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Artful Teaching and Learning: The Bank Street Developmental-Interaction Approach at Midtown West School

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

Artful Teaching and Learning:
The Bank Street Developmental-Interaction
Approach at Midtown West School

By Sam Intrator, Soyoung Park, and Ira Lit





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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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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On the seashore

On the seashore of endless worlds children meet.

The infinite sky is motionless overhead and the restless water is boisterous. On the seashore of endless worlds the children meet with shouts and dances...

On the seashore of endless worlds is the great meeting of children.

—Rabindranath Tagore

Introduction

Forty or so first graders sit in the far back rows of an auditorium in the center of Manhattan’s Theater District. They fidget and talk among themselves in hushed voices. They appear blithely unaware of the group of actors working through an intense relationship scene on the stage. After a few minutes, a man who appeared to be directing the rehearsal swivels toward the back of the auditorium and calls out toward the collection of 6 and 7 year olds, “Okay, it’s all yours.”

As if on cue, the first graders crane their heads toward the aisle. They hear, “Let’s get set up!” and in messy unison they begin to extricate themselves from the wooden seats. Some of them head off toward the front of the stage lugging colorful costumes and elaborate hats with antlers and other designs. Small squads head off toward the back of the theater and begin carefully lifting up trifold painted panels and various other set pieces: trees designed with waving, delicate branches and leaves that shimmer back and forth, elaborate benches, and tables. The first graders proceed slowly, and, in what seems like choreographed activity, carefully lug the props down the aisle.

The flurry of activity happening in the theater marks a transition. The actors leaving the auditorium are high-school students from the Professional Performing Arts School (PPAS). The first graders are from P.S. 212, Midtown West School, an elementary school that shares the building and auditorium. They coexist as two distinct school communities within the same building. What binds them together is their location six blocks from Times Square, in the heart of what might be the world’s most vibrant theater district.

Midtown West: Founded in community, partnership, and parental involvement

Established in 1989, Midtown West is a New York City public elementary school serving approximately 350 students from kindergarten through grade five (60 students in each grade, nearly 30 students per class). The student body is diverse. Table 1 shows the demographic composition in academic year 2012–13.

Table 1. Demographic Composition of Midtown West School, 2012–13

Eligible for free or reduced lunch	28%
Black/African American	9%
Hispanic or Latino	22%
Asian or Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	10%
White	49%
Multiracial	9%
Special education	16%

Note. Adapted from “P.S. 212 Midtown West enrollment (2012–13)” by New York State Education Department, <http://data.nysed.gov/enrollment.php?year=2013&instid=800000048375>

The school was established in 1989, at a time when the development of alternative, small schools of choice was on the rise in New York City. Unlike other parts of the city, the Midtown West neighborhood was not yet home to many thriving schools of choice. With the support of Tony Alvarado, the dynamic superintendent of New York's Community School District 2, a group of motivated and involved parents established a partnership with Bank Street College of Education to develop a progressive school of choice. They modeled the school on the Bank Street development-interaction approach with an emphasis on developmentally oriented curriculum and instruction, a prominent role for social studies and the arts, and integrated, project-based learning. (See Afterword for a detailed description of the Bank Street approach.)

When asked about the origins and motivating forces behind the founding of the school, Johanna, one of its longest-practicing teachers, described:

Parents, parents, parents!

And then Alvarado, at the time, was really into option schools.... [The parents] knew they didn't want a very traditional setting, and they wanted a setting that attracted lots of different kinds of people and children because at the time, early on, we accepted children from all five boroughs, 'cause we're an option school. So it was, I think, perfect timing. Alvarado was really into opening small option schools, and these parents were looking for something like that.

Anita, one of the founding parents, a former educator at the school, and the current parent coordinator, described the intentionality of the original connection to Bank Street College:

So [Alvarado] began this in collaboration with Bank Street really as an early childhood center. It began with pre-K, kindergarten, I think a first grade in the first year, and then we added a grade each consecutive year until we reached fifth grade. So it began very small, and the goal was always to keep it fairly small. We have two classes per grade level, and the fundamental philosophy of this school was to align it with Bank Street as much as possible.

Anita then goes on to describe a federal grant initiative that supported the early work at the school:

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

So the tenets of this grant [included]: connecting with the university, so we had Bank Street; integrating parent involvement; age-appropriate, developmentally appropriate curriculum; and bringing minority males particularly into the school as teachers. So under that, we already had the collaboration with Bank Street. Parent involvement became a very integral part of our school philosophy and still is. The developmentally appropriate curriculum, as an early childhood center at that point, I think ... was very important.

Midtown West School Program

These elements of the philosophy and mission of the school and the explicit connection to Bank Street are still present and flourishing. The “School Philosophy” (Midtown West School – P.S. 212, 2014a), summarizes the founding principles and ongoing commitments of the school:

Midtown West School is a collaboration between Community School District Two and The Bank Street College of Education.

It is an educational setting, which focuses on the following components: a school for children that is a working model of the thematic constructivist approach associated with the Bank Street College of Education; a literacy-based, standards-driven curriculum, which encourages individuality, and interactive learning, and supports the implementation of The New Standards. Students are expected to reflect on the quality of their work and to reach their full potential as active learners; a place where diversity is celebrated and collaboration between families and school encouraged; an educational laboratory for research and assessment related to how children learn and how best to prepare teachers to teach them; a professional development institute for the preparation and continuing education of teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators, working in elementary education. As such, it serves as a resource not only for the families in the community within which the school is based, but also for professionals and educational personnel from other school[s] and institutions who would like to avail themselves of the school program.

We are committed to creating an environment where children, parents and staff from different ethnic, cultural, linguistic and economic backgrounds can work together to achieve a truly integrated, nurturing, academically rigorous school community.

