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A School Growing Roots: The Bank Street Developmental-Interaction Approach at Community Roots Charter School

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Recommended Citation

Lit, I., & Intrator, S. (2015). A School Growing Roots: The Bank Street Developmental-Interaction Approach at Community Roots Charter School. Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education (SCOPE). Retrieved from <https://educate.bankstreet.edu/books/13>

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Teaching for a Changing World:
The Graduates of Bank Street College of Education

A School Growing Roots: The Bank Street Developmental-Interaction Approach at Community Roots Charter School

By Ira Lit and Sam Intrator





This case study is one of five publications from the larger study entitled *Teaching for a Changing World: The Graduates of Bank Street College of Education*
Linda Darling-Hammond and Ira Lit, principal investigators

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Suggested citation:

Lit, I. & Intrator, S. (2015). *A school growing roots: The Bank Street developmental-interaction approach at Community Roots Charter School*. Stanford, CA: Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education.

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Acknowledgments

We are grateful for the generous support of numerous colleagues in the preparation of this report. In particular, we would like to acknowledge the contributions of the following collaborators:

First and foremost, to the administrators, teachers, and students at **Community Roots Charter School** for opening the doors of their schools and classrooms and taking time to talk with us about their practice. Without their generosity of time and spirit, this work would not have been possible.

Additionally, to numerous faculty and administrators at Bank Street College of Education for invaluable support at every stage of the project, from the study's design, to identifying potential school partners, to sharing resources and expertise in support of our understanding of the Bank Street developmental-interaction approach.

Finally, to **Eileen Horng, Jon Snyder, and Linda Darling-Hammond**, our colleagues at SCOPE and collaborators on this project who provided intellectual and practical support in the undertaking of this study and the preparation of this manuscript.

The **Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education (SCOPE)** was founded in 2008 to address issues of educational opportunity, access, and equity in the United States and internationally. SCOPE engages faculty from across Stanford University and from other universities to work on a shared agenda of research, policy analysis, educational practice, and dissemination of ideas to improve quality and equality of education from early childhood through college. More information about SCOPE is available at <http://edpolicy.stanford.edu>.

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These days

Whatever you have to say, leave

The roots on, let them

Dangle

And the dirt

Just to make clear

Where they come from

—Charles Olson

Introduction: A School Rooted in its Neighborhood

It's a muggy and sweltering June morning in the Fort Greene section of Brooklyn, New York. Children and parents walk past the towers of the Raymond V. Ingersoll housing project toward a sprawling brick school building. The perimeter of the school's playfield is the overpass of the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, already shimmering with heat and fumes as the snarl of morning traffic crawls along.

P.S. 67, the Charles A. Dorsey School, originally opened in 1815 as the first Brooklyn school to serve African American children. Like many public school buildings in New York City, the edifice now serves as a home to multiple school programs, one of which is Community Roots Charter School.¹ Community Roots is housed on the third floor.

We sit down on the edge of the meeting rug in a second grade classroom and a teacher in a bright-colored sundress and open-toed sandals calls the 25 students together by saying, "I know it's hot outside, so let's start by dreaming about going to live in a tree house. Let's dream of a 'tree house, a tree house, a secret you and me house.'"

She asks students to close their eyes and join her in a short visualization of what they might do in their own secret tree house. One little girl says she would read in the tree house. Another boy wearing a brightly colored orange and white New York Knicks jersey whispers with a serious head bob to his partner on the rug that he would "relax" in his tree house.

After a few minutes of facilitating students sharing their imagined activities in the tree house, the teacher begins a gentle transition to the school day and turns on a Smart Board projector that illuminates the class's signature song. The children and teachers begin singing the classic Frank Sinatra homage to the bustling energy and promise of New York, "If I can make it there, I'll make it anywhere; It's up to you, New York, New York!" The voices strain with enthusiasm as they further celebrate New York as "...king of the hill, top of the list, head of the heap, A-number-one!"

The class's transition from "tree house dreams" to singing in celebration of their complicated and diverse city struck us as an emblematic moment to describe the essential character of Community Roots Charter School in Fort Greene, Brooklyn. As the epigraph poem signifies, the roots of this young school and its related community can be mapped back to Bank Street College of Education. The initial conception and design of the school began as a class project undertaken by

¹ With permission, this report identifies the school and school administrators by their actual names; teachers and students are referenced via pseudonyms.

Community Roots’ founding coprincipals, Alli Keil and Sara Stone, while they were taking a graduate course on designing small schools taught by longtime faculty member Frank Pignatelli in one of the educational leadership programs at Bank Street College. Keil and Stone worked together to develop a plan and proposal to design a diverse, public school that would be inspired by and guided by an ethos of progressive, student-centered teaching and learning—long rooted in the Bank Street developmental-interaction approach. This vision would counter the trend in urban school reform to create urban public school grounded in the “no excuses” ideology that prioritizes modes of learning and community emphasizing discipline and regimentation. As Keil put it:

So the charter school movement right now believes that charter schools are for predominantly poor children from minority families, and that those types of children learn in a militant, back-to-basics, no-excuses model. And we were there to say, from both of our teaching experiences, that’s not true. We both taught in caring classrooms that were social studies focused, with children from all different backgrounds. And that children learning together was going to be the most important thing in terms of being successful in our world right now.... And so that was our belief....

And then it was saying that every single child can learn in this setting, can learn in a setting where teachers care for and love their kids, that feels familial, where families are welcomed in the classroom, and where children are learning to be researchers. That’s how we frame [our work with] the Bank Street approach... where we’re gonna teach children to be researchers, starting in kindergarten. And we do that through really engaging, project-based social studies work. And there was not—there isn’t a great belief, at least in New York, that that type of education is for everyone.

Planting the Seeds

Founded in 2006, Community Roots Charter School is an elementary school serving approximately 350 students from kindergarten through fifth grade (50 students in each grade). In fall 2012, Community Roots expanded to include a middle school at another location, beginning with 50 sixth graders and expanding by a grade each year to include seventh and eighth grades. The student body is diverse, with the demographic composition in the academic year 2012–13 shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Composition of Community Roots Charter School, 2012–13

Eligible for free or reduced lunch	31%
Black/African American	38%
Hispanic or Latino	10%
Asian or Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	3%
White	42%
Multiracial	6%
Special education	20%

Note. Adapted from “Community Roots Charter School enrollment (2012–13)” by New York State Education Department, <http://data.nysed.gov/enrollment.php?year=2013&instid=800000059312>

As Keil described it, her own educational trajectory shaped her vision of what she wanted to create at Community Roots. A Brooklyn native, she attended St. Ann's School—a progressive private school about a mile away from Fort Greene. After graduating from Brown University, Keil returned to Saint Ann's where she taught before realizing that she wanted to work in public schools. She joined Teach for America in 1998 and was placed in a school in Harlem. During that time, she started to take courses at Bank Street College in teacher preparation and later pursued a master's degree in educational leadership.

Stone's interest in education began as a child growing up in a family of educators—teachers and psychologists who worked with children. She also grew up with a brother with special needs and watched her parents navigate the school system with him. She studied education at Syracuse University and received her teaching credential as an undergraduate student. Upon graduating, Stone got a job providing pullout special education support at Midtown West, a public school in Manhattan's theater district with close ties to Bank Street College. Stone eventually moved to a general education position and worked as a grades 4/5 loop teacher at Midtown West before going to Bank Street to get her master's degree.

Keil described the trajectory of the school's inception in this way:

I was a little bit of an odd Teach For America candidate, in that I had a couple years of teaching experience. I wasn't just graduating from college.... Despite working at a very dysfunctional public school, I really believed that there was a way to integrate public schools and the Bank Street [approach]. That became my dream. ... I wanted to open a public school that took Bank Street practices into the world.

Keil went on to characterize the inception of the school and her relationship with Stone and her Bank Street advisor, Pignatelli:

I met Sara in a small school–design class [at Bank Street], where the project was to start to do the skeletal design of a small school. Sara and I met and made a really great team, we figured out very quickly, in that Sara has third through fifth grade expertise, and I was really building a kindergarten through second grade expertise. Sara came from a special ed perspective and background; I came from a gen-ed perspective and background. And we decided, I think, pretty early on that we were gonna try to really actualize this project. At that time, Frank Pignatelli became my advisor and I pitched this like, “This is what I really, really want to do,” and he backed us the whole time. And Frank became one of our original board members.

Stone added:

...It turned out to be a really good decision, as Alli had mentioned. I ended up in some classes that made a huge impact on my life, such as the small school–design class. And I, to be honest, I hadn’t thought about opening a school. I had always thought about doing, I guess, work at that level, but I was very comfortable teaching at that time in my life. But meeting Ali, it seemed like too good of an opportunity to pass up. I knew that this combination isn’t something that comes along every day, and we just matched so beautifully. We had the same philosophy on education. We had really good discussions. We became friends first. And we had, like she said, that complementary background of K–2: 3–5; gen-ed: special ed. And then she also brought the experience of being in public and private and charter schools. I had only public school experience.

And it also, for me, encapsulated this idea of being creative. And it gave me an opportunity to design something that I’d believed in from the ground up, rather than going into something preexisting. I could add the components that really meant something to me, and I would be able to get behind that. And so it had to do with inclusive education. It had to do with social studies. And then diversity was also a really important factor for me, because I feel like to be inclusive, ... you can’t have one [inclusivity] without the other [diversity].

Community Roots School Program

On the school’s website (Community Roots Charter School, 2014a) and charter documents (Keil & Stone, 2005), Community Roots describes its educational program and mission:

Community Roots Charter School is a rigorous K–5 learning community where learning is embedded in meaningful real world context, where children are deliberately taught to see the connections between school and the world. Community Roots students will meet or exceed the New York State standards and be prepared to excel in the 21st century by being taught to be independent thinkers and to work productively within a diverse group of learners. At Community Roots students will learn to combine curiosity with appropriate application, which will lead to deep understanding and the confidence to take on challenges to become who they want to be.

Community Roots ensures that all students receive services necessary for learning and development. If a child is having any challenges they will receive academic intervention services as needed. If appropriate,

we support students in obtaining a higher level of supports through an Individualized Education Program (IEP). All of our classrooms use an Integrated Co-Teaching model, and teachers work collaboratively with the Learning Supports Team and Support Staff. Our Learning Supports Team includes a Learning Supports Coordinator and SETSS teachers (Special Education Teacher Support Services). In addition, our Support Staff consists of Counseling Services, Occupational, Physical, Speech and Language Therapy, and Hearing Education Services. These providers work collaboratively to address the needs of our diverse population.

According to Stone and Keil, the following serve as the animating, guiding principles of the school:

1. Curricular focus, with an emphasis on social studies, embodied in deep, engaging, and extended “integrated studies” units, capped by a community shared “culmination” experience;
2. Commitment to inclusion, instantiated in a staffing model that includes an integrated co-teaching model (ICT) in each class, and a significant set of staffing resources to meet the needs of a wide range of learners with special needs; and
3. Focus on diversity, family, and community that bridges the home, school, and the wider community in the education of the school’s students and in an effort to have school make an impact on the wider world.

As summarized by Keil:

For me, a passion was that this school be diverse and represent Fort Greene.... The more schools I visited, the more segregated I realized public schools were, and that was very clear from my own teaching experience.... What Sara brought to the table was she was absolutely passionate that it would be inclusive, and then together we were both passionate from Bank Street... that the school be social studies focused and project based. So that was the package that we began developing.

