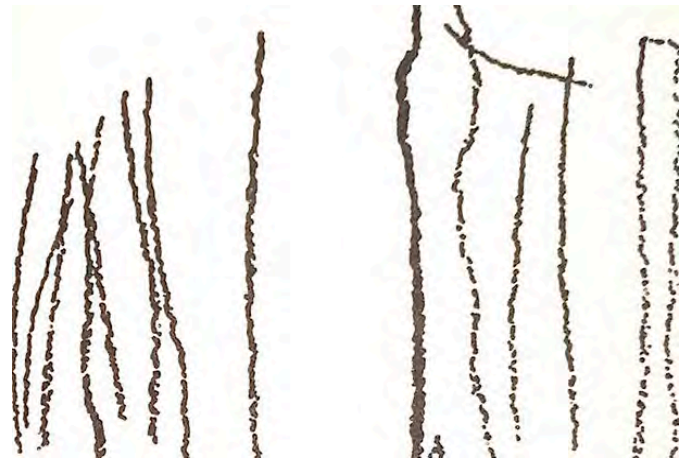
Today, nursery schools and early elementary classrooms still provide children with Pratt's inventive blocks. She designed her sturdy and easily handled blocks based on mathematical relationships between shape and size. Cuffaro (1991) views blocks and other open ended materials as the "textbooks" of the early childhood curriculum.

When Biber, a developmental psychologist, joined the faculty in 1928, she began a study of the drawings of children aged eighteen months to four years, in which she organized and analyzed the artwork qualitatively in a developmental sequence (Biber, 1934/1984a). In her study, *Children's Drawings from Lines to Pictures*, Biber viewed the cognitive, physical, and emotional aspects of young children's growing control of the material as integrated. This synthesis is basic to the developmental-interaction approach that Shapiro and Biber (1972) articulated. We find it fascinating that these two studies occurred in these early years and that they were based on children's play with art materials, such as blocks and drawing materials, instead of on other modes of expressive behavior, such as language or movement.

Drawings from Biber's book (1934/1984).

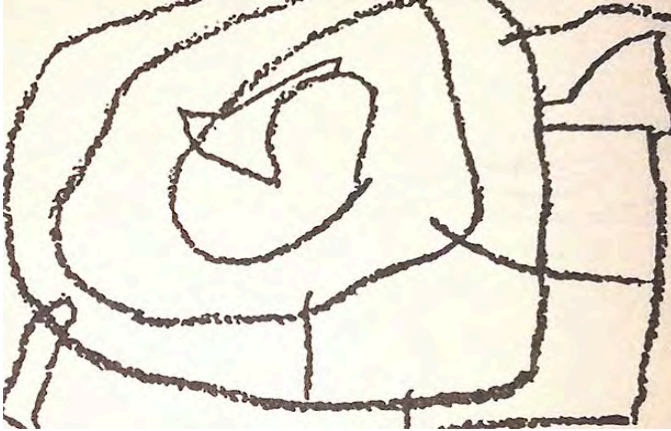


1. Motoric exploration

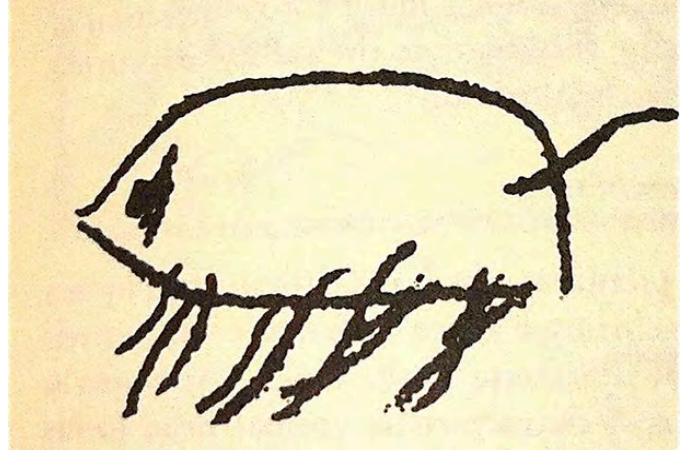


2. Control: patterns

Drawings from Biber's book (1934/1984a):