Midtown West is proud of our successful collaboration with community partners and our groundbreaking initiatives, all of which help to develop outstanding educational programs.

Following the Bank Street approach, social studies is at the core of the curriculum across grades at Midtown West. Each grade level typically conducts two or three long-term, integrated units of study each year, weaving literacy and mathematics in the extended exploration of social studies connected to the neighborhood, city, or larger world and related historical contexts. When guiding students through these studies, teachers “emphasize experiential and interactive approaches in which the children derive their own meaning from the world around them through active engagement with materials and field experiences” (Midtown West School – P.S. 212, 2014b).

Students at Midtown West also have opportunities to participate in an array of enrichment programs throughout the week. All classes get one or two full periods of music, art, physical education, and library/media each week. In grades K–2, teachers incorporate science into their units of study within their own classrooms, while students in grades 3–5 have science in a laboratory with an experienced science instructor. In addition to this well-rounded curriculum during school hours, Midtown West offers an extensive after-school program during which students can take classes that range from dance to cooking, to arts and crafts and much more.

Teacher Collaboration

In order to provide such a rich, developmentally oriented program, Midtown West teachers work closely together both within and across grade-level teams. A distinctive feature of the school that fosters collegiality among the staff is its looping structure. Four teachers work as a team across two grade levels: K–1, 2–3, or 4–5. Teachers work with the same group of students for two years, and then begin the loop again. In this way, strong collaborative teams are formed who know students and curriculum intensely across a two-year grade span.

According to the school’s parent coordinator, Anita, Midtown West first used an inter-aging model for grouping students in classes. After about four years, the staff decided that the age range in one class was too wide. As Anita explained:

We would have children who were three years apart. So again we were fooling ourselves that we could do developmentally appropriate curriculum for children who are three years apart in the same classroom...so our conversations led us to switch to a looping model from inter-aging.

The teachers at Midtown West express that the structure of the looping model encourages sustained collaboration across the school. Each week, faculty meet not only with their grade-level partners, but also in their looping teams to plan curriculum and share observations about children. Second grade teacher Seth says looping is at the heart of the professionalism and collegiality at Midtown West:

The looping really is one of the big things because we're not always [saying,] "They're doing third, and we're doing second." But we're flip-flopping [grade levels] all the time. That really lends to [collaboration] because the things that we're experiencing in second grade right now, we're always telling them about at the end of the year.... That, really, I feel like is one of the big underlying things why we collaborate so well, because it's not like it's just the two second grade teachers. We're second grade teachers, too, just on off-years.

Bank Street Connections

Midtown West continues to have extensive connections to Bank Street College. Over the two-plus decades of the school's existence, a faculty member from Bank Street's Graduate School of Education has functioned in some capacity to support the school. In the early years, a Bank Street faculty member served as one of the founding partners to help design and launch the school and worked closely with teacher and school leaders on every aspect of the curriculum. Over time, the role of the partnering Bank Street faculty member has shifted based on school needs and priorities and the availability of funding, but the partnership has continued in some form throughout. Currently efforts are focused on supporting professional development, particularly around the social studies curriculum. Additionally, during the 2012–13 academic year, seven of the 14 classroom teachers, as well as the school's art teacher and parent coordinator, held degrees from Bank Street, a trend that has been consistent over the years. Midtown West supports numerous Bank Street student teachers each year, and often those relationships will lead to new hires at the school when positions open, though teacher turnover at the school is quite low. The relationship between the institutions is deeply rooted in the school. While the educators at Midtown West talk about the need to adapt Bank Street principles and practices to their local, dynamic, public-school context, Bank Street's influence on the school's ethos and practices is easily recognizable and widely touted.

Midtown West Case Study

This case study begins by examining the Theater Study, a yearlong integrated social studies unit that serves as a cornerstone of the first grade curriculum at Midtown West. As Midtown West is located in the heart of Manhattan's theater district, the study is both an investigation of community and an in-depth exploration of, and engagement in, the many facets that go into the production of a play—from story, to script writing, to the many indispensable jobs, such as creating sets, lighting, and acting. The case study then turns to the "centrality of meetings" and the importance of meaningful discourse as a central tenet in the approach to working with students that guides practice at Midtown West. An extended vignette examining a fifth-grade

math lesson explores the significance of conversation around problem-solving and academics. The next section of the case study examines the school's emphasis on extensive integrated social studies curriculum units. This aspect of Midtown West is illuminated through a description of an expansive study of bridges in second grade. The study concludes by exploring the structural and cultural arrangements in place at the school to cultivate sustained faculty collaboration. As one teacher describes working at the school, "We're engaged in this unfolding, never-ending conversation about teaching and learning." All of the elements of practice and activity examined at the school are analyzed in reference to the Bank Street approach and the long-standing relationship between Midtown West and Bank Street College.



The Play's the Thing: The Bank Street Approach at Midtown West

“James, Lydia, and Vanessa: I like how you are all working so carefully together. Please bring the throne right to the front of the stage,” says Darren Card in an even and encouraging tone.

Darren teaches first grade at Midtown West, and he directs the play along with Nicole, who teaches the other first grade class. “The Golden Kingdom” represents the culminating event in a highly structured, ambitious yearlong Theater Study.

The first grade Theater Study began with two Bank Street colleagues and Midtown West grade-level partners thinking about how to adapt a long-standing Restaurant Study from the first grade curriculum. Darren, who described having an enduring fascination and passion for musical theater, was teamed with Frank (formerly a K–1 teacher and now the art teacher), who had been a Broadway actor before turning to teaching. As Darren described, “He was my first grade colleague at the time, and he has a background in performing, so I felt like he would be a great helping hand because he knows all the real aspects of [theater], where I’m just looking at it from an audience experience and the joys.” Working together they developed an expansive Theater Study that begins with an intensive exploration of how children understand and experience community in their family, school, and neighborhood and then moves through a series of units that examines facets of what it takes to mount a theatrical production, culminating with the first graders writing a script and performing a theatrical production before an overflow audience.