In addition, Community Roots provides extensive opportunities for professional collaboration, community gatherings, and student engagement and enrichment. As demonstrated in the sample weekly schedule in Table 2 (page 6), Community Roots school leaders have intentionally crafted a school and community schedule that supports their overarching goals and programmatic needs. Art, music, gym, and science are offered in special blocks during the week. Numerous community events for students and their families are built into the general calendar. And, importantly, significant blocks of time are set aside for teacher collaboration and professional development.

Table 2. Sample Weekly Schedule: Community Roots

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Weekend
8:15 a.m.	Morning meeting Community building activity Read aloud/ word study	Morning meeting Intergrade buddy read once per month	Morning meeting Community building activity Read aloud/ word study	Family sing in music room Morning meeting Community building activity	All-school meeting and community sing Morning meeting Community building activity	PALS (playing and learning squads): Organized by families in partnership with teachers, different families opt to host a play date for a small group of students.
9:10 a.m.	Academic block	Academic block	Academic block	Academic block	Academic block	
10:05 a.m.	Academic block	Academic block	Science	Academic block	Academic block	
11:00 a.m.	Lunch Grade 5 Community Builders meeting Faculty planning and/or meetings	Lunch Faculty planning and/or meetings	Lunch Faculty planning and/or meetings	Lunch Faculty planning and/or meetings	Lunch Staff community lunch	Three Stars Gardening: All three schools colocated in the building bring in volunteers to work together on the garden.
11:55 a.m.	Art	Academic block	Academic block	Academic block	Gym	
12:55 p.m.	Academic block	Academic block	Academic block	Capoeira or African dance	Academic block	
1:50 p.m.	Academic block	Music	Academic block	Academic block	Academic block	
2:45 p.m.	Academic block	Academic block	Community building activity	Art Grade-level team meeting with coprincipals	Science	
3:35 p.m.	Dismissal: Some students stay for after-school extra help or Learning Through Service & Action (a grade 4–5 service group). Monday 4–6 p.m. faculty professional development. Faculty planning or grade-level meetings with learning specialist on other days.					
Evening	Evening activities include Family Music Night; Parents and Children Together with Art (PACT), run by Free Arts NYC; Community Open Opportunity Kitchen School (COOKS); and Family Sports Night.					

Note. In any given week, part or all of a school day can be taken up by field trips.

Black text: In-classroom academic activities. During academic blocks, students might engage in integrated studies, writing, math, reading, or open work.

Red text: Specials. Teachers often use specials periods to prepare for academic blocks and/or to have meetings (e.g., planning, student study team, or IEP meetings; or meetings with parents).

Green text: Faculty-specific activities.

Purple text: School activities that include parents and families.

The relationship between Community Roots and Bank Street College is multifaceted and extensive. In addition to the founding coprincipals both having graduated from a Bank Street leadership program in 2012–13, nine of the 24 classroom teachers at Community Roots held a degree from Bank Street College. Two Bank Street faculty members have served on the advisory board of Community Roots, and three Community Roots faculty have served as adjunct lecturers at the college. Community Roots faculty hosts Bank Street student teachers, and Community Roots faculty engage in professional development activities at Bank Street. The relationship between the institutions is significant. While the coprincipals and faculty at Community Roots identify various sources for the vision, philosophy, and practice that flourish at the school, Bank Street’s influence on the school’s ethos and practices is intentional, recognizable, and widely touted.

Community Roots Case Study

This case study examines the efforts of a recently established public charter school in a diverse urban neighborhood in Brooklyn to create a school guided by the foundational principles of the Bank Street approach (see “The Bank Street Developmental-Interaction Approach” in the Afterword for a detailed description). The efforts to infuse the practice and approach of the school with a progressive ethos is set against the prevailing trend to create schools that deploy highly systematic and didactic pedagogies. The case study begins by describing the rich learning that transpired during a study of the Fort Greene neighborhood undertaken by Community Roots first graders. The study explores the interactions between people in the community and locates the Rosewood unit as an integrated social studies unit. The case study then turns to how Community Roots charter school uses an integrated co-teaching model (ICT) that involves placing a general education teacher and a special education teacher in each classroom. This model enables the school to strive toward inclusion and provides the teachers with opportunity to structure learning in the classroom in ways that enhance the capacity of teachers to meet with students, individualize learning, and engage in an approach to learning grounded in high levels of interaction. The case study concludes with a focus on Community Roots’ intentional efforts to cultivate a sense of community among the many diverse families at the school and within the school’s neighborhood.

Approach to Curriculum

I think that when kids come to school they bring so much with them, and so much of that is about they're working so hard all the time to understand the world around them. And I think Bank Street taught me that the role of school is supporting them in that process of making sense of the world around them through every discipline, but social studies [in particular] being a place where we can ask questions about why things are the way that they are, in a way that responds to students' development—cognitively and in terms of their identity.

Beginning with, “Who am I? What makes me, me?” [in the early grades] and then moving into, “Why?!” in fourth and fifth grade: “Why do I see inequality in the world around me?!”; “What’s happening?” or “What happened in the past that made things the way that they are today?” And those are such hard, painful questions for many of our kids, and they have such different relationships to them. And I see our classrooms as being a place to support them and nurture them in examining those really difficult questions.

—Oliver, fourth grade teacher, Bank Street graduate

A lot of what Oliver said really resonated with me, and I think this carries over from Bank Street, too. The way that we structure our units for integrated studies is so much about the people's experience. It's not an event-based thing. You're not just ticking off a timeline, even though we do have timelines. It's like, “How did people experience this era, or this moment, or whatever is happening?” And that allows kids to really access it in a whole bunch of different ways, which I think is really important.

—Megan, fifth grade teacher, Bank Street graduate

Walking the halls and classrooms of Community Roots, one gains a palpable sense of its curricular priorities. Maps adorn the hallways and the walls of every classroom. Chart paper with brainstormed lists hangs from walls, and lines of twine crisscross the classrooms. Almost everywhere you look you see murals, collages, and models that showcase human aspects of city life from bridges

to parks to neighborhoods. Community Roots is a place that is richly and centrally engaged with the social studies—connecting students with history, geography, and community, while making meaningful connections to students’ lives in the present day. Student work—particularly representations of literature, writing, and the arts cover the walls, doors, and blackboards. Keil noted this curricular orientation as a founding priority of the school:

I think just the belief that public school children have the right to have arts education, music education, science education—those things are just being sucked out of public schools as accountability measures become crazier and crazier, and there are only two things that are tested—that’s all [schools are] teaching to. So I think we both [Keil and Stone] strongly believe that kids need those opportunities to sing and dance and create art and all those sorts of things.



“I have the perfect tour guide for you to visit Rosewood,” first grade teacher, Yuki, says to me as we stand in a hallway teeming with Community Roots students, parents, and siblings. We dodge through the crowd, and she stops in front of a slight and serious African American boy wearing a dark blue Yankees T-shirt. “Malik, will you take Sam to visit Rosewood?” Malik nods his head, briefly makes eye contact, and then nimbly snakes his way through the crowd.

A 10-foot multicolored banner spans the multipurpose room, “Welcome to Rosewood.” Eight conference tables have been assembled in the middle of the room on top of which sprawls the neighborhood of Rosewood. It is a scaled diorama of a neighborhood designed and constructed by the first grade students using a variety of materials including recycled food product boxes, cardboard, pipe cleaners, corks, Popsicle sticks and other ordinary objects. There are skyscrapers, restaurants, pet stores, bodegas, fire stations, dog-walking parks, ball fields, art boutiques, and more. Cars and trucks constructed out of clay are positioned on the streets of Rosewood, and the models of large shade trees surround the neighborhood. Small details like birds in the trees and carefully crafted street signs round out the teeming neighborhood that includes nearly 80 structures.

The first graders have been immersed in a two-month intensive research study of their Fort Greene neighborhood called the “The City Block Study.” The driving idea behind the investigation is to provide students with an opportunity to see and understand how Community Roots is a school nested within the ecology of a neighborhood. The curriculum moves students through the investigation of how relationships, architecture, and shared space all contribute to the form and function of an urban neighborhood. The unit starts with a series of walking excursions into the neighborhood guided by the following questions:

- *What did you notice about Fort Greene?*
- *What kinds of places/features are in Fort Greene?*
- *What kinds of goods and services?*
- *What are needs and wants?*

Over the course of two months, the first graders set off on multiple explorations of Fort Greene. They take numerous walking trips around the community carrying clipboards and trip-observation sheets that guide their research.

As one student reported in her research notebook:

At the very beginning of the neighborhood study we were seeing what neighborhoods look like and we also went on a walk. We saw a lot of commercial blocks more than residential blocks. One trip was around

our block and the secon trip was past bam [Brooklyn Academy of Music] past atatic center to barclys center. We wrote down what we wonderd and what we sow. We lerned that baldings come in all differ-ent sises and shapse.

The neighborhood study and its exploration of community as a meaningful context to engage student learning provides an exemplar of Community Roots' intentional focus on project-based, integrated social studies units as a core element of its instructional program. As one teacher said in response to the question, "How would you explain the role of social studies in the Community Roots mission?" He said, "I teach for social studies."

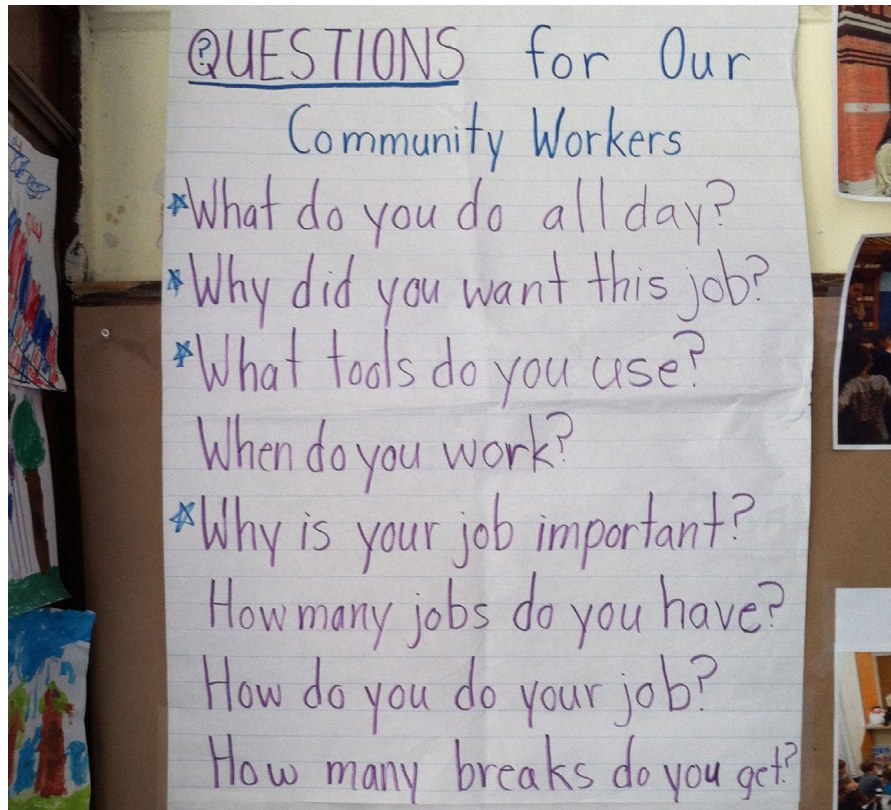
The original documents submitted for Community Roots' charter approval highlight the ideas of an integrated social studies curriculum:

Children learn best in meaningful contexts...Using backward design techniques and a wealth of classroom experience the Community Roots planning team developed three integrated units for each grade level opening...These integrated units are geared to increase student awareness, appreciation and understanding of various world cultures, beginning with their own (Keil & Stone, 2005, p. 14).