3. Design



4. Representation

One reason that Johnson and Biber made those choices might be that block buildings and drawings can be easily documented and studied. Moreover, young children's expressive play with materials is more developed than their abilities with the spoken and written word. Blocks and drawing materials were available during children's uninterrupted play periods. Children built and drew spontaneously in designated spaces with materials that were provided daily by the teachers. The adults observed children in an environment that was safe and that encouraged children's self-initiating play. Researchers and teachers did not control or direct children's experiences. Instead, they organized the materials and discussed their availability and then, as the children worked, supported their ideas and inquiry. This approach was in opposition to the rigid, direct modeling and demonstrating by the teacher that was typical in most classrooms at the time. Instead, Biber (1934/1984a) explained, "the purpose was to allow the child's interests to develop apace with his needs" (p. 157). Teachers' leading questions, such as "What is it?," "What are you drawing?," or "What are you building?," were discouraged. Instead, teachers were encouraged, as they are now, to articulate the unique elements of the children's work, with a remark such as "Look how you moved your arm when you made these long curving lines." The teacher's role was and is to help children become conscious of their intuitive actions.

Young children from all cultures are able to realize these unfolding stages of development without formal instruction (Biber, 1934/1984a; Kellogg, 1969). Johnson and Biber also may have been aware that, unlike the world's many spoken and written languages, art is a universal mode of expression, especially during the early childhood years. Biber (1934/1984a) wrote that as soon as young children are able to hold a drawing tool, a stick, a crayon, or a magic marker, they begin to make marks on any available surface. Their early rhythmic arm movements or their scribblings soon create recognizable

shapes. These shapes at first are explored at various places on the drawing surface and eventually become arranged and organized into unified compositions that for us are extraordinary aesthetic delights to behold. Finally, around the age of four or five, children are able to match and assemble their graphic symbols, such as circles, squares, rectangles, triangles, dots, and lines, with what they perceive as necessary for representational imagery. These ideas have been elaborated, and at times challenged, by later researchers (e.g., Burton, 1980; Gardner 1990 Golomb, 1992; Kellogg, 1969; Kindler & Darras, 1997; Lord & Smith, 1973correct date; Lowenfeld, 1947).

Formation of the Cooperative School for Student Teachers

As the Bureau was gaining renown through the 1920s, Mitchell and Johnson realized that they needed to educate teachers who could implement this child-centered approach to learning. In 1931 the Cooperative School for Student Teachers (which later became the Bank Street College Graduate School) was formed. From the beginning, art played a central role in the curriculum for teachers. William Zorach, an artist/sculptor and instructor at the Art Students League, was among seven advisors in the Cooperative School. According to his vitae in the Cooperative School's first catalog, he was "one of the first artists who worked out progressive ideas in art in the various experimental schools" (Bureau of Educational Experiments, 1931, Advisors, paragraph 7). He had written a number of articles in *Arts Magazine*, including "The Child in Art" and "The New Tendencies in Art." Many years later, Biber (1984b) wrote that she wished that she had been a student of Zorach's, saying that his "way of guiding expressive potential through an evolutionary course of open experimentation to the technical mastery of line, space, and form would have provided me with another language with which to think" (Biber, 1984b, p. 155). When viewing his stone sculptures of children with animals, you can imagine how his work with children influenced his own art.