Bank Street’s founder, Lucy Sprague Mitchell, believed a “study” involved getting deeply immersed in a field of learning that would absorb a child in the complexity of the domain. The domain of exploration would typically connect students with real-world experiences, peoples, histories, geography, materials, problems, and opportunities. She described it as a “firsthand laboratory approach, an experimental attitude, a handling of sources, a discovery of significant relations within the data, a situation that permits genuine thinking on the part of the children of the type which characterizes investigators—not the type which characterizes antiquarians” (Mitchell, 1934). The Theater Study at Midtown West exemplifies this vision in many respects.

Structure of the Theater Study

Unfolding over a full academic year, the first grade Theater Study encompasses interconnected elements across four phases of exploration, activity, and learning. Darren and Frank call the four phases: *discovery*, *research*, *creation*, and *implementation*.

Discovery phase. *Discovery*, the first phase of the Theater Study, has three elements, during which the first graders examine the concept of community, complete an immersive author study, and explore the concept of neighborhood.

During the first discovery element, students begin by considering the question, “What is a community?” and then think about those spaces and places that make them feel safe, healthy, and happy. They also begin to explore the idea that any productive community endeavor requires a distribution of jobs, and they develop a system for assigning classroom responsibilities and charting jobs to support their extended study. This focus on distribution of responsibilities in a community anticipates a crucial element of the curriculum, which involves children occupying key jobs in the theater production.

The second discovery element is an immersive author study. For example, in fall 2013, the first graders studied the musical theater team of composer Richard Rodgers and lyricist Oscar Hammerstein. The students examined eight of the pair’s major works: *Oklahoma*, *Carousel*, *State Fair*, *South Pacific*, *The King and I*, *Cinderella*, *Flower Drum Song*, and *The Sound of Music*. The immersive author study also serves as a literacy unit as they read, learn to sing songs, and respond to the works in writing and through illustrations.

During the third discovery element, students explore the question: What are the places in my school’s neighborhood? They take walking trips through the neighborhood, map out the special places, and develop representations of the data they collect investigating their neighborhood. This inquiry and fieldwork prepare them for the next phase, when they research the neighborhood’s theater community.

Research phase. During *research*, the second phase of the Theater Study, the first graders take on the role of researchers and closely examine the theater community in their neighborhood. Darren and Frank sought to embed the study directly into the work and pulse of the school’s theater district neighborhood by taking children on field trips or by bringing people who work in theater to the school. “We would either have them come in, or we would go out to the theaters and actually talk to them or see their jobs in progress,” said Darren. The students develop research, mapping, writing, and other skills to support their study. Darren described:

We had research notebooks, and kids would develop questions. We talked about moving from general questions that we were able to ask

all family members [as part of the kindergarten’s Family Study], like, “What holidays do you celebrate?” and, “How many people are in your family?” to, “Now, how do we develop a specific interview?” The same questions we ask a costume designer are not going to be the same questions we ask a box office worker.

The students study the intricacies of what it takes to mount a performance, paying special attention to the many jobs and responsibilities that go into a production. They meet and interview everyone from actors, designers, and lighting operators, to production people, directors, and stage managers. They see these connections to community come alive in the work of the “big kids” from the Professional Performing Arts School (PPAS), the high school with whom they share a building and theater space. The Theater Study provides Darren’s students an immersion into the intricate web that sustains the theater district, a complex and dynamic ecosystem that unfolds right in their school’s backyard.

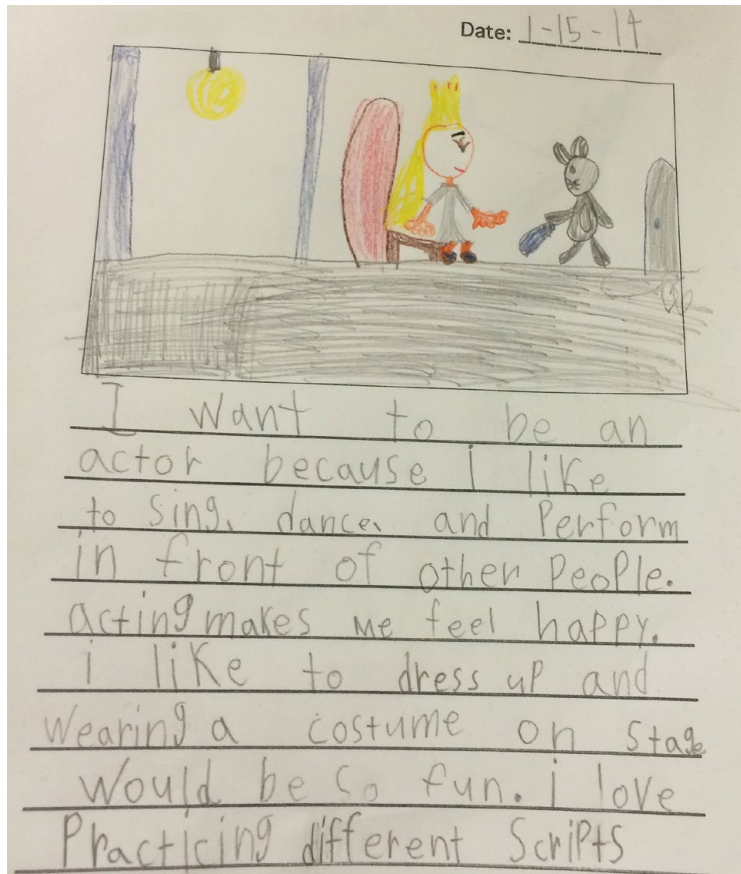
Creation phase. The third phase of the Theater Study, *creation*, has script writing, play development, and job assignment elements. It begins with both first grade classes collaborating on writing a script and then selecting the musical numbers. After the first graders write the script, they meet with third graders (veterans of this process) to learn about different theater jobs and responsibilities. Children apply for and take responsibility for the various jobs and responsibilities in the class production. Then they further explore theater-related jobs while planning the production. As Darren explained:

[It is] the creation phase where the kids would then actually reflect back on the first half of the year and say, “What did I love the best? What am I good at? What are my talents? And now I’m gonna actually take on that job to then help collaborate to create the first grade musical for the end of the year.”