The documents also quote Tarry Lindquist and Douglas Selwyn about the importance of social studies:

Social studies as an organizing hub allows for systematic process of learning. For example, students study the geography, culture, religion, economics, and history of a location that happens to be the setting for a novel, or a historical fiction they are reading. Students compare and contrast the people and places they are reading about with their own time and place. They practice bringing together various learning experiences into the realm of usable knowledge. Students are learning how to question, how to organize and evaluate their own experiences, how to connect what they have assimilated and how to communicate about it (Keil & Stone, 2005, p. 14).

Infused throughout the ongoing work of developing Rosewood is a series of activities that engage children in experiencing the multiple variations of relationships and interactions that exist with a community. As Bank Street's founder Lucy Sprague Mitchell wrote in her book *The People of the U.S.A.: Their Place in the School Curriculum*, "The more [the child] knows [about people and places] through personal contact, the better for [the child's] social growth" (Mitchell & Boetz, 1942, p. 9).



Students research and explore how people live, work, and interact in Fort Greene. In exploring how everyday life unfolds in the neighborhood, they learn an essential idea emphasized by Mitchell. As she wrote in *Here and Now Story Book*:

Young children live in the “here and now” world around them which they use as a laboratory for their explorations. They are interested in what the people they know are doing and in how things work. They take in this world around them primarily through their five senses and their muscle experiences—not through words. They are natural investigators, explorers, scientists on a young level (Mitchell, 1953, p. 275).

Community Roots’ first grade neighborhood study resembles, in many ways, the original neighborhood study developed by Mitchell, in which her students originally investigated Upper Manhattan. As Field and Bauml describe:

From earth science and man-made inventions, children would investigate the city’s water supply, sound-conducting materials, coal and cement, electric engines, fire engines, tugboats, derricks, mail-canceling machines, among others. Additionally, the children were to learn about the relationships of people to people as individuals: “Largely

individual, more play and work in groups”; and in communities: “relation of neighborhood workers to children’s lives” (Field & Bauml, 2014, p. 194–195).

As with Community Roots, Mitchell’s original curriculum emphasized field trips that provided children and the teacher opportunities to investigate the ecosystem of the neighborhood. Several of Mitchell’s trips—while focused on Manhattan and pertinent to 1950—match what the creators of the Rosewood curriculum did in Fort Greene:

- Street trips to see vegetable wagons, grocery trucks, and the dairy store
- Riverside Drive to compare boats and bridges with those on the Harlem River
- Fire Station, Engine Co. 69
- Print shop on 145th Street between Broadway and Amsterdam

Community Roots’ curriculum involves children in real-world investigations that provide opportunities to discover the relationships between materials, space, and ideas and give the facts meaning. That focus is instantiated in the school’s “integrated studies” (referred to by faculty as “IS”), a series of extended social studies units at each grade level that serves as the focal point of the curriculum for the year. The IS units are regularly reviewed and revised by the teaching faculty, and they are archived in line with the Bank Street tradition of curriculum documentation. The following was the current slate of IS units at the time of this case study:

- Kindergarten: Me Study, Apple Study, Family Study
- First grade: School Study, Neighborhood Study
- Second grade: Park Study, Transportation Study, Brooklyn Bridge Study
- Third grade: New Amsterdam Study, World Communities Study, Lenape Study
- Fourth grade: West Africa Study, Settlement/Colonial Times Study, Revolutionary War Study, Civil War Study
- Fifth grade: Civil Rights Study, Westward Expansion Study, Immigration Study, U.S. Government Study

As described on the school’s website:

Integrated studies engages students through social studies content and allows them to experience reading, writing, listening and speaking as well as exploring concepts through art, music, math and science in a

context that is rich and meaningful. Literature is used to compare and contrast our own experience with a wide range of experiences that will be unlocked through reading. Through social studies meetings, writing and responding to readings, and experiences, students learn to question and persuasively communicate their own ideas as well as respect and understand those that are different. Through integrated studies students and teachers develop a classroom culture that engages students in cultural awareness.

The Community Roots integrated studies curriculum begins with concepts that are close to students such as home and family. Students then use what they have learned about their own cultures, neighborhoods, and belief systems to learn to look outward to far away places as well as events, places and people in history. Students are taught the skills to formulate meaningful questions and look for answers that lead to deeper understanding of content knowledge (Community Roots Charter School, 2014b).

When asked about the emphasis on an integrated social studies curriculum at Community Roots, Keil noted its origins from her preparation at Bank Street:

That’s all Bank Street.... They can take credit for that. I think we are very, very clear... It’s like my tagline: If you ask our kids what they’re studying they’re going to say, “the neighborhood” or “Civil Rights.” They’re not going to say “reading and writing.” We take that seriously, that kids need to be immersed in really meaningful content, and then you need to give them the skills as readers or writers to access that. I think the classrooms come alive around social studies and the culminations are the big piece.

Teachers, administrators, students, and parents all reflected on the value, impact, and significance of the integrated studies’ “culminations.” As previously described in the description of the Rosewood, neighborhood study culmination, these events served multiple purposes:

- They give meaningful form and purpose to the extended curricular studies.
- They provide a public forum and authentic audience for the display and explication of students’ developing knowledge and skills.
- They offer opportunities for students to express their knowledge in a wide range of formats, offering students multiple pathways to share what they know and can do. Finally, they serve as a community

building and community gathering exercise, woven deliberately and consistently throughout the year and across the grades.

Keil underscored the value of the culminations and their role in the IS cycle in the following way:

It's like the whole study the kids get really used to that cycle, which is super important. Like where they are in their study—you can feel it in their classrooms, like the classrooms go bare at the beginning of a study. Everything gets taken down, and we recreate a room based on what they're studying and that feeling—there's also an excitement of the rhythm of the year that they're going to engage in one study and then it culminates, and then the next study. It's like you're giving them this gift, and they're so excited to hear what it is and what they're going to do.

Similarly, one of the classroom teachers expressed the importance of the culminations:

That's the most important thing; that's what the kids work toward every month or month and a half. For culmination, families come. You know, it's an amazing expression of all the different things the kids are doing, and everyone's learning style is included. One kid's giving a speech in the corner. Another one's got a diorama. Another one is showing a video on a laptop. It's just everyone can participate... It's egalitarian. We can all access this content in our own way. We can all find a way... that works for each of us in our own style. I think it's such a part of the school... You find what works the best for you and that, that's really a core value here.

Deborah Sampson Day

When talking about the aims of the focus and orientation of the integrated studies, Joel (another fourth grade teacher and Bank Street graduate), noted:

I remember taking the social studies course [at Bank Street College], and I had this realization that, “Wow, social studies is less about the specific things that you're teaching and more about how do you build these skills so that they can investigate the things that they're interested in.”

To this point, the following serves as an example of how the orientation of integrated studies can lead to student-driven scholarly projects that provide opportunities for learning, skill development, and social justice action:

Three girls from Oliver's fourth grade class catch us in the hallways: "Did you know it's Deborah Sampson day?!" they inquire enthusiastically.

"Who's Deborah Sampson?" we pose back.

"Deborah Sampson was a young woman who wanted to volunteer for the army during the Revolutionary War. Women weren't allowed to fight in the Revolutionary War because men didn't think they were capable of it. But Deborah Sampson broke the law to serve her country. She dressed up like a man and joined the army. We think she was very brave, so we are having Deborah Sampson day to celebrate her."

We inquire further about what happened with Deborah Sampson, whether she was ever found out, and how they know so much about her. The girls note that they have read several articles about Deborah Sampson and researched her story online. They point out that her story isn't fully known, but they believe the accounts of Sampson that suggest she was injured in battle more than once, but probably didn't get medical care because she was afraid of being caught as a woman. According to the students, at one point, a doctor treating her wounds discovered her true identity. But the doctor kept her secret, and Sampson went back to the army. Several years after the war, Sampson was honored by the state of Massachusetts, where they still celebrate Deborah Sampson day in her honor.

The girls carried with them a pamphlet outlining the history of Deborah Sampson, her role during the war, and some other interesting facts about her life. They were distributing the pamphlets to students, teachers, and parents before and after school and during their lunch and recess breaks.

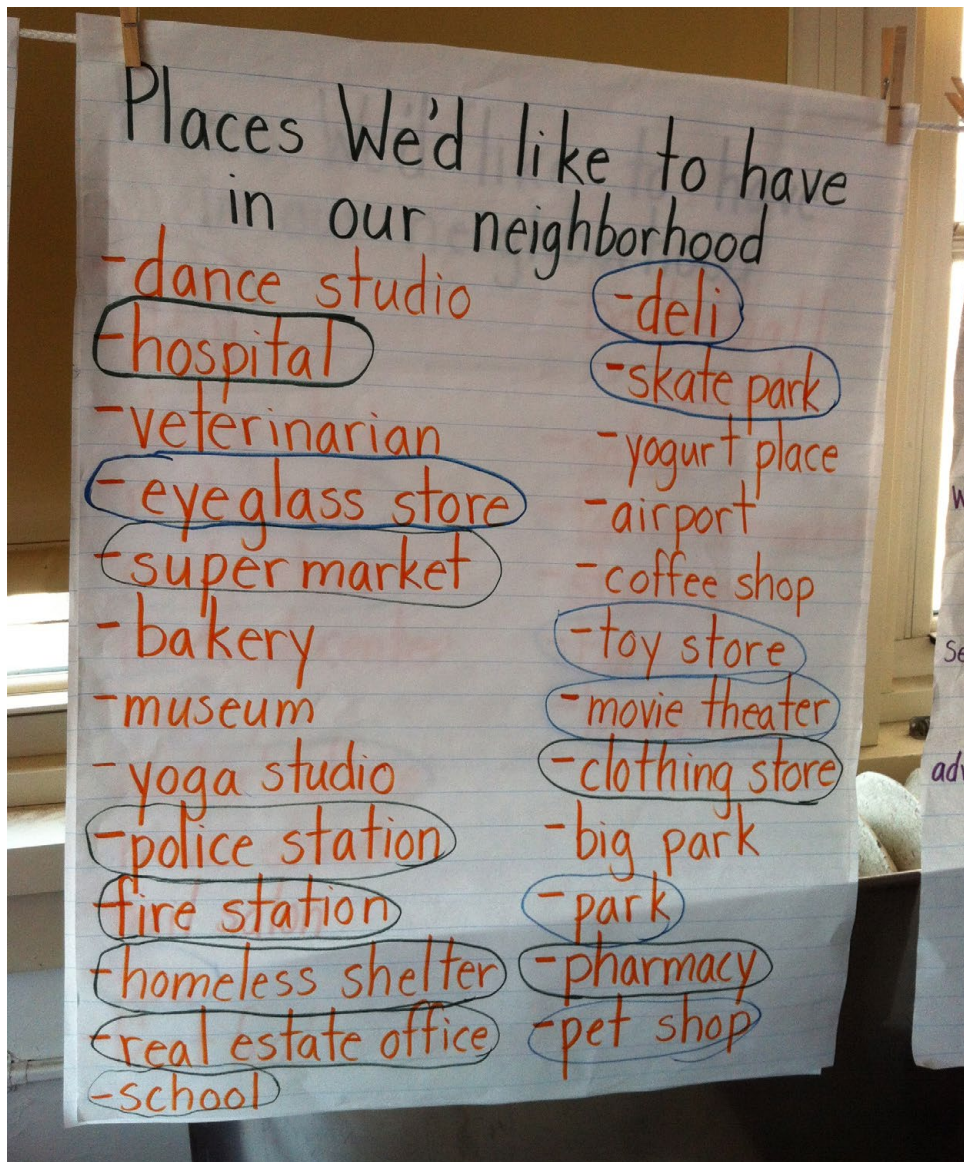
"Why are you telling us about Deborah Sampson?" we inquired. "Is this a project for an assignment for your class?"