The first catalog also lists Ralph Pearson, an independent modern artist, as a member of the Cooperative School's teaching staff. He was the director of the Design Workshop at the New School for Social Research, another progressive institution for adult learning that Cooperative School students attended and that the Cooperative School was working closely with at that time. In the Cooperative School's 1931–1932 catalog, he wrote that students in his workshop would "create form and color harmonies for the pleasure and mental health to be had from the doing" (Bureau of Educational Experiments, 1931, 2. Studies in the Arts, paragraph 6.) The catalog stated, "Many of the skills acquired in Mr. Pearson's Design Workshop may prove to be of decided value in the direction of children's art work" (Bureau of Educational Experiments, 1931, 4. Classroom Techniques, paragraph 4.) Another entry in the catalog noted, "We should like every student to attempt an expression of some



A trip to a pottery studio shop inspires a 4/5s class at the Bank Street School for Children to create their own.

of his own experiences or observations through one of the arts—language, painting, music or drama—not for the sake of the product but for the meaning that such creative expression will have for him” (Bureau of Educational Experiments, 1931, Curriculum & Its Basis, paragraph 5). The catalog listed art workshops in dance, music, block building, drawing, painting, clay, woodworking, and mask making. Mitchell believed that the student teachers’ artistic growth would influence their teaching of children. As Nager and Shapiro (2007)

noted, “In this sense, the curriculum for teachers was designed as an analog to that for children” (p. 25).

The Early Social Studies Curriculum and Art

Because of Dewey’s influence on Mitchell’s, Pratt’s, and Johnson’s thinking about children’s school learning, children and teachers in the Nursery School in the 1920s went on trips in the neighborhood as a means of engaging in inquiry and developing the children’s understanding of the world around them. Starting with the child’s frame of reference and interests, teachers provided experiences in the outer world that were followed by the children re-creating those experiences in the classroom. The outside world entered the early childhood classroom through children’s symbolic use of materials and their play with each other.

Mitchell continued developing her ideas about experiential learning while collaborating and teaching with Elisabeth Irwin at P.S. 61 and Little Red Schoolhouse in the early 1930s. Moving beyond nursery years education, Mitchell developed studies for six- to 12-year-olds that included direct encounters with the outside world. Again, open-ended materials were transformed into symbolic communications, both artistic and scientific. Mitchell was fusing Dewey’s ideas about educational thought and practice with her research on children’s development. As children grew older and had ever-widening experiences, they were able to extend and relate personal thoughts and feelings within a larger and more complex cognitive and social framework. The focus on trips and on children’s active and direct engagement with ideas, people, and materials became a powerful influence on developing the philosophy and



6/7s at the Bank Street School for Children painting a mural of La Marqueta, 1980s.



8/9s at the Bank Street School for Children building a long house for their Lenape study, 1980s.

practice of the Bureau of Educational Experiment's children's school and later of Bank Street's Graduate School and School for Children as well as of other progressive private and public schools.

While Mitchell and Dewey deeply believed in scientific thought, they also valued artistic expression as a means for children to emotionally identify with and internalize their learning from their studies. Dewey (1934) wrote, "Science states meanings; art expresses them" (p. 84). In *Young Geographers*, Mitchell (1934/1991) demonstrated how a classroom becomes both a scientist's laboratory and an artist's studio. Unlike the practice in typical classrooms at that time (and today as well), in Bank Street classrooms the basic materials of art—paint, clay, drawing materials, blocks, and wood—continued (and continue) to be available for children through the age of thirteen to use in recreating their experiences, instead of disappearing after the early years of childhood. The classrooms at Bank Street (and other progressive schools) were—and still are—filled with the industry of children's work and play: block buildings, murals, drawings, paintings, and models of their artistic, scientific, and social learning.

In *Young Geographers*, there are photographs of children's work beyond the nursery years, from kindergarten through junior high school. Mitchell (1934/1991) wrote that when they are able to represent their experiences through symbolic imagery, children reveal the learning they have acquired from the teacher's "input." The input consists of trips in the outside world, discussions, and readings. She observed how children visualize and verbalize their world through their art and other symbolic work in all areas of study. She called children's work the "output," which becomes increasingly differentiated with children's growth. These developing outputs then become integrated into more complex modes of thought as children mature. Antler (1987) wrote that Mitchell "understood that a child's creativity incorporated an intellectual impulse" (p. 298).