The element that Darren and Frank call “Creation, Part 2: Jobs in Action,” unfolds in March and April with students learning more about specific jobs and then taking on job responsibilities in the production and rehearsals.

Implementation phase. The final phase involves many preparations and rehearsals and, finally, the performance. As Darren described it with a sweep of his hands across the auditorium, still abuzz with setup and preparation for the preview performance, “Now [they’re] actually doing their jobs” as the children bring the production to life.

While the culminating performance will be memorable to children and families, the essence of the study is the close and in-depth exploration of the neighborhood and the in-depth engagement with the working world of the theater. Along the way,



students build a repertoire of academic skills, research tools, and strategies for collaboration in support of their efforts. As Denise, a kindergarten teacher in the same K-1 loop, explained:

I feel that because we [give] careful consideration to where our school is and really making that come alive for the kids and having them see that. In Midtown West, in this neighborhood, there are lots of restaurants. There are lots of theaters. That comes to life with them. They see it when they pass by to go home, to go to school. So why not study it?...It makes it a little bit more realistic and a little bit more meaningful to them.

Darren added:

I think we're also fortunate to be in a neighborhood where we're able to have people pop over quickly. If we were in Brooklyn, it would be harder to get probably an actor to come. So it's that idea of using your neighborhood. I think there [are] so many resources available to everyone. [Take advantage of] what's out there right outside your door.

Once the rehearsal begins, Darren and Nicole stand mostly to the side and watch the events unfold. The little actors sing and dance with polish and energy. The stage crew works in rhythm to change the sets and props that they created working with Frank, their art teacher, as well as with some arts educators from Studio in a School, a non-profit organization that brings high-quality comprehensive art classes and arts educators to local public schools. The backstage crew works with alacrity to help the actors change costumes and prepare to hit their cues and get onto stage. The yearlong effort culminates with a highly polished and enthusiastically received “run” of the show for the school’s extended community of students, educators, family, and neighbors.

The Theater Study at Midtown West is a classic example of an integrated social studies curriculum in the Bank Street tradition, where teachers and students work to understand the complex interconnections among geography, resources, history, people, and community. Moreover, they do so in a way that directly engages students with the local community, people, geography, etc., while weaving in core academic learning: Language arts becomes crucial for reading and writing about the topic of study. Historical modes of thinking are engaged for learning about the past and making connections to the present. Math, engineering, art, and design, are required to consider the making of products useful for human endeavor. As described in further detail below (see “Approach to Curriculum”), these integrated and extended studies are at the core of the curriculum across the grades at Midtown West.

While the performance brings the school community together to showcase the music, acting, and creativity of Midtown’s first grade, the intensive yearlong lead-up to the performance can be understood as a consummate Bank Street experience. It is an ambitious and consuming group project indicative of the overarching Bank Street precept of a classroom being a place where a group can come together as a community to undertake ambitious studies and projects, and, importantly, to connect that work to the broader world in which the school is located. Longtime Bank Street faculty member Barbara Biber, who chaired the school’s research division from 1933 to 1963, described this aspiration: “We want the children to be aware of themselves as initiators in their learning roles, to establish their individual identities and, at the same time, to grow through the emergence of the self in the cooperative, collective group experiences of play and learning” (Biber, 1973).

Approach to Students

The Centrality of Meetings, Convenings, and Conferences among Teachers and Students

The art studio of Midtown West resembles a magical, fantastical alchemist's shop in a young adult fantasy novel. Shelves overflow with wondrous materials; shiny orbs and delicately fashioned designs, parts of moving sculptures, flutter and jangle from the ceiling. Drawings in soft pastels and canvases with blaring colors cover the wall. Baskets of buttons, knobs, and other doodads are piled everywhere. Drapes made out of bottle caps, soda pop tabs, and mashed cans cinched together by wire and paper clips cloak shelves stuffed with art supplies.

At the front of the room, Frank steps in front of a screen projecting 12 images of a cartoon-like, blue-hued dog striking various poses. "This is George Rodrigue's Blue Dog series," Frank tells the class. Four or five students squeeze into each table, 30 students in all. The conditions are snug, but Frank leads them through interpretations and analysis of the works. "How is Blue Dog with a motorcycle different from Blue Dog with a bike?"

"What do you notice that is the same and different from one drawing to the next?" he pushes.

"As you know, when we look at work, we try to understand how the artist puts together shapes and structures. What shapes would it take to draw Blue Dog?"

He doesn't wait for long as hands shoot up all over the room: "Ovals for the faces and ears, triangles for the chest, wavy triangles, curvy lines for the toes, arcs for the tail." One boy wearing a bright blue Zlatan Ibrahimovic soccer jersey from the French club Paris Saint-Germain shoots his hand up, "The nose looks like a potion bottle." A girl wearing bright pink nods and shakes her head simultaneously, "Yes, a potion bottle or a heart."

Frank smiles broadly and gracefully pantomimes the different shapes as if he were dancing with his hands and arms, "Yes, yes—these shapes are what we will work with—just as George Rodrigue does. Thank you for being so involved in this conversation and sharing all these ideas and insights. Now we will start sketching our own Blue Dogs. Use your shapes and curves and contours."