One of the girls responded, "No. We learned about Deborah Sampson and wanted people to know about her story. It wasn't just men who helped in the Revolutionary War. There were women, too, and we think it's important for women to be honored not just men. We wanted to share her story."

Joel's observation that social studies is an approach to helping children "build these skills so that they can investigate the things that they're interested in" relates to how the fourth graders and Oliver approached the Deborah Sampson event. Once the girls conveyed their interest, they were encouraged to take on the role of independent scholar, utilizing skills in the discipline of history, connecting them in meaningful ways to their own interests, and then acting on that knowledge in ways that connect to their own present day interests and circumstances. In short, the principles and practices of social studies guide the essential framework of

learning and teaching at Community Roots. As Oliver said in reflecting on what is distinctive about Community Roots:

I think IS [integrated studies] is huge. Really huge... I think IS is really big and important. It feels like it's the glue that holds everything else together, whereas at other schools I've worked at, social studies has been an afterthought and very little attention has been put into making even scheduling time to teach it—let alone the professional development that goes into making it strong. So IS stands out to me as the biggest thing.



Part 2: Approach to Students

And I think the other thing that's gonna feel familiar and very Bank Street centric is the culture of the school. When you walk into classrooms you're gonna see kids that are talking and learning, comfortable and happy, and teachers that feel familial and friendly and connected to kids and families, which is something that I think you get from Bank Street—that learning should be comfortable and fun.

—Alli Keil, coprincipal

I think, too, something that came out of my Bank Street education is really thinking hard about children and observing children, being keen observers of children, taking notes on their behavior in their activities and responding to that.

—Steve, fifth grade teacher

For me it's that your first and foremost responsibility here is knowing your kids really well inside and out, and people take that very seriously and own that.

—Sara Stone, coprincipal

The door swings open and students spill into the classroom. It's late morning and despite the air conditioning, the school feels humid and the air is heavy. The 25 fifth graders in the class move with the lethargy of tweens amidst a long day.

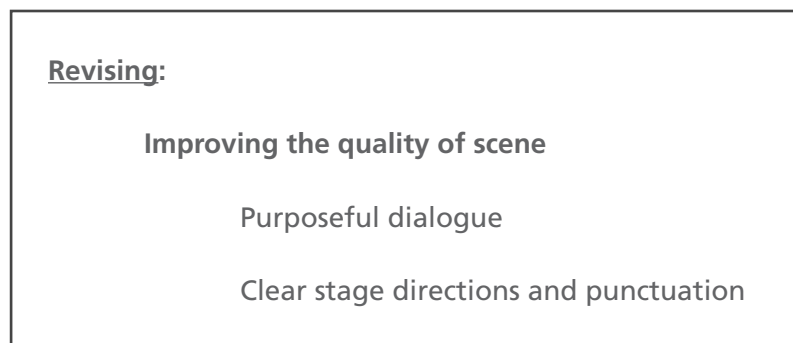
As they amble into the room, Oliver turns, smiles, and with a bracing energy greets each student individually by name. The students are returning from music class, and Oliver is geared up because the class is in the final stage of a collaborative playwriting effort. The students greet Oliver with smiles and nods, but tumble down into their seats with an apparent sluggishness about them. Oliver is nonplused: "Can you quietly move to the cart and pick up your laptops. We need to get started."

While the students were at music, Oliver was busy preparing for the afternoon's lesson. The class was in the midst of an integrated studies unit on the Civil War. The culminating project of the study would be a series of plays written, staged, and performed by the students in pairs or small groups. The plays were to address a central

question in the class’s historical studies, while integrating curricular aims in writing and the dramatic arts.

Before the students returned from music, Oliver had set out thick manila folders on each desk. The folders contained drafts of their plays and a series of tracking forms that were designed to help students track their progress and move toward completion.

As the students move to the cart and pick up their laptops, Oliver moves to the side of the room and points to a chart paper titled “Playwriting Process Chart.” The right side of the chart paper has three subheadings: drafting, revising, and editing. Each of the headings has a checklist underneath, for example:



On the left side, bright blue sticky notes indicate where each individual student is in the process of completing the play. “I will be coming around to meet with each of you and then your group. Please figure out where you are. For example, Johnny—you are in the revising stage, and I want you to be ready to explain what you will do to move yourself into the polishing and editing stage.” As Oliver explains this, he pulls a sticky note in an exaggerated and clownish motion, conveying what it would mean to move through the process. His action gets a laugh, and then he steps toward the front and says, “One more reminder: Our question is ‘Why did the South secede?’ Keep this in mind and remember strong writers write purposeful dialogue.”

Even while Oliver is finishing, this droopy group of students starts to move purposefully around the room. They gather their papers, pick up laptops and move into small groups. One freckled boy wearing a tie-dyed T-shirt stands up, precariously balancing a computer and a pile of drafts. He is small and young looking, and he shuffles over in his blue Crocs to a boy who is a head taller. They look disparate in age, maturity, and ethnicity, but the smaller boy walks up to his peer, jabs his finger at his laptop screen, and confidently asks, “What do you think about this?”

In the meantime, in just a few minutes Oliver has circled around the room twice. The first time he moved, he held speed-meetings with nearly every student.

He quickly scanned each student's folder, monitored the student's set up, and gave quick encouraging nods or pointed with his finger at what he intended each student to do. After this initial series of check-ins, which focuses all of the students on the task at hand, Oliver moves back through the room, meeting with students in more lengthy and focused conferences.

One boy sits back in his chair and starts studying his pen and then looks down and unties his shoelace, ties it back, and then unties it again, this time closely examining the plastic tip of the lace. He barely looks at his folder. Oliver arrives and asks, "Angelo, how are you doing? What stage of the writing process are you?"

"Revising," Angelo replies.

"What are you trying to revise...?" Oliver asks.

Angelo points to the paper, and Oliver looks it through. "If there is not a lot of action, what kinds of stage direction can you give?" Oliver asks.

Angelo shrugs, but Oliver keeps on looking at him and says, "This is so interesting to me... You are building suspense. You are writing about a prison guard. How do you think they would say these lines?"

Angelo shrugs again, and Oliver says, "Do you want to practice? You be the jail guard..."

Angelo reads, "I looked at it."

"How would he say that? What would his body or his hands be doing?" Oliver asks.

"I think he could be trembling," Angelo says,

"Yes, that is great. I can see him saying [Oliver's hands start to tremble, and he reads the line with emphasis]: 'I looked at it.'"

Angelo puts both hands on the keyboard and starts tapping away with a seriousness of purpose as Oliver moves onto another pod of students.

While this work is underway the door swings opens and another student walks in to the classroom. He is agitated and jittery, and he collides with a bookcase. Students turn to look, but immediately Oliver's co-teacher, who had been meeting with three other students, slides over to him and asks him, "How are you doing?" She huddles up at the desk with the newly arrived student and talks with him for a bit. She helps him find his folder and gets him set up in a corner seat, where the student gets to work.

The series of instructional moments and interactions in this episode illuminate a theme we observed in many of the classrooms at Community Roots: teachers engaged in a constellation of highly personal interactions with students around the curriculum. The one-on-one and small group interaction is core to how teachers help students learn. Longtime Bank Street faculty members Edna Shapiro and Nancy Nager (2000) describe how the Bank Street model works by

bringing a deep understanding of the subject matter together with her understanding of each individual learner, the teacher guides children's learning and the growth of knowledge by asking meaningful questions... The teacher is the key person, guiding children's inquiry, making connections to academic fields of study, and providing continuity in experiences to facilitate and enable learning (Shapiro & Nager, 2000, p.11).

As one teacher described her work,

We often launch class with a community activity that poses a question or introduces a key piece of content, but the most important teaching that I do involves the many meetings that I will have moving around the room and engaging with students.

The ongoing, frequent interactions that occur in the Community Roots' classrooms provide teachers opportunity to be enmeshed in the unfolding work of individuals and groups of students. The character of talk between the teachers and students has a unique register that occurred throughout the classrooms. For example, when Oliver engaged with one group that was working through revisions:

Oliver sits down and reads a section just written by Louisa. He pauses and looks at her intently. "This is a powerful addition. You are the playwright, and I want you to think about how you can add suspense with your stage directions. How can you build suspense? What can an actor do with his body to add to the tension?"

She looks at him, twists her hair around her finger and says, "Well, maybe I can add something about him running." Oliver who had been standing over her shoulder pulls over a chair and now sits down. In doing so, he conveys that he intends to be there for a longer stretch. The student gets the signal, turns to her keyboard, and begins to type. In the meantime, Oliver turns around to speak to a student who had come up to show him a new piece on his draft. After a bit, Louisa taps Oliver on the arm and says, "I imagined this on stage, and here is what I wrote: 'Henry's body goes limp. Both the Doctor and Nurse run to the medicine tent.'"

Oliver looks at her with tremendous warmth and genuine excitement. "You are controlling the action as a playwright. I love that idea! You send your audience a strong message."

Across the classrooms there was a verbal register used by teachers in their engagement with students:

- “You are a *playwright*,” Oliver says to Louisa.
- During math class, we hear Jane telling the students, “You are a mathematician and you need to figure out how to solve this problem for your client.”
- In a history lesson, Megan refers to her students as “researchers.”

One teacher described the conscious use of this register in this way:

[It is] as an effort to develop an identity as more than a student. Addressing them as “researcher,” or “mathematician” conveys our belief that we do this work [to extend] beyond just the classroom. It’s about how we approach a problem in the real world. We’re not just doing this in the classroom.

This deliberate use of language and general orientation of the teachers seems to serve multiple purposes. It is evident that the teachers are conveying a deep level of respect and expectation for their students. Their practice promotes a centering of the work on the long-term prospects of the student as a lifelong learner, one who will embrace the identities of the disciplines under study. In addition, these interactions model and promote the notion that the purpose of the work of school is to serve the needs and interests of the students beyond their instrumental tasks in the classroom and extend to the needs and interests and long-term prospects of the student as a learner, creator, and engaged community member.

In doing so, the teachers work regularly to model themselves as learners and doers of the disciplines taken up in school. For example, when Megan (fifth grade teacher) is working with students on producing documentary videos, she describes how, when she talks with students about the work that they are doing, she conveys to them how she too engages in doing the work herself:

There is an emphasis here on strong modeling. If I can provide a strong model [of my video work or writing] then the kids would take it seriously. I use the word documentarian because that is what we are.