Then and now, these developmental considerations were and are the basis for the content and artistic recreations of the social studies curriculum, the “core curriculum.” Although Dewey acknowledged that children passed through stages of growth, he was not interested in investigating the unique qualities of each stage (Cenedella, 1996). Mitchell and the Bureau wanted to study and document these stages and how they related to curriculum studies. The relationships children discover and the connections they make in their thinking at different stages were at the heart of Mitchell’s educational philosophy and practice. Just as she addressed the physical, emotional, intellectual, and social needs and interests of the whole child, the content of the core social studies curriculum involved the whole culture, including the interactions between the physical and social environment. Instead of relying on assignments and rote memorization based on textbook readings and the teacher’s lectures, teachers and children became interactive learners, using all their senses. Together they went on trips, interviewed workers, read relevant books, discussed ideas based on their ongoing inquiry, and re-created through visual and verbal symbolic work the salient characteristics of the culture they were studying. This is how art became an integral part of children’s studies in the school.

Art Education at Bank Street in the 1950s to the Present

As the years progressed, art instructors in the Graduate School continued to develop and refine developmental theory and practice in art education. Lois Lord and Jane Bland, who were teaching the Arts Workshop in the ’50s, were influenced by the thinking of Viktor Lowenfeld at Pennsylvania State University, who wrote *Creative and Mental Growth* in 1947. Like the educators at Bank Street and other progressive institutions, he deeply believed that children’s art reflected emotional, social, aesthetic, intellectual, and physical growth. He also formulated a theory of stages in artistic development that paralleled Biber’s research. He pioneered the idea that good teaching was a dialogue with children. He



Texture collage by a four-year-old, paper collage by a five-year-old, and texture collage by a 10-year-old.

advocated focusing not only on the visual and physical levels of the experience but also on the personal emotions that art making evoked in the child.

While teaching graduate students at Bank Street, Lord and Bland were also working with Victor D'Amico at the Museum of Modern Art's Education Department. Using the museum's collection as a primary resource in their family workshops, they pioneered the use of found materials for collage and assemblage experiences for their students. For Lord and Bland, these materials became as important as paints and clay in the development of the art curriculum. It's hard to imagine now that collage and construction were not considered serious art forms in schools at that time, despite the early use of found materials by artists in the beginning of the 20th century. Many of these artists, such as Picasso, Miró, and Klee, were influenced by children's intuitive artwork. Their interest may have in turn inspired a renewed focus on and valuing of children's art education at the museum and by art educators elsewhere.

Throughout her career, Lord was passionate about communicating her ideas about teaching art to every teacher, not just to art teachers. In 1961 in the film *Collage: Exploring Texture*, she documented her use of collage with children at the New Lincoln School. In 1970 she published *Collage and Construction in School: Preschool/Junior High*. In both the movie and the book, Lord offered practical strategies, both visual and verbal, regarding the aesthetic presentation of the materials. For Lord, the clear organization of any art material was of primary importance in attracting children to the art experience. Instead of a scattered jumble of collage materials, jars of muddied paint, or lumps of clay that was too wet or too dry, she offered children materials in prime condition. At the beginning of a collage experience, children were asked to choose from neatly organized and categorized piles of papers and textiles in a variety of colors, patterns, and textures. Red, yellow, and blue (the primary colors) as well as black and



Lois Lord teaching in her 90s in 1996.

white tempera paints were poured into small shallow containers or coasters that children carefully placed on a metal tray along with a brush, sponge, and water container. Clay was offered in large malleable lumps.

While teaching children at the New Lincoln School and graduate students at Bank Street, Lord continued to refine her ideas about

developmental stages in children's art. Like Lowenfeld, she looked beyond the schema or symbols that children use in their art. She was interested in how children's developing imagery was transformed into a work that expressed the creator's unique vision and emotional connection to the art experience. She began thinking about how she could help teachers provide materials and a structure that enabled children to visualize their deepest feelings and ideas about their world. We were both fortunate to be among the art teachers Lord mentored in the School for Children and in the Graduate School in the 1970s and 1980s. She deeply influenced our philosophy and practice as art educators with children and adults.