The noise level picks up immediately as students reach for materials. They look back and forth from the examples on the screen at the front to the paper canvases on their

desks. As the chatter and restlessness amps up, Frank moves about the room peering down at the students busily working at their tables. “OK, let’s get started and focus on the work,” he says pushing his hands down as if to tamp back the noise. The room quiets as the group begins to draft their images.

One girl wearing polka dots raises her arm, and Frank leans over to look at her project. “Tell me about this,” he begins. She starts talking and Frank soon drops into a crouch, so that he is looking eye-to-eye with her. A mini-conference has commenced, while all around students are working, talking, and moving about the room to look at each other’s drafts. The conversation continues with Frank locked in on this particular student, listening and responding to her ideas. She talks and Frank nods, “Say more about what you mean.”

A central feature of practice at Midtown West involves what happens when a teacher and a student come together to meet. The meeting is a cherished and critical element of pedagogy and practice at the school. The interaction entails connecting with a student, listening deeply, and asking an ongoing series of open-ended questions. Biber (1973) described the essence of this learning encounter between teacher and student:

A classroom embodies a way of life among people. We attempt to build a social environment in which children are known and responded to as individuals, where the interaction between adult and child and between child and child is supportive of learning, and where the children come to identify with the teachers’ goals for their learning.

As one teacher said when asked about the role of these conversations with students, “Meetings, meetings everywhere! That is what we do at Midtown West.” This feature of pedagogy stands out because the physical classrooms at Midtown West are on the small side, and the spaces are typically chock-full of materials, activity centers, books, and nearly 30 students per classroom. The combination of the cramped physical space and the commitment to engage in fluid and varied meetings and conferences contributes to a sense that Midtown West resembles the streets of its neighborhood: busy, intense, social, bustling, and fast-paced. As Principal Bourke noted, “When you go into classrooms, you’ll hear a lot of noise. The learning is messy. Learning spills out into the hallways. Kids have a lot of freedom to learn in their own way.”

The sounds of activity ripple through this third grade classroom, where students are working in pairs to measure perimeter and area using straws. At hand is a math activity designed for students to understand the concept of perimeter by aggregating the linear measure of one-dimensional lines. The teacher, Beth, moves through the room, kneeling down and looking carefully at student work, “Explain your thinking here,” she queries one girl whose straws are intersecting in a complex pattern. The

student explains, “I think that they all go together to make a big thing.” Beth nods quietly as the explanation unfolds in a circuitous fashion.

What stands out as a feature of classroom life in Midtown West is how focused teachers will be on an interaction with one student or a small group around a question or a piece of work while a whirl of activity unfolds around the room. Beth later explained:

As an adult in this environment you have to be a facilitator. You need to learn to put things out there without directing the line of thinking too much. We are a school that specializes in meetings, and we have to teach what it means to meet and thus learn within a context of others in the classroom. There is a real value on meeting and working together. We teach [students] to talk, share their thinking, and to understand what it means to be silent at times. We take seriously the idea of working things out together and making sense together of ideas—which can get a little interesting and noisy during activities like this.

Teachers also work to build structures that can slow down the pace, offering opportunities for student thought, reflection, and depth, while also providing occasions for student–teacher conferencing: one-on-one, in small groups, in larger groups, or as a whole class.

*In Johanna’s room, students are engaged in a span of silent reading. There are 28 students spread across the room occupying every nook, cranny, and corner of the space. Johanna moves around the room with a clipboard and a pad of sticky notes. She sidles up to a student splayed out on the rug. The student is wearing a bright yellow T-shirt with a daisy imprinted on the back. She is a restless reader and has been scooting around on the rug, all the while reading *Who was Abraham Lincoln?**

“Destiny, how are you doing with the book?” asks Johanna. Destiny looks up and gives a half-hearted thumb waggle. “Hmmm,” says Johanna kneeling down next to her. Destiny moves from her pretzel-position on her back to sitting cross-legged. Johanna says, “I know that we decided you would try a nonfiction book because you have been reading so much fiction.” Destiny nods.

Johanna writes something down on her clipboard. “I know how much you love fiction. When you are reading fiction what draws you in?” Destiny smiles and says, “I love adventure.” There is a long pause as Johanna waits for Destiny to say more. Destiny looks down, plays with her laces. After nearly 10 seconds, Johanna asks, “So I’m hearing that you like to read adventure, tell me about some specific adventures that capture you.” Destiny nods and says, “I like when people go searching for other people or they go after a treasure or on a journey.”

“So it sounds like you’re into when people pursue things either outside themselves or when they go after personal goals,” says Johanna.

Destiny nods again and says, “I guess Abe Lincoln sort of did that, too.”

Johanna smiles broadly. “Yes, you are making a very good observation. If you read a nonfiction biography you can often discover how the person has a life of adventure and pursues success. I’ll tell you what,” Johanna then pulls off a few sticky notes. “I want you to take these sticky notes and go through the parts that you have read to see if you can find moments when Abe Lincoln was on an adventure.”

Destiny takes the sticky notes and carefully places them over Abe Lincoln’s face on the cover and starts leafing through the book. Johanna stays seated cross-legged next to her, jotting notes on her clipboard.

“Johanna!” Destiny smiles and points to a section in the book. “Here is an example,” and she reads, “Abraham finished with school for good at the age of 15. Altogether, he had gone for only about a year. But he learned how to read. Now he could teach himself anything he wanted. He read every book he could find. He once walked 20 miles to borrow one.”

After a few more exchanges, Johanna gets up and says, “It was very nice to talk with you about your reading. I would like for you to find two more examples of adventure in the book. Can we find them by Wednesday? You can write them down.”

Destiny gives Johanna a more energetic thumbs-up and Johanna moves on. It was a three-minute exchange between the two of them—a conversation about learning that was personal, relational, and focused on a child’s relationship to her learning. True to the Bank Street developmental-interaction approach, Johanna utilizes the relational and personal nature of her interactions with Destiny to connect the student more deeply and meaningfully to the academic content at the center of this lesson.