She attributes her commitment to working alongside her students on meaningful projects to the preparation she received as a student teacher at the Bank Street School for Children. At one point during her year of student teaching, she was expected to teach an extended integrated studies unit on birds. Megan relayed to her Bank Street advisor that she didn’t know much of anything about birds, to which

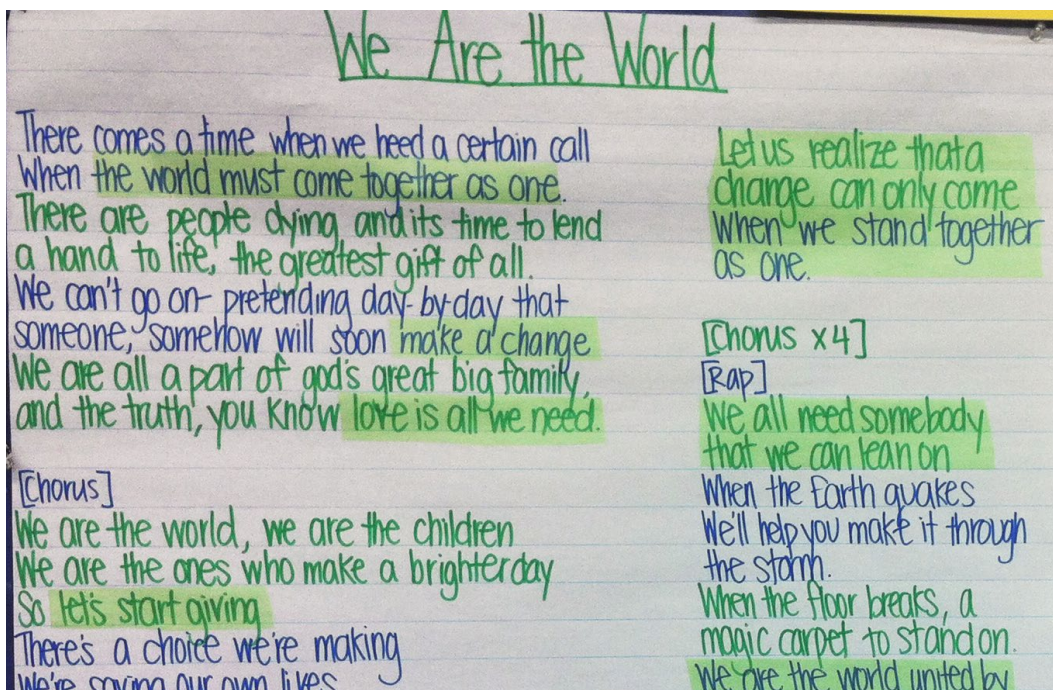
her advisor chimed, “Well, that’s your job now! To engage in the work you want your students to do. To model for them how to be a scholar about birds.”

Inclusion

Approximately 20% of the students at Community Roots have an identified disability, all of whom are served by the school’s integrated inclusion model. Community Roots’ approach to special education and its commitment to full inclusion represents a significant effort to provide the structure and resources needed to implement into practice an approach toward special education shared by Bank Street:

The Bank Street approach to teaching students with disabilities is based on the premise that all children have the same needs: joy and excitement in learning, rich curricula, opportunities for individual and cooperative learning, and a supportive school environment. Teachers in all classrooms benefit from a deeper understanding of how to identify learning differences and how to present lessons in ways that allow all children access to understanding what is being taught (Bank Street College of Education, 2014b).

The fundamental structures of Community Roots have been designed to enable teachers to support a range of learners inside the regular classroom. Each classroom utilizes an integrated co-teaching (ICT) model, and every classroom is staffed with



both a general education and special education certified teacher. In addition, teachers work collaboratively with a Learning Support Team that is staffed by other special educators and learning specialists. The commitment to inclusion is a defining characteristic of Community Roots:

At Community Roots, inclusive education is not simply about special education, but about creating an environment where there is a deeply connected community that celebrates the diversity of our students' learning strengths and needs. We instill the concept of inclusion into every aspect of our mission, community and curriculum. In addition, we are committed to developing creative programming for students with special educational needs. The criteria for our successful inclusive environment are embedded throughout the school's charter, professional development plan, program implementation and community outreach. All staff members are held accountable for taking part in professional development that supports teachers in working to adapt the school's curriculum to meet student's individual needs. At Community Roots, all staff members are responsible for creating a school environment in which all children feel welcome and thrive both academically and socially (Community Roots Charter School, 2014b).

The structure of the co-teaching model—one general education teacher and one special education teacher in each classroom—contributes to a flexibility around grouping and support within classrooms. For example, in one math lesson we observed the special education teacher take a group of eight students onto the rug for a mini-lesson on word problems. The other teacher worked the room providing support for and conversing with the other students who worked either independently or in pairs. As the students on the rug transitioned to more independent work, the special education teacher began to move through the classroom working with the full range of students in the class to support their specific needs, “How are you doing on this problem?” “Can you explain your thinking here?” The high frequency of exchange between teacher and student in classrooms corresponds to the fundamental principles of attending both to the whole child as a learner and to each learner as an individual.

Keil describes the model of co-teaching as a central element of Community Roots and one of its defining features,

I think co-teaching is essential, and that really stands out to parents who are looking at lots of public schools, even—and private schools. It's not a head teaching and an assistant model. It's not a mentor–mentee. It's the full co-teaching, sharing of these 25 kids and 25 families.

Inside the classroom, the emphasis on project-based teaching and the focused sensitivity of teachers to the unique developmental profile and trajectory of each student dovetails with the principle of inclusion. As Shapiro and Nager (2000) describe, in the developmental-interaction approach, “The teacher was expected to be attuned to what the child brought to the classroom—the social and intellectual talents and abilities, the gaps, the inconsistencies, fears, and joys—and to construct a curriculum that reflected both decisions about content and what children brought to that content” (p. 22).

Aside from the organizing structure of the integrated co-teaching model, Community Roots has developed a range of resources that the school deploys to support the range of children in their classrooms. This has been a work in progress as Stone reported:

We have all related services provided here, from occupational therapy to speech therapy, and then we meet. We try to put the same amount of effort in—as we can—to our support staff as we do our classroom teaching staff, so we have regular support-provider meetings, because I think it’s important that they have a community too. And a lot of those kids have overlap services, and it’s a really good opportunity for us to be able to talk about children.

There’s other structures that we put in place, such as a child study team. And that’s been a huge learning experience for us over the years—trying to make that work. We believed in this idea of coming together to talk about children, and that we have enough expertise on staff that we can essentially figure out solutions to working with children. But over the years, it’s been a really hard sort of dynamic to make work. And this year [2013] I think we’ve finally gotten to a place that feels really good. It’s a committee that has stayed together, representative of different related services, and then also different grade levels; whereas before, it used to change depending on where the student was coming from. And now that group is solid, and I think has essentially come up with their own identity, and that’s really helped service our kids.

The ICT model is a clear instantiation of Community Roots’ commitment to the inclusion and success of a very wide range of students. While ICT is not unique to Community Roots, it is taken up with vigor in this place and expressed in words and practice with deep conviction. The inclusive approach serves as a central facet of the orientation of the work of the school and its teachers.

Part 3: Approach to the Community

I think what sets our school apart and makes it a Bank Street school is the experience-based learning. I mean if you just look around and see what the first grade combination was like or even if you just walk into our rooms and you see the way kids are learning, they're learning in ways that connect them to the real world. And that's, I think, the most Bank Street thing. I think that that's what defines Bank Street philosophy in teaching and learning. And that's part of, as a graduate there, as a student there, that's what I experienced. I thought everything I learned in my graduate courses was practical. I could bring it straight into my classroom and try it out on my kids. I could bring it back and talk about it in my classes, and there was space for that collaboration. It wasn't just, "Read these articles and talk about 'em." It was, "Let's try these things out. See how it works with real kids. And how can we help kids make connections to their world?"

—Tasha, third grade teacher, Bank Street graduate

One little girl with her hair braided into an intricate pattern sits at a desk setting up blue and gray soldiers, horses, and other plastic figurines. The other 18 kindergartners present that day sit in a moon-shaped crescent in front of one of their classmates, an older brother, a mother, a father, and the boy's babysitter. The students fidget into position, each of them holding a pencil and a notepad. The family appears to be fidgeting as much as the kindergartners.

Jody watches the students squirm a bit and then calls the group to order, "Five, four, three, two, one, zero." She slowly and calmly counts down while showing the corresponding number of fingers on one hand. "I need you to find calm in your body so that we can begin to interview Sean and his family." The movement on the rug slows to a minimal hum. Once the group grows still, Sean, the student whose family is the focus of today's study, introduces his family on Jody's cue.

Jody then asks, "Who can help me ask the next question?" She points to one of the many hanging sheets of chart paper. A thin boy wearing a black Brooklyn Nets shirt shoots his hand up holding his pencil. Jody points to the question, and he reads it along with her, "Where do you come from?" Sean's mom looks at her husband with a near pleading look for him to begin, and he takes the cue, "I'm from the country. I am from Pennsylvania."

Jody interjects, “OK, let me write that down with you. That is a hard one, but I am going to sound-spell it ‘Pen-sil-vay-nee-yuh.’” As she writes, each member of the class diligently writes in a reporter/researcher notebook as well.

The kindergartners question each of the adults about their origin, and spend some time locating Pennsylvania and then Serbia (where the babysitter was from) on two of their large maps hanging in the room. Jody then asks for a volunteer to read the next question, “What do the grownups do?”

The mom begins, “Thank you for asking...,” but Jody interrupts and says, “If we just wait. Because there are three adults, I want to break up our note-taking box into three columns.” Jody models this on her chart paper where she is taking her “research notes” and the students follow along in their own research journals.

The mom continues, “I am a nurse and care for mothers who are getting ready to have a baby.” The children ask follow-up questions with seriousness of purpose. Some sit cross-legged, others fidget from position to position, and others sit on their knees, but they all continue to take make notes in their notebooks (some in pictures, some in words). The interview continues with the questions, “What does your family celebrate?” and, finally, “What does your family do for fun?”

After the research interview is finished, the family breaks up into stations around the room. At each station, a family member has prepared a demonstration or activity related to something they do. Sean’s babysitter has Monopoly, one of Sean’s favorite games. At another table, Sean’s older brother displays his Civil War toy soldiers and books, reflecting his deep interest in the topic. Sean sits at a table with a set of family photo albums and a loaf of homemade banana bread, a family specialty. Sean’s mom has brought some of her nursing equipment, including some stethoscopes and other medical materials. The teachers have added a set of plastic baby dolls for the students to practice on. Sean’s father steps outside the classroom where he attempts to arrange the corner of the hallway into a mini television studio. He is a writer for Comedy Central, and his activity is to film the kindergartners telling a “funny story.” They join him in groups of three, and he has his iPhone camera rolling. “OK, tell me a funny story!” he says. The students take turns stand with their backs to the wall looking at the camera and begin, “One day...”