As a professional photographer, Lord documented children's work with art materials throughout her life. She showed her slides to illustrate her thoughts about teaching art. These remarkable slides mesmerized audiences, and we were fortunate to see them again and again in her many presentations to teachers in the Arts Workshop, faculty in the Bank Street College Graduate School, and teachers in the School for Children as well as to those who participated in the many outreach programs she offered during her career. We were very affected by Lord's insights into how to help children and adults connect to art experiences. Using an approach similar to Lowenfeld's dialogues, at the beginning of the art experience she asked a carefully worded question, which she referred to as the motivation. The motivation invited and inspired students to respond from their own experiences, which was different from having children start with a dictated topic that was unrelated to their lives. Lord felt that the teacher's narrow choice of a subject didn't allow students' experiences to become the focus of their art. Together with Nancy Smith, her student teacher at New Lincoln (who later became a head teacher), she mapped out a developmental sequence of motivations designed to inspire personal subject matter.

In 1973 Lord and Smith wrote a manuscript titled *Experience and Painting*, which Smith (1983) later finished as *Experience and Art: Teaching Children to Paint*. In their manuscript, Lord and Smith (1973) offered examples of motivations for children who are able to represent their experiences in the world,

such as "What animals do you know that are fierce and what animals do you know that are friendly?," "What games do you like to play with your friends?," and "What do you like to do with your family on the weekend?" These seemingly simple questions encourage children to identify and create imagery that often reveals compelling subject matter from their lived lives. Lord believed that every child deserves access



Eight year old painting a boat on the Hudson River.

to this means of communication. As the art consultant in Bank Street's Follow Through program, she visited and led art workshops for teachers in many public elementary schools where children rarely had the opportunity to express their deepest feelings and thoughts about their lives through visual means.

At the New Lincoln School and Bank Street College, Lord became involved in the integration of art in the social studies curriculum, based on Mitchell's (1934/1991, 1950) principles. For Lord, art offered a means of connecting who you are—your inner self—with the world outside. While Lord felt that motivations about children's personal lives outside of school were crucial, she also felt that classroom teachers needed to include art within their curriculum studies. Her thinking about motivations is alive in past and present integrative social studies curricula as enacted in the Bank Street School for Children and other private and public schools. For example, nursery and early elementary school children study their relationships to families, neighborhoods, and school, as young children did in the Bureau of Educational Experiment's nursery school. After a trip to the post office, for example, the kindergarten or first-grade teacher gathers all the children to discuss the trip. The teacher poses a motivating question, such as "What was your favorite part of the trip to the post office?" Children offer a variety of responses and use drawing materials to represent their favorite experiences. The next day, before the work period, the teacher asks children questions, such as "What do you remember about the workers in the post office?" "Where were they and what were they doing?" and "Who would like to build a post office out of cardboard?"

Second and third graders are able to understand concepts based on the here and now and relate them to the more abstract long ago through concrete experiences with historical objects and sites. Teachers at the Bank Street School for Children may begin a study of the Hudson River, past and present, with a painting experience. They might ask a series of motivating questions, such as "If you could take a trip on the river, what kind of vehicle would you go in?" "What would you do, what would you see?" "Will you begin your painting with a vehicle or with the water?" and "What colors will you choose?"

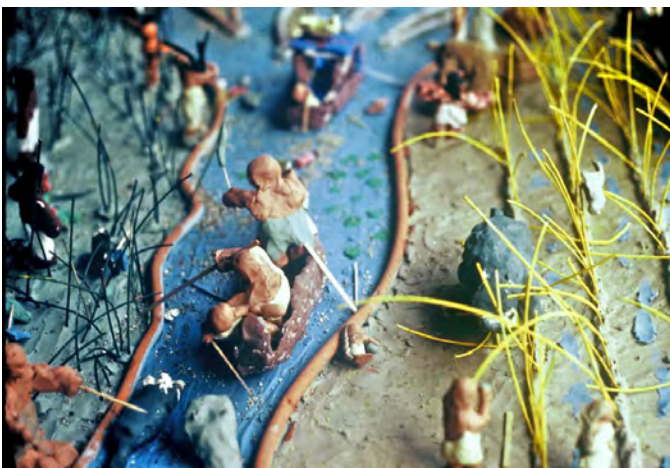


Table model of the flooding of the Nile and mural for a play about the Aztecs.