Meetings and convenings are a hallmark of instructional practice at Midtown West, and they are readily on display throughout the day. For teachers who believe that learning and growth occurs through ongoing relational interaction and that each child is a singular, developing human being, deserving of support and encouragement, intensive one-on-one and small group meeting provides opportunities to work with a child’s unique strengths, interests, and needs. In addition to the variations of small group gatherings, teachers also orchestrate a number of larger group meetings across the day. Class meetings are commonplace at Midtown West. Most teachers begin the day with a class meeting, where teacher and students formally greet one another and then provide a process for students and teachers to share personal news or outside-of-school connections to current topics of study. Meetings are also utilized regularly to build and shore up classroom norms and procedures, to collectively resolve conflicts or disagreements, and to actively engage and debate ideas.

The tenor of these meetings is one of both patience and a deep respect for and belief in the value of the contributions the students in the classroom have to offer to the collective enterprise. This is a place where teachers and students work collectively and in connectivity to make progress.

The fundamental nature of meeting defines the daily pace of life in Midtown West. As Principal Bourke, noted:

...and just the openness and willingness for a teacher to have those conversations with kids. Everyday, there's some kind of a meeting, a class meeting, where the kids either sit in a circle and they talk about issues, and if there's a problem, they discuss this. So a lot of time is allotted to that particular practice. Whereas in other schools, that is discouraged, unless it's maybe kindergarten or first grade. Here, it's definitely a part of the core practice.

Building a Scholar's Mindset and Research Skills

“Monday’s geography group! Meet me by the blue table.” Heads briskly turn to look at the groups listed at the back of the room. Five students—Jerome, Brittany, Christy, Violet, and Jared—quickly shuffle toward a table labeled “Blue,” where Johanna stands with a yellow bin full of trade books on Africa and South Africa. “Alright geographers,” she begins, leaning over to meet her students at eye-level. “We’re gonna do something differently with geography group this week. Not only are you generating the questions, but you’re gonna do the research. Think about what you already know about Africa or South Africa, and think about questions.” She then instructs the students to come up with one question to ask the class about African or South African geography. The group is to generate a question as well as research the answer. This question will be shared with the entire class, who will look up the answer later in the day. When she finishes explaining the task, Johanna walks away to check in with other students completing their morning routines.

“I have an idea!” Christy exclaims. “What if there’s similar weather to America?” Violet leans over a map of South Africa spread out on the table and says that she thinks Arizona and California might have similar weather to South Africa.

Overhearing this, Johanna kneels down by the group of students and asks, “What would you have to figure out first?”

“What the weather in South Africa is,” Christy replies, nodding to Johanna with confidence.

Johanna grabs a globe that is sitting on a nearby shelf and places it on the table.

Pointing at South Africa, Jared suggests, “It’ll be hot and humid since it’s close to the equator.”

“It’s a big country. Would it all be the same weather?” Johanna asks.

Jerome raises his hand and says, “It’ll be colder the farther south you go because you’re farther from the equator.” The other students nod in agreement.

Then Johanna gives the group a challenge to compare the weather of the capital of the United States with that of the capital of South Africa. Johanna’s prompt, “What’s the capital of South Africa? Can you take a moment to find out?” sends the students diving into the bin of books and flipping through pages of the texts.

“There are three capital cities!” Jerome exclaims.

“There are three capitals?!” Violet repeats as she runs over to Jerome and leans over his shoulder to look at his book. Christy and Brittany find a similar page describing South Africa’s capitals in a separate book and begin reading. The students discover that South Africa has an administrative capital (Pretoria), a legislative capital (Cape Town), and a judicial capital (Bloemfontein).

Johanna asks the students what they think each word—administrative, legislative, and judicial—means. Brittany hypothesizes that administrative means, “like the boss.” Jerome explains, “I just think of voting” when he hears the term legislative. Jared replies that judicial is “like judge.”

Jerome points to a line in his book and says, “I think it’s the administrative one cuz the book says it’s the national capital.” “That’s where the boss is,” Brittany and Christy interject. Violet looks at the globe and notices that Pretoria is the only capital that has a star on the globe. The students decide that they want to ask the class a question about Pretoria, the administrative capital of South Africa.

Violet opens up a composition notebook and says, “let’s write bullets,” offering to write a list of possible questions the group could pose to the class. She begins by writing “Weather” and “Capitals,” each on its own line.

Brittany offers, “Maybe, ‘What’s the most important capital?’”

Jerome shakes his head as he explains to Brittany that including “most important” in the question might be asking students to share their opinions and not to look up a fact.

“Oh wait, can I make it harder?” Brittany looks up at the group, eyes wide with excitement. “Can I ask: What capital in South Africa is most similar to the Washington, D.C., capital?”

Several students exclaim, “Yeah!” Brittany then writes the question on a strip of paper for the group to present to their peers, who will later research the answer themselves.



Helping students develop research skills is a central component of each long-term study at Midtown West. Students become scholars who generate questions and explore possible answers by reading texts, conducting interviews, and taking field trips. Johanna’s geography groups are one way that students take on the role of scholarly researcher in the third grade South Africa Study. She explains, “They’re really researchers, and I think that’s key...we really work hard in the second–third grade loop trying to make them into researchers, giving them the tools that they need as they move on to fourth and fifth grade.”

At Midtown West, students begin engaging in scholarly research as early as kindergarten. Students visit one another’s homes during their extended Family Study, gathering information through observation and interviews. The children then create charts and map out similarities and differences among the families that they visit, and eventually author books about the different families.