The Family Study is part of an extended integrated studies unit that kindergarten students conduct from January to June. This study builds on what students learned from two fall integrated study units, the Me Study and the Apple Study. A celebration of individuality and diversity, as well as community, the Me Study explores each student’s backgrounds, interests, and characteristics. In the Apple Study, students learn to use their senses to explore similarities, differences, and characteristics of the apple. The students then bring their emerging research and observation skills to

the Family Study, which provides students an opportunity to study their family and home life and that of their peers. As described in the school's charter documents:

Studying the child's family will deepen students' understanding of themselves and their peers and how they each fit into the world that directly surrounds them. They generate systematic research questions that guide their interviews with families and take on a more active role becoming researchers themselves through learning how to observe, question, and interview, record, role play and test new ideas, and present information in a creative and authentic manner. School becomes a place where a child's home is an important part of their history (Keil & Stone, 2005).

At the end of the extended Family Study, each student produces a 25-page portfolio, which includes one-page summaries of the student's research notes about each classmate's family. The culminating product simultaneously reflects the students' developing research and writing skills and celebrates the cohesion and diversity of their classroom community.

The Family Study conducted by kindergartners showcases a central animating principle of Community Roots: understanding and learning for children at Community Roots happens in active relationship with a child's family, as well as the larger school community, neighborhood, and the world beyond. Engagement with family happens across the year and through the grades through a wide array of structures. The kindergarten Family Study draws on families as a pivotal and integral resource to a child's learning and provides a rich source for the development of emerging research and thinking skills. It begins a coordinated developmental continuum of integrated studies and prepares kindergartners for the first grade focus on community, neighborhood, and jobs.

Several of the Bank Street graduates who taught in the upper grades also pointed back to the family unit as being a hallmark of the Community Roots curriculum. They described it as laying the foundation for later integrated studies projects with their roots in the Bank Street approach. As one fourth grader teacher detailed,

I think of our work as trying to connect personal history to all the other skills that we need to learn: reading, writing, math, and thinking. But it begins with the personal history and then using those skills in service of learning about your environment. The Family Study in kindergarten embodies that, as the taking of our family life—our outside-of-school life—and bringing it into the school.

The focus on family and community infuses Community Roots in and beyond the classroom. As one of the early-grade teachers described,

So now I think that stuff kind of became tradition. Like the constant communication with families. The doors being open so families are coming in.

Also, the relationship with the families is very, very important here. The fact that our administrators not only know every student's first and last name but they know all the parents' names as well. And there's a sense of taking care of not just the children that go here but also the entire family unit that's involved in the school.

And as Keil noted,

I think when we opened, our intentions were always very much to make this a place where families felt welcome and a one-stop shop. I'm very passionate about this idea of wraparound services and this idea that parents... Like, we have your kids for eight hours a day. We should know if there's any stress or strife or conflict or crisis in the family, and we want this place to feel like a place where you can come and get support. Will I always have the answer? Will someone here always have the answer? No. But we'll always support you through it.

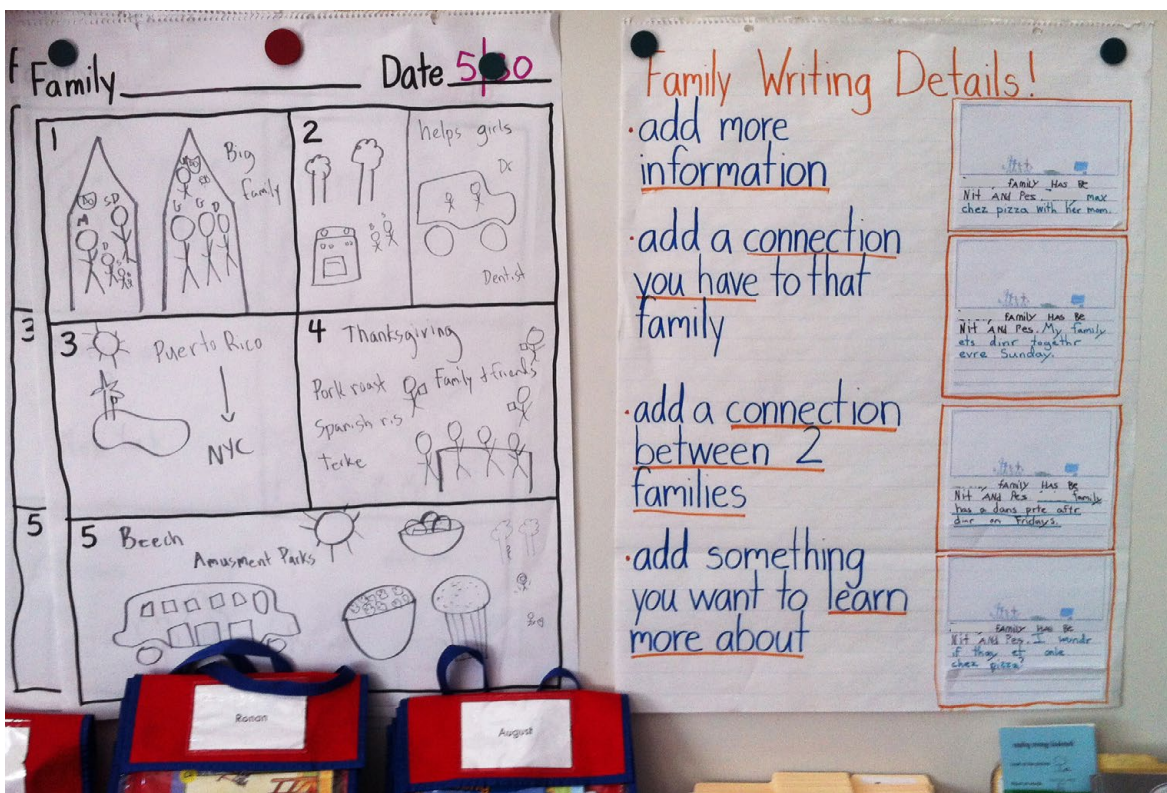
The community orientation of Community Roots is exemplified in numerous ways. Wednesday afternoon's community building session is one prime example:

The scene in the school at 2:35 p.m. on a Wednesday afternoon is a combination of jubilation and managed chaos. Roughly 300 students (K-5), nearly three dozen teachers and administrators, and around 15 parents and grandparents, are all busily moving to various spaces across the school building for the start of Community Open Work (COW). The school is a beehive of activity.

One teacher meets a small group of students at the top of the stairwell. He has several skateboards in tow and leads the group down to the ground floor where he offers a skateboarding session. The older students have their own boards and begin with some warm-up laps around the blacktop. The younger students are taking turns working in pairs, one sitting on a board and the other pushing from behind. The teacher works to outfit the students with appropriate gear while offering suggestions and encouragement to students based on their level of comfort, skill, and interest.

On the third floor, a parent is leading a woodworking workshop. Desks are now covered with saws, containers of wood glue, hand drills, angles, and grips. Students are in the midst of crafting tables, stools, and chairs. In just 10 minutes, the classroom is transformed into a busy shop, apprentices in groups of two or three working diligently, while the teacher circulates asking questions and guiding the work.

Around the entire building, 25 such workshops are underway, with teachers, parents, grandparents, and other community members sharing their talents, interests, and skills with the students of Community Roots. In addition to skateboarding and woodworking, students encounter COW workshops on embroidery, cooking, yoga, origami, and a wide range of other activities of interest.



Community Open Work is emblematic of the community orientation of Community Roots. Every Wednesday, the last hour of the school day is dedicated to community building activities. Teachers, parents, grandparents, and other community members organize and lead the COW workshops. The activities are open to students of all ages and grade levels, and students sign up for workshops based on their interests. The workshops run for about six to eight weeks, and the content ranges widely. The COW workshops and other Wednesday communal activities support building community within and beyond the school by sharing interests, organizing students into small groups, making the school accessible and engaging, bringing families and community members into the school, and generally making the school a site for community.

From the perspective of one of the teachers at Community Roots, the value of COW is in:

...bringing kids together from all different backgrounds and experiences. This is a huge part of the ethos of our school, and we want to do that even within the school itself. So bringing together younger children with older students and parents and teachers... for that to happen; just to really mix it up.

Community is fostered, expressed, and valued in numerous other ways at Community Roots. Structurally, the school underscores the importance it places on community in the form of a full-time staff position: director of community development. The position was established a few years after the school was launched and is held by Rae, one of the school's founding teachers. When asked about the formation of this position, Rae described it this way:

My master's degree was in international educational development with a focus on family and community development. And so that was what really drew me to this school to start with. That like, yes, we believe in high expectations for our children both academically and socially and emotionally. But we also do care about their social and emotional progress and do give value to like community and what it means to be a part of the community. And so that's what really drew me to this school to begin with.

And then after a few years I just—my personal interest is in this type of work. And I think at that point Alli and Sara were starting to see a need for a position kind of solely dedicated to working on programming, to really help solidify the things that were already in place and kind of move some things forward even more. In particular around like having a very diverse community and thinking about what it means to have all stakeholders, you know, have a voice in the community regardless of where they're coming from, and feel comfortable in the community, and be able to really—that it's owned by all, even though we are in a very, very diverse place. We serve a very, very diverse community.

So that's kind of how it came about. So three years ago I moved into this position as director of community development. ... [R]eally it's looking at our major stakeholders. So our children and our families and our staff, and thinking about how those key players play into the larger community. Creating programming for all three of those stakeholders and then also thinking about how we're connecting with the outside community. So making connections with local organizations and working with them and having folks in here. And just doing all that. So that's like the broad strokes overview and then under each thing there's a number of programming.

The director of community development supervises numerous programs designed to foster community and connection at the school and with families, and to connect the school to the broader community. The following are among the extensive range of community-oriented programs at the school:

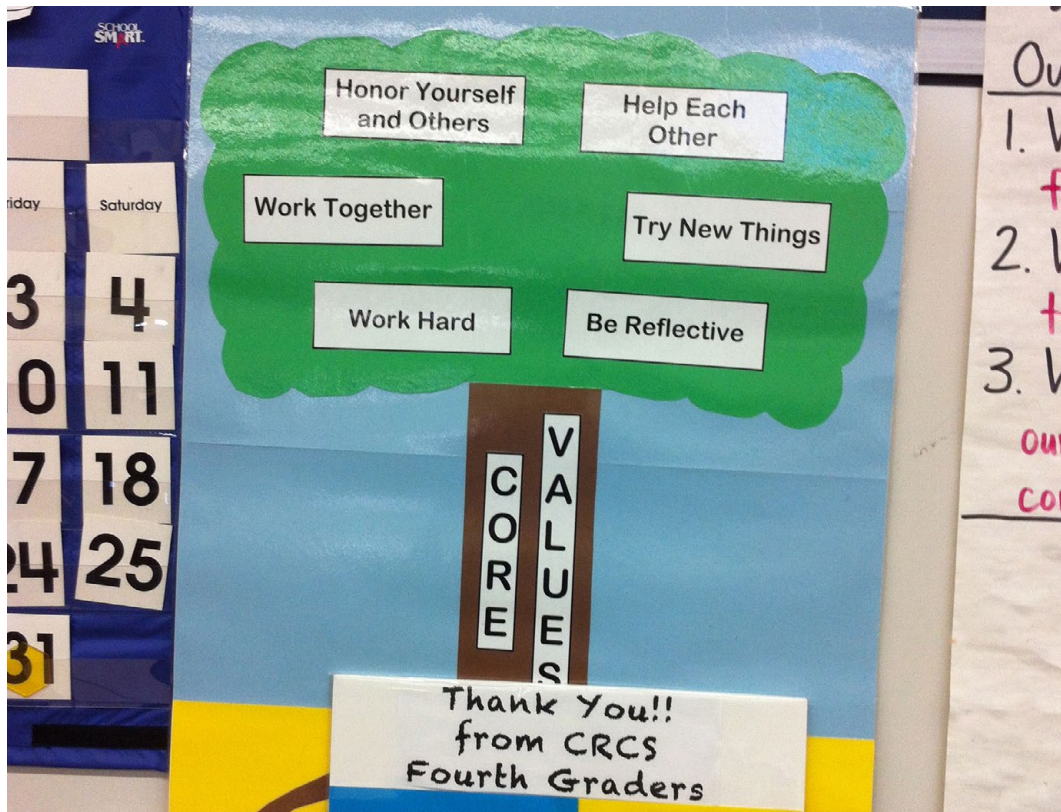
PALS (playing and learning squads) is a program that works to build social connections among Community Roots' diverse students and families by organizing after-school play groups and activities. At each grade level, teachers set up groups of four or five students and their families at the beginning of the year and ask parents to organize a minimum of three play dates or other activities among the students. This bit of active engineering of community relationships is designed to help build and strengthen community among the students, across the school, and within the school's diverse families.