A trip to the Hudson will inevitably follow. During the study of Lenape tribes of Manhattan, a painting motivation may begin with the question, “If you were a Lenape child, what games would you play?” After children respond, the teacher may ask, “Will you begin with the background or the people?”

Older children from fourth through eighth grade are able to understand past and present cultures of distant lands, with increasing depth and complexity at each age level. At Bank Street, while children are studying ancient Egypt, they frequently visit city museums. They investigate the tombs, murals, and small models that depict daily living through visual imagery and hieroglyphics. In their drawings on trip sheets at the museum, they record their observations of paintings, sculptures, architecture, and possessions they have seen in the collection. Back in the classroom, using what they’ve seen and recorded, they make models of the Nile River and life around it, using clay and other materials. As the culminating experience to this half-year study, children create a play about life in ancient Egypt. They write the script, make the scenery, props, and costumes, and present the play to their families and the school community.

Just as critical to the creative work being expressed and communicated is the process of working together in a democratic community. A curriculum study based on children’s interests provides a common purpose. Children’s individual and group artworks are shared and become contributions that benefit the developing study and the progression of living, working, and playing within the classroom community. Instead of competing with each other for top grades and awards for intellectual, physical, and social dominance, children and teachers share their unique ideas, interests, and abilities during the course of the study. A living and dynamic community of learners develops from experiencing and creating together (Vascellaro, 2011).

Teaching Teachers Today

We have been teaching the Arts Workshop and refining the curriculum together since the middle of the 1980s. We are amazed at how modern Bank Street’s early founders were in their thinking about children and teacher education. Mitchell and her colleagues knew that if their ideas about development and their understanding of curriculum were to be enacted in their school, they needed to educate teachers about the theory and practice of their progressive approach. Similarly, we have been reminded of this again and again when teaching teachers the importance of working directly with art materials. Teachers need to feel successful as artists in order to have the desire and ability to include art in their classrooms. As the artist El Anatsui said in a recent radio interview, “Every one of us has an artist in us. Really, some may be asleep and some are fully awake, you know. So I think I have a kind of

commitment to waking up some people in whom it is asleep. Teaching—my work is still teaching” (Goodman, 2013).

In addition to Bank Street’s early founders and Lord, the previous instructors of the Arts Workshop—Jane Bland, Naomi Pile, and Rachel and Wilbur Rippey—have strongly influenced us. To this day, we assign Lord’s *Collage and Construction* and Pile’s *Art Experiences for Young Children* (1973). Pile’s writing, like Lowenfeld’s, is especially compelling, reflecting her sensitive understanding of children’s emotional lives. She includes many lively anecdotes that illustrate how art gives children a means to express feelings they are not able to articulate verbally. From participating in the Rippys’ Interrelated Arts Workshop, we realized the importance of including trips within the community and crafts as ways of fostering students’ confidence, their relationships with each other, and a respect and awareness of the cultural diversity within our classrooms and the society at large. The Rippys’ artistry, humor, and supportive teaching styles were influential models of which we hoped to gain some measure.

Every time that we teach the Arts Workshop, we realize that it is not enough for teachers to work with the materials and to learn about children’s artistry at different stages. Helping teachers discover “the artist within” is one of the biggest challenges. Like Mitchell, we believe that teachers need to feel confidence and pleasure in their creative abilities. As Nager and Shapiro (2007) noted, “In highlighting the teacher as artist, Mitchell’s emphasis was on the importance of the aesthetic dimension, not only the appreciation but also the expression of creative impulse” (p. 14). Unless they feel a personal connection to art making, teachers are unlikely to use art materials in their classroom. Many of the graduate students we teach have had few experiences with the basic materials of art as children. Often students remember teachers who expected exact replications of an object. Some students recall laissez-faire art teachers who gave no motivations, guidance, or support during their art lessons. Others recall teachers who singled out a student as a class artist. The effect on the rest of the class was that they felt that they could never measure up to this “artist.” As a result, many students enter the Arts Workshop with trepidation and fear; during the introductions at the beginning of the first class, many say, “I’m not an artist.” We share the concern about students’ lack of confidence in their creativity and skill with art materials that Mitchell (1935/2000) expressed in her article, “Social Studies for Future Teachers.” She wrote about the need to train traditionally taught teachers for the progressive classrooms that she and her colleagues were establishing: “As individuals, few had experimented with raw materials in the ‘arts’—they were critics rather than creators” (Mitchell, 1935/2000, p. 130).