In first grade, students learn how to do research that is based in their communities. Anita, the parent coordinator, explains that first grade researchers begin by coming around the school with their clipboards to interview staff about their jobs. They then take those clipboards out into the neighborhood, to visit theaters and restaurants, or even interview Broadway stars to understand how different roles help a community thrive. This intensive research of the community continues into second grade, when the scholars study bridges and subways. As Anita describes, “[the students] really study how that serves the larger community; all the details of how they get built, how they work, who works in them.”

The focus of research gradually broadens out to countries and eras more distant from the students' own experiences. This starts in the third grade studies of China and South Africa and culminates in fourth and fifth grades with the state-mandated studies of New Amsterdam, the American Revolution, immigration, and westward expansion.

This model for social studies follows Mitchell's vision for organizing geographic education in a developmentally oriented manner. Mitchell (1934) charts the development of geographic thinking as starting with "attention to and experimentation with qualities of things (including [one's] own body)" from 0–14 months of age, then moving to a "widened interest in external moving object[s]" at 4–5 years old, followed by "beginning to leave the 'here and now'" at 7–8 years of age, and a "great impulse towards the distant and long-ago" by ages 9–10 (pp. 10–12). The studies at Midtown West are aligned with Mitchell's belief that geography education and child development needed to go hand-in-hand. Students begin by learning about themselves and their home environments until they mature enough to begin exploring times and spaces increasingly distant from their immediate surroundings.

One element of the Bank Street College credo is to see human beings develop "[l]ively intellectual curiosities that turn the world into an exciting laboratory and keep one ever a learner" (Bank Street College of Education, 2014b). The scholarly research embedded in the Midtown West studies nurtures this orientation toward deep understanding and personal connection. By generating their own research questions and investigating problems of interest, Midtown West students develop deep understanding of topics that matter to them and to the larger community. The centrality of this type of active learning at Midtown West is what drew Principal Ryan Bourke to the school in the first place. He explained:

Kind of one of the reasons why I was quite excited to come here and join the staff was empowering kids to be learners. Teaching kids that even at the young age of kindergarten, they can take a piece of paper and a clipboard and they can measure the world, make observations, ask questions. They can frame problems, bring that information back to the classroom, analyze it, and choose a way to present it. I feel that is something that sums up for me what the curriculum represents here at Midtown West. I call it creating this type of space [where] they assume the status of a researcher from kindergarten. They assume the status of a mathematician, or of a reader, or of a writer... We're not telling them what to learn. We're teaching them how to learn and how to be prepared when they enter middle school and high school and the world.

Math Congress: Developing Scholars Through Discourse in the Disciplines

Teacher Trevor’s fifth grade Math Congress is another way that students can practice and hone their problem-solving skills through scholarly discourse while utilizing a variety of meeting and convening formats. This work serves Trevor’s goal of developing a community of scholars who take ownership of their learning and solve problems together. As he put it: “I’m one of 29 in the class. We should only be focusing on [me] one-twenty-ninth of the time...It’s all about ownership. This is not called ‘Trevor’s class.’ It’s not. We’re a community.” The Math Congress is an opportunity for students to embrace this scholarly community as students are challenged to problem-solve together and defend their strategies through collective discourse. Additionally, as students are engaging in these scholarly endeavors, the language they use to describe their understandings is of a high intellectual caliber, something that was in evidence across the grades at Midtown West.

The fifth grade Math Congress is one place where this intellectual discourse is regularly practiced. It also exemplifies the student-centered orientation that Trevor and his colleagues embrace. The Math Congress is reminiscent of the aspect that Trevor finds most memorable from his days as a student at Bank Street: “We always talk. We debrief—just constantly modifying [and] reflecting [as a class].”

The Math Congress is part of the Contexts for Learning Mathematics curriculum developed by Catherine Fosnot and her colleagues. The guiding philosophy for this curriculum is described as:

...knowledge emerges in a community of activity, discourse, and reflection. We learn to write by writing and discussing our writing with other writers. Similarly, we become mathematicians by engaging with mathematical problems, finding ways to mathematize them, and defending our thinking in a mathematical community...

The heart of the math workshop consists of ongoing investigations developed within contexts and situations that enable children to mathematize their lives. As children work, the teacher moves around the classroom, listening, conferring, supporting, challenging, and celebrating. After their investigation, children write up their strategies and solutions and the community convenes for a math congress. This is more than simply a whole-group share. The math congress continues the work of helping children become mathematicians in a mathematics community—it is a forum in which children communicate their ideas, solutions, problems, proofs, and conjectures to each other. (Fosnot, 2007, p. 27)

There are five components that the teacher must plan in the math workshop that Fosnot and her colleagues designed:

1. Developing the context for the math workshop,
2. Supporting students' investigation,
3. Preparing for the math context,
4. Facilitating the math congress, and
5. Integrating mini-lessons, games, and routines to ensure a smooth flow.

The Contexts for Learning Mathematics curriculum dovetails with Midtown West and Bank Street's view of children as active learners and makers of meaning. The approach emphasizes the importance of discourse within a mathematical community and advances the idea that the purpose of math education is to develop students who can communicate their ideas, conjectures, and emerging understandings, rather than seeing math learning as limited to enhancing skill with algorithms or mere consumption and regurgitation of facts.

In Trevor's classroom, the Math Congress involves multiple steps:

First the students are posed a series of word problems. In teams of two, they use whatever models they choose to help them solve each problem. They then create posters demonstrating the models that they used along with the solutions.

Next, two pairs get together to form a math committee where one person from each pair explains the models on their posters, so that students can be exposed to a variety of strategies for solving the problems and give and receive feedback on their different approaches.

Trevor posts prompts that students write in their math journals then use as guides for their conversations during the math committees:

- *What relationship do you see?*
- *Why do you think those relationships occurred?*
- *How will you convince others of your conclusions?*
- *What problems are solved with division and which with multiplication?*

When the pairs meet as committees, there is a buzz of tough questioning followed by logical, elaborate responses. Students frequently use the prompts as guides, asking each other what the relationships are between their findings and why they used only division or multiplication when solving each problem.