As Sara Stone describes it:

So it actually started off with Alli. Because we're not a neighborhood school, Alli was like, "What can we do to really strengthen these relationships outside of the school building?" And she had brought it up with some teachers, and they had brought it up with some parents. And really it's completely parent-run. This thing.

...what we've found has been great is, especially with kindergarten, first, and second, is they're really starting to navigate different relationships and start to understand. Developmentally for them, it's great. So throughout the year, there's three times where they'd have play dates outside of school within a group that's chosen by teachers. So a teacher will say, "You five are together. You five are together." And parents will lead those things. So the only job really that the teachers have is to just create the play dates and kind of like get them excited about it. But the parents plan the play dates. And so it's great 'cause you have kids who don't always get to hang out, 'cause they don't live near each other or they're not around each other all the time, going to the museum together or just going to the park together or just going to someone's house and making pizza. So that's PALS.

Buddy Read is another program aimed at building relationships and community in the school. While many schools organize classroom buddy programs, at Community Roots the organization and structure is deep and purposeful. Every class is paired with a buddy classroom in a different grade, and every student is assigned a specific buddy from the matching class, coordinated by the classroom teachers and the community development director. Classroom buddies meet regularly. At the beginning of the year, buddies work on special projects together each week around the six core values of the school: Honor Yourself and Others, Work Together, Work Hard, Help Each Other, Try New Things, and Be Reflective.



Then throughout the year buddies continue to meet and build social connections through reading and other activities.

Community Builders (CB) and Learning through Service and Action (LSA) are initiatives designed to engage Community Roots’ students in service projects at the school and with the broader neighborhood community. CB is a program for fifth graders who go through training to be mentors to K–2 students. They then volunteer during K–2 lunch and recess twice a week to support the K–2 students. LSA involves numerous service projects, based on the interests and research of students in the LSA group at the school. LSA also includes opportunities for Community Roots’ students to engage with residents of a nearby rehabilitation center, for example, singing, reading, and playing games with its residents.

Staffle Raffle is a program where teachers raffle off opportunities for students to go with teachers on community adventures—to a local bookstore, museum, home visit, cooking experience, or the like. As one teacher put it, “It’s a way to bring kids together outside of the classroom and connect with their teachers.”

Numerous **Parent workshops and clubs** are offered and promoted at Community Roots. Fostered through a combination of parent and teacher interest and the

encouragement of school administrators and the community development director, parent workshops and clubs provide another forum for community building. A few of the workshops and clubs that we encountered during our visits to Community Roots include:

- **Community Chorus**, a parent and teacher musical group, led by the school’s music teacher;
- **Community Open Opportunity Kitchen School (COOKS)**, a family cooking program for preparing meals and sharing recipes;
- **Community Reads**, a teacher–parent book club;
- **Parents and Children Together with Art (PACT)**, a collaboration with Free Arts NYC to provide after-school arts experiences for students and families; and
- **Supporting Parents And Connecting Experiences (SPACE)**, a weekly parent support group meeting to address a wide range of questions, concerns, and issues of interest to families.



In all, more than 20–25 clubs and workshops are organized for families each year. Keil pointed out the centrality of this work to the identity of the school:

So that is really intentional and it's work that constantly evolves, I think, and being a place of parent learning, saying, "Come in and let's do workshops. Tell us what you want workshops in. If we don't have the expertise here, we'll bring it here because why should you have to go to someplace else when you have to bring your kid here and pick your kid up here anyway," you know? And that we can learn from families, I think, is another piece and that it's our responsibility to connect families to each other and create this network here.

Stone added,

It works here because we really put a lot of value on each of the stakeholders, that we are not just here to educate children, but we're here to work with families and we're here to work with staff, and that caring about each one of those groups is integral into making the school work.

This valuing of community at Community Roots resonates with the preparatory experiences its numerous faculty and school leaders received from Bank Street. As Jody noted,

And then the other aspect that I got from my student teaching there [at Bank Street] is just how they foster community within their classrooms, because I was a student intern at their School for Children as well. I was lucky enough to experience that. And part of that community is really honoring that child and their whole family and who they are as a whole being.

Joel added,

And so it was really nice as a recent grad to come here and be able to put all of that into action. Communicating with parents was a perfect example of, "Yep, this is what I learned about in class. This is how we should to it."

Conclusion: Contextualized Constructivism

As reflected throughout this paper, echoed via interviews with the founding coprincipals, and confirmed by our classroom observations and interviews at the school site, broadly speaking, Community Roots is a place that is highly infused with elements of the Bank Street approach, though situated and shaped by its local context.

When Lucy Sprague Mitchell founded Bank Street as The Bureau of Educational Experiments in 1916, its original mission was to be a lab school setting where educators could develop innovative progressive practices focused on the teaching and learning of young children. Although progressivism as a philosophy of education encompasses many variations, Nager and Shapiro characterize the progressive ethos of Mitchell’s work, “as an effort to effect societal change toward greater equity and democratic participation” (Nager & Shapiro, 2000, p. 6). While the animating social principles of education as a force for social and personal transformation remains a core element of the Bank Street approach, the context of American education has undergone fundamental transformation—particularly for public schools. The landscape includes Common Core State Standards, testing, special education requirements, charter schools, and a myriad of other realities driven by highly prescribed policies. In this sense, the journey of designing, launching, and now running Community Roots Charter School represents an opportunity for the anchoring principles first articulated by Mitchell to be adapted in one particular context within the current milieu of American public education.

Community Roots’ formidable challenge has been negotiating a balance between a school practice that honors long-standing Bank Street principles—such as respecting children as active learners, experimenters, explorers, and artists who develop socially, cognitively and physically at different rates and along different pathways—and meeting the very explicit accountability and performance standards of a charter school within the New York City Department of Education in the 2010s. As Keil notes, “We have had to make tradeoffs and adapt the Bank Street approach, because this is the real world.” These adaptations have yielded a hybrid approach of sorts, that fuses an unrelenting commitment to core progressive principles, such as respecting children as unique learners, while simultaneously attending to the reality that in order for children to be successful on the tests that are so important to accountability structures, Community Roots needs to employ some strategies and instructional approaches that explicitly prepare students for the exams.

One of the strategies employed across the school in response to this set of demands is an emphasis on structure and routine that pervaded instructional practice in the classrooms we observed. Here is an example from Oliver's fourth grade classroom:

"Let's get started," Oliver says with energy. The group fluidly unfolds from the rug and, with practiced steps, students carefully pick laptops from a large laptop crate and head off to their desks, where large manila folders spilling over with drafts await them.

"Remember what we're working on here." Oliver demonstratively sweeps his arm across a room covered with multicolored chart paper. Even the banana-colored shades are drawn down so that they can serve as a backdrop to post the frameworks and expectations for the class project. For example, "Synthesis" in bold orange letters, followed by a clear application to the discipline: "Historians synthesize information from multiple sources to develop theories about the past."

Taped next to it is a chart entitled "Visualizing Historical Fiction." Separate titles are divided into three clear boxes:

- 1. Author's Descriptive Language*
- 2. Image Library*
- 3. Author's Description Language + Image Library*

In each category, there are yellow sticky notes with quick sketches of historical scenes illustrating the categories denoted on the chart.

As the students sit down and flip up their laptop screens, they rustle through their drafts, which are noted with clear markings. The scene is highly fluid, yet systematically choreographed and intensely organized.

In 1938, John Dewey wrote *Experience and Education*, a short book that attempts to respond to the scathing criticism targeting his progressive educational philosophies. In it Dewey noted:

Many of the newer schools tend to make little or nothing of organized subject-matter of study; to process as if any form of direction and guidance by adults were an invasion of individual freedom, and as if the idea that education should be concerned with the present and the future meant that acquaintance with the past has little or no role to play in education (p. 22).

Community Roots represents an effort to devise what Dewey describes as “organized subject-matter(s) of study.” Set against a culture that demands unequivocal and systematic measures of success, the founders of Community Roots have attempted to cultivate a progressive approach defined by fluid but clear systems, and an acknowledgement that a direct focus on skill building—both content and process skills—would support both the progressive orientation of the school and the accountability demands of their context.

The kindergarten teachers’ approach to the Family Study integrated studies unit demonstrates this systematized progressivism well. The teachers approached this rich, engaging, and developmental task by thinking not just about the social learning that might occur, but by systematically breaking apart the task into a series of constituent skills that could be then taught, reinforced, replicated, and explicitly re-taught over time. As Keil noted:

What we teach the kindergarteners—they’re given their first research notebook; they’re taught to design interview questions and evaluate, “What makes a good question?” and “What gives you nothing—a ‘yes or no’ question,” right? So it’s broken down to the kindergarteners. They’re taught to take notes for the first time from an interview, and conduct an interview, and they take notes and pictures, and then now words. And then they’re taught to use those notes to inform their writing—“What does that look like?” You know, those really early researching skills that you build upon. I don’t know that Bank Street talks that much about skills—right? It’s about whether we are immersing kids in really rich curriculum and content and study. And I think what we’ve built in is probably more the skills work part.

This bridging of explicit instruction to the traditional Bank Street approach to integrated studies has been a distinct focus for teachers and school leaders at Community Roots. Keil says, “We are more hard-core about skills. What research skills are we teaching? Being more clear, specific about the skills necessary to be successful. Bank Street doesn’t talk much about skills; more about immersion.” She goes on to note that in addition to orienting and developing students toward an identity of readers, writers, and researchers, the school must also support their development as test-takers to ensure the health and success of both the students and of the school.

Every school is both a product of and a contributor to its community and context. Community Roots, as a charter school in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, New York, with deep ties to the Bank Street College of Education is a rich and thriving instantiation of the values, practices, and priorities of each of its contextual drivers. Community Roots fuses the idealism and progressivism of the Bank Street approach within a neighborhood and community context where such educational ideals and practices

are rather uncommon. The founding coprincipals take great pride in the notion the Community Roots exists as a “proof point” of the possibility that a deeply progressive, community-oriented, public charter school can thrive in the urban context. Community Roots’ commitment to a pedagogy that values student-generated ideas, qualitative rendering of student progress, high interaction, and broad-based experiential curriculum, while serving a truly diverse, local neighborhood community, serves as a reminder to the profession that even in the modern day accountability context where the metrics of achievement focus solely on academic scores, the processes and practices at the core of the Bank Street approach can be profoundly successful.