By the end of the semester, most of the students in the Arts Workshop have gained confidence and competence in their artistic abilities. Some students ask about places where they can continue making art. We feel that their growth as artists is the result of the cumulative and progressive art experiences

they have over the weeks and months of the course. As students gradually become more comfortable, they share their insights, problems, and successes with each other. Together we have created a community of interactive learners and artists. We can only hope that the pleasure and joy felt from their artistic transformations will help our students implement art making to the children they teach.

We realize that there are many other obstacles within our schools that prevent teachers from including art in their classrooms. Practicing teachers who take our workshop lament the lack of time in their teaching schedule for including any of the arts during the school day. During financial crises in our cities and towns, arts teachers are often the first to be dismissed. As a result, classroom teachers need to have the desire and the skills to make art a part of their curriculum.

Throughout our country's educational history, the arts have been excluded from the academic curriculum in too many of our schools, both private and public. Some educators perceive art materials as messy and uncontrollable, unlike the neat and precise tools for academic work: pencils, pens, paper, computers, and books. Other barriers to art education in our society include beliefs that the arts are frivolous and emotional. In the hierarchy of cognitive processes, intuitive and sensory artwork is believed to involve lower levels of intelligence. Even though researchers have documented the intellectual progression in children's and adults' art, this prejudice persists. Arnheim (1969), Langer (1953), Gardner (1990), and Werner (1957/1978) have written that the arts are in the domain of higher levels of cognition, along with linguistic, logical, and scientific thought processes.

Because of our concern about these problems in the field of art education, in 1992 we applied for a research grant from Bank Street College to document how children think and learn as they work with art materials. Our project was funded, and we proceeded to videotape children of different age levels painting in their classrooms. Our initial goal was to find concrete evidence of children's thinking as they responded to the teacher's motivations, the presentation of the painting setup, and the support

they received during the painting experience. The tapes confirmed the importance of the teacher's role before, during, and at the end of painting. What we were surprised to discover in the tapes was the lively dynamic of children's interactions with each other throughout the experience and how these social exchanges promoted learning. For instance, we saw how crucial the setup of group painting at a large table was for both visual and verbal exchanges.



Paintings of giraffes are inspired by the work of the five-year-old in blue at the head of the table.

Children were continually looking at each other's artwork, asking questions, and making comments about their own or their friends' paintings. As they worked, even the youngest, the three-year-olds, were exchanging and communicating ideas in both verbal and nonverbal domains. Their visual perceptual behaviors, physical gestures, and verbalizations to themselves, to each other, and to their teachers seemed to bounce back and forth around the large table (Gwathmey & Mott, 2000).

As we reflect back on our research, we are struck by the importance of our viewing and studying the context of children's art making. In their revisit and critique of Bank Street's developmental-interaction approach to education, Shapiro and Nager (2000) emphasize the relevance and congruence of Kurt Lewin's contributions, noting that "his central concept of the 'field,' the necessity of viewing behavior in context, had a major impact on developmental-interaction" (p. 25) and citing Franklin's (1981) statement that "Lewin [was] distinguished from his contemporaries...by his view that psychology should be concerned with conceptualizing and studying the actions of persons in situations" (p. 75). Shapiro and Nager propose strengthening the implicit but underemphasized "context" or "situation" within the developmental-interaction approach. Postmodern theorists have written extensively about the role of culture and socialization in children's learning in art. We find deep connections between postmodernists and the writings of Dewey, Mitchell, Biber, Shapiro, and Nager. In *Teaching Visual Culture*, for example, Freedman (2003) writes that "Individuals are part of their socio-cultural milieu" (p. 80). She advocates that researchers study the social setting of the classroom, the importance of which is reflected in early and later writings about progressive classrooms and in the discoveries we made while viewing the tapes of children painting.

We were delighted that, like Bank Street's early founders and the many Bank Street researchers who followed them, we had integrated the roles of researcher and teacher within the context of the classroom. The lively interactions between the children and adults in our videotapes of children painting verified for us Dewey's (1916/1966) earlier insight that the self is both social and individual, or—as Cuffaro (1995) says of Dewey's perspective—"It is not either the social or the individual but the *social individual*" (p. 23).

As we videotaped, we watched a four-year-old paint the entire paper space with muddy dark colors. While she was worked she occasionally looked at a child nearby making a series of representations of people. She then asked the teacher for another paper and proceeded to make her first visual representation of her family. When children adopt the ideas and symbols of others, sometimes we hear those being emulated say, "Stop copying me!" This objection may originate from the popular image of the solitary artist creating unique original imagery within the studio. When we say that we learn from each other's good ideas, usually children are able to accept this suggestion. In the Arts Workshop and

with older children, we give examples of how artists influence each other, work together, and copy the work of others—past and present—in order to learn a new way of making art (Gombrich, 1960).

When we show our videotapes in the Arts Workshop, we refer to the work of Piaget (1962) and his influence on Bank Street’s developmental-interaction approach in the 1960s and subsequent years (Shapiro & Nager, 2000). The children’s art making in the tapes verifies his contributions about the role of imitation in learning as well as the crucial experience of “disequilibrium” that occurs when new ideas clash with older ways of thinking and doing. Similar concepts are embedded in Vygotsky’s (1934/1986) emphasis on the role of socialization in children’s learning, such as the zone of proximal development and scaffolding by peers and teachers. He emphasizes the importance of verbal exchanges while new ideas are being accommodated to existing forms of thinking. In our tapes, children are commenting on and asking questions about each other’s work. Their various zones of development are closer to their peers than the teachers. Understanding the importance of children’s conversations and encouraging such talk in the classroom is contrary to the practice of requiring silence during an art or other subject class period, as some teachers do.

Visual imagery is a powerful means for expressing and integrating emotions and thoughts. Children’s artwork often reveals their innermost feelings and ideas about what they know and see in the world around them. Much of their artwork communicates the joys, wishes, and dreams experienced within the context of family, friends, and cultural celebrations. Young children are aware of and are able to visualize what they know about the wars, violence, disease, and prejudices within our society. We believe it is important to help teachers and children feel safe and supported when their visual imagery expresses their knowledge about the ills within ourselves, our families, and the larger society. After the destruction of the World Trade Center, children in the School for Children preferred to use the materials of art to express their fears and strategies for coping with this disaster, rather than verbalizing their thoughts at the morning meeting. In the kindergarten, children built the twin towers with blocks and provided their block people with possibilities for escape: slides and parachutes. In the Upper School, many children drew or painted the towers, before, during, or after the tragedy. When educators are not permitted to address these difficult issues or are too uncomfortable with them, we are not helping children clarify and resolve their understandings about the frightening realities around them. Similarly, we are sometimes confronted with issues around children’s need for privacy as well as reactions from the public when upsetting artwork is displayed within the classroom or in the halls of the school. As Shapiro and Nager (2000) wrote, general principles about development and growth along with cultural expectations need to be evaluated in respect to each particular context, and vice versa.

We are hopeful that in the future, the pendulum will swing and society will view the arts as vital to our humanity. Parents and educators are already questioning the lack of the arts in our schools. Despite the present hurdles, we still retain the excitement and passion that our predecessors felt when they saw that all children and adults can learn how to express their innate artistry. Our research into the past and present has confirmed how important it is to continue advocating Mitchell's (1950) mission of imparting the joy of learning in the arts and sciences to all our children in our schools.

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