Afterword

Our aim in this case study of Community Roots Charter School was to share vivid descriptions of the practices of several Bank Street graduates in a particular school working with children and with colleagues. This case study is part of a larger study, *Teaching for a Changing World: The Graduates of Bank Street College of Education*, that examines the preparation, practices, and effectiveness of graduates of Bank Street College of Education teacher certification programs over the last decade.

Bank Street's Graduate School of Education offers internationally renowned master's level teacher certification programs from early childhood through middle grades with a number of specializations, programs, and pathways. The graduate school also offers a number of other programs, including leadership, museum education, literacy, and child life. Its graduates serve in a multitude of schools and other organizations in and beyond the New York metropolitan area. Bank Street College and its graduates have been responsible for significant reforms of schooling in a number of the schools where Bank Street-prepared teachers and principals congregate.

The larger study, *Teaching for a Changing World: The Graduates of Bank Street College of Education*, has five publications, including this case study:

- *The Threads They Follow: Bank Street Teachers in a Changing World*
- *The Preparation, Professional Pathways, and Effectiveness of Bank Street Graduates*
- *Learning to Play, Playing to Learn: The Bank Street Developmental-Interaction Approach in Liliana's Kindergarten Classroom*
- *Artful Teaching and Learning: The Bank Street Developmental-Interaction Approach at Midtown West School*
- *A School Growing Roots: The Bank Street Developmental-Interaction Approach at Community Roots Charter School*

Methods

Our effort for this set of three case studies focused on trying to understand the influence of a Bank Street education on the teaching of the college's graduates at

specific schools and to describe key features of their practice and its relationship to the Bank Street approach. Broadly, this effort seeks to answer the question: “What does the Bank Street developmental-interaction approach (the Bank Street approach) look like in practice?”

Toward this end, our research encompassed five broad and iterative processes that guided us through the development of this report:

1. We identified appropriate contexts for data collection.
2. We built a framework for observation and data gathering.
3. We collected evidence in service of the case study write-up via observations and interviews.
4. We analyzed the data using the Bank Street approach as a lens for analysis as well as a grounded-theory approach to identifying relevant themes.
5. Finally, we engaged in a collaborative effort to put the dominant themes and data together into a coherent series of case studies.

In examining our research question, two intersecting ideas guided our work: First, we recognized that each case study would display particular variations of the Bank Street approach, as high-quality practice will always be shaped and influenced by the particulars of the local context and conditions. Second, we were interested in exploring iterations of the Bank Street approach that occurred in schools where there was an established “footprint” of Bank Street’s presence. To this end, we examined teachers’ practice in three schools with close ties and connections to Bank Street, presuming that such schools would provide the best context within which Bank Street graduates would be afforded the opportunity to engage in practices resonant with their preparation. For the purposes of the study close *ties* included:

- Significant presence of Bank Street graduates in the school;
- School leadership focus that encourages meaningful connections to Bank Street College and articulates a sympathetic alignment to the Bank Street approach; and
- A meaningful and ongoing structural relationship to Bank Street. This could include serving as a placement site for student teachers, participation in professional development activities, and/or a history of other initiatives connecting the school and the college.

Additionally, our research team was interested in exploring contexts with these types of deep connections to Bank Street to evaluate the cumulative effects of school-wide practices in settings potentially aligned with and supportive of the Bank Street approach.

Data collection entailed a combination of interviews (teachers and school leaders), review of school documents and other artifacts, and extensive onsite visits and classroom observations, typically over the course of a full week. The research team spent one full week in the spring of 2013 at Community Roots. In simple terms, these were the overarching questions that guided our work:

1. What does the practice of Bank Street graduates look like in the classroom?
2. In what ways is the Bank Street developmental-interaction approach in evidence at the classroom and the school level?
3. How is the Bank Street developmental-interaction approach being adapted in this particular context?

The Bank Street Developmental-Interaction Approach

Our lens for the case study observations and other data collection was the Bank Street developmental-interaction approach (the Bank Street approach), an approach to teaching, learning, and teacher development that can trace its roots to a progressive era movement that began in the early 20th century. The Bank Street approach was conceived, in large part, in the work of progressive educator Lucy Sprague Mitchell who founded what was originally called The Bureau of Educational Experiments (BEE). Her vision was that the school would be a laboratory that would be staffed by teachers, psychologists, and researchers whose collaborative work would create and study environments in which children grew and learned to their full potential, and to educate teachers and others how to create these environments.

The transition from BEE to Bank Street College occurred in 1931 as a result of a series of meetings between Mitchell and leaders of a network of progressive private schools who approached her with the idea of creating a cooperative teacher preparation program (Grinberg, 2005). The impetus for this proposal emerged because, according to leaders of progressive private schools in Manhattan at the time, such as Walden School, City and Country School, and Ethical Culture School, “Normal schools and universities did a poor job preparing teachers” (p. 13). These progressive school leaders believed that teachers graduating from traditional

programs had been acculturated to an idea of teaching that emphasized narrow methods and prescriptive practice and that teachers were not open to approaches anchored in child development, social justice, and the social context of children and schooling. Mitchell was enthusiastic about the teacher preparation project and the first cohort began in 1931–32.

Mitchell’s mission was to develop a program that prepared teachers to undertake teaching as an endeavor fusing the systematic methods of a scientist with the creative, open-mindedness of an artist. In 1931, she articulated the overarching principles guiding the new school in an article written in the journal *Progressive Education*.

Our aim is to turn out teachers whose attitude toward their work and toward life is scientific. To us, this means an attitude of eager, alert observation; a constant questioning of old procedure in the light of new observations; a use of the world, as well as of books, as source material; an experimental open-mindedness, and an effort to keep as reliable records as the situation permits, in order to base the future upon accurate knowledge of what has been done.

Our aim is equally to turn out students whose attitude toward their work and towards life is that of the artist. To us, this means an attitude of relish, of emotional drive, a genuine participation in some creative phase of work, and a sense that joy and beauty are legitimate possessions of all human beings, young and old. If we can produce teachers with an experimental, critical, and ardent approach to their work, we are ready to leave the future of education to them (Mitchell, 1931, p. 251).

Mitchell’s original vision of teaching still guides and animates the Bank Street approach to the preparation of teachers. In a 2007 concept paper on the progressive ideals of teacher preparation, Nager and Shapiro contend that the approach developed by Mitchell and her colleagues remains central to the work of Bank Street: “The breadth of Mitchell’s synthesis, her capacity to inspire others with her vision, and the heuristic framework she helped shape may be at least partly responsible for the remarkable durability of key ideas” (p. 8). They identify five key principles that continue to guide Bank Street’s approach to the “teaching of teachers.”

1. Education is a vehicle for creating and promoting social justice and encouraging participation in democratic processes.

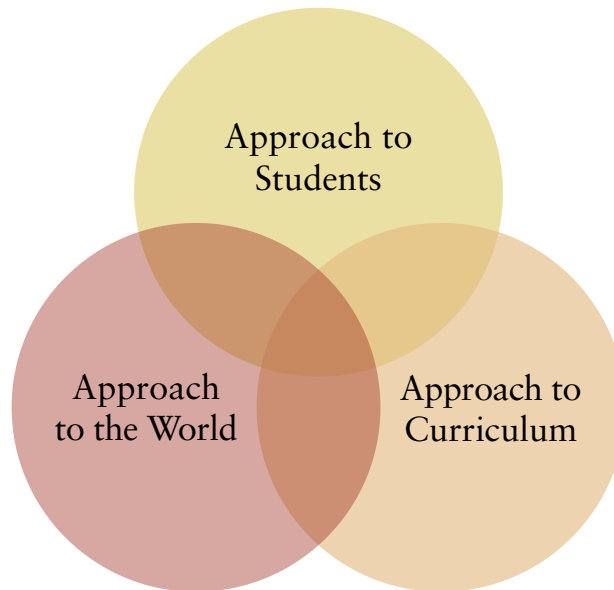
2. The teacher has a deep knowledge of subject matter areas and is actively engaged in learning through formal study, direct observation, and participation.
3. Understanding children’s learning and development in the context of family, community, and culture is needed for teaching.
4. The teacher continues to grow as a person and as a professional.
5. Teaching requires a philosophy of education—a view of learning and the learner, knowledge and knowing—which informs all elements of teaching (Nager & Shapiro, 2007, p. 9).

This conception of teaching and learning instantiated and fostered at Bank Street has come to be known as the “developmental-interaction approach,” or more popularly, as “the Bank Street approach.” The developmental-interaction approach “recognizes that children learn best when they are actively engaged both intellectually and emotionally with materials, ideas and people” (Bank Street College of Education, 2014a). Educators who embrace the developmental-interaction approach to teaching recognize that students’ development unfolds at varying paces and through interaction with the world. The classroom is regarded as a space that would

strengthen the child’s competence to deal effectively with the environment; encourage the development of autonomy and the construction of a sense of self; promote the integration of functions—that is, thought and feeling, feeling and action—and stimulate individuality and vigorous, creative response (Shapiro & Nager, 2000, p. 22).

For the purpose of this case study, we reviewed a wide range of materials and interviewed a number of experienced Bank Street faculty and graduates in an effort to distill the Bank Street approach into a framework or lens that would help to guide data collection, analysis, and writing, while grounding our understanding of the Bank Street approach within classroom practice. We describe our findings here, recognizing that a vision originally articulated nearly a century ago would be shaped and reshaped by the diverse array of individuals who engage with it. There is no one perfect way to describe or instantiate a philosophy held, shared, and exemplified by a diverse array of individuals over a long period of history.

Accordingly, the lens we used in conducting these cases studies was “the Bank Street approach,” distilled here as an interrelated and integrated approach to students, approach to curriculum, and approach to the world:



Approach to students

We defined the “Bank Street approach to students” as one that is:

- Founded first and foremost on knowing individual student’s strengths, interest, and needs;
- Developmentally oriented and grounded;
- Committed to the notion that student growth is fostered by interaction with materials and the world around them;
- Based on building strong connections and relationships with individual students;
- Founded on a broad level of and orientation to inclusivity;
- Intent on taking students seriously, seeing students as active learners, makers of meaning, and researchers of their worlds; and
- Aware of the social, cultural, and individual nature of development.

Approach to curriculum

We defined the “Bank Street approach to curriculum” as one that is:

- Broad-based, but with special and particular attention and depth in the social studies;
- Encouraging of long-term, student-centered projects and other extended explorations of topics and subjects;
- Interdisciplinary, with emphasis on engagement with and integration of the arts;
- “Constructivist” in its orientation, providing students opportunities to help shape and drive curricular and instructional choices;
- Centered around both the learner and learning; and
- Focused on the learning process to arrive at desired outcomes.

Approach to the world

We defined the “Bank Street approach to the world” as one that is:

- Founded firmly within the tradition of progressive education, governance, and social values;
- Oriented toward meaningful connections to the family, community, and larger world;
- Encouraging of children and teachers to take up questions and issues of justice and equity in their work;
- Committed to the notion that schools should be in service of a more equitable and just society; and
- Supportive of teachers as collaborative professionals, robust decision-makers, lifelong learners, and politically engaged and oriented.

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