Finally, the entire class convenes for the Math Congress, where teams present their work to the whole class and face pointed questions requiring them to communicate solutions and strategies with depth and clarity. Throughout the exercise, students attend carefully to the quality of their explanations, propose multiple perspectives, and engage their peers around the puzzles of the problems.

For today’s session of the Math Congress, the teacher, Trevor, asks the students to work in their math committees and develop strategies for solving a complex set of problems. On the classroom SmartBoard, Trevor projects a partially completed table with information about the exercise routines of several students. Each team is charged with completing the table and developing visual explanations of their work and related strategies (see Figure 1).

Two teams—Krysta and Annie, and Jeannie and Marlo—join together to work in math committee session:

“Do you wanna switch, because we have like a half a minute left?” Krysta looks across at Jeannie and Marlo, who promptly stand up and switch places with her.

Jeannie grabs ahold of her braid and begins explaining that the first person listed in the table, Maria, finishes four circuits around a track in a total of 120 minutes. The students must figure out what Maria’s rate per circuit is.

“We decided to draw 120 dots,” Jeannie begins.

Without skipping a beat, Annie interjects, “Is that the most efficient method?”

Jeannie lets go of her braid, stares Annie in the eyes and confidently states, “It was the most efficient for us.” She then continues, “It said to break it up into four groups and that’s what we did.” Jeannie points at four rectangles on her poster that are drawn around rows of 30 dots.

Krysta follows Jeannie’s hand with her eyes as she asks, “How did you know to put 30 of them in one section?”

“We knew 120 divided by 4 is 30,” Marlo says, tugging at the bottom of her white T-shirt.

As the pair finishes explaining that it took the runner 30 minutes to run one-quarter of the entire number of circuits, Krysta’s eyes shift to the right side of the poster.

Figure 1. Sample Math Problem

Name	Minutes of exercise	Number of circuits completed	Rate
Maria	120	4	
Marco	60	3	
Rachel	6	$\frac{1}{3}$	
Josh	12	$\frac{2}{3}$	
Suzanne	5	$\frac{1}{4}$	
Lucia	15	$\frac{3}{4}$	
Eileen		$\frac{1}{2}$	18 min.
Bob		2	30 min.
Julio	30	$1\frac{1}{2}$	

Note. This table of incomplete information relates to the exercise regimes of nine runners. Time and rate are expressed in minutes; distance covered is expressed in fractions of circuits around a track.

“I don’t understand that,” she says as she points to another problem: Rachel ran one-third of the circuit in 6 minutes. What is her rate per circuit?

“Ok,” Jeannie starts explaining. “Her minutes were 6, so we drew 6 dots.”

“I got a different answer,” Annie interrupts. She then asks Jeannie how she and Marlo got 18.

“Well,” Jeannie takes a deep breath then continues, “Because she completed one-third of the circuit and not a whole circuit...because the rate is for one circuit of a whole, but she only completed one-third of the circuit and that’s six. So the whole circuit is 18.”

Krysta then proceeds to ask Jeannie which problems she solved with division and which ones with multiplication, and why.

While Jeannie and Marlo are immersed in explaining their reasoning for each problem, Trevor joins them and in a voice no louder than a whisper instructs them to put their posters up outside in the hallway next to each other. He then tells them to bring their notebooks, clipboards, and pencils with them back to the meeting rug area. “This should all take about two minutes,” he concludes. The girls quickly and quietly move to follow Trevor’s instructions.

In a matter of minutes, the entire class is sitting on the rug with their materials in their hands. There is a steady hum of conversation as students chat with each other in low voices, waiting for their teacher. Trevor sits in his chair beside a SMART Board and rings a small bell. The class goes silent. Without a word, Trevor flashes a slide on the SMART Board with instructions for the next step of the Math Congress. The students are to walk through the hallway, read one another’s posters, and leave comments or questions on sticky notes for their peers.

The students share ideas about the types of comments that might be most helpful for their peers. Then Trevor instructs the students to write their names on their sticky notes and to complete the next phase in 5 minutes. The students promptly stand and begin perusing the charts hanging around the classroom and in the hallway. They quietly write praise, questions, and suggestions on their sticky notes, which they stick directly onto the posters. Examples of the students’ comments include:

- “I liked how you labeled and used steps but next time maybe you can use a more efficient strategy because drawing circles could take a while. Also maybe you could write down your strategies and/or an explanation. All in all great job!”*
- “I like how you showed your work and wrote explanations for each answer.”*
- “What model did you use? Area model/ratio table/double number line?”*
- “It was a little unclear on what your strategy was. Did you find any relationships in the making?”*

- *“Will this strategy always work for these problems?”*
- *“I don’t really understand your strategies. It was really hard to follow. Steps would have been nice.”*

When 5 minutes are up, Trevor signals to the students to quietly make their way back to the rug. The students sit facing the SMART Board, which now has a bulleted list of questions for the group to ask and consider during this final portion of the Math Congress. Trevor says to the students, “Maybe we’ll get to two or three charts today,” as he stands up and walks out to the hallway. A few students whisper “Yes!” with eager anticipation, while others look at each other expectantly.

Trevor reenters the classroom holding up a poster with the names Wendy and Lee written in orange marker on the top right corner. The two students who created the poster walk up to the front of the room, take the poster from Trevor, and hold up opposite corners of the chart so it is clearly displayed. The class looks carefully at the poster and then begins to ask questions about specific problems, such as, “What was the whole?” and “Can you speak about the relationships you found?”

One student asks Lee, who is the main presenter for this pair, “How could one time around the circuit take 20 minutes if the whole time was 15?” He points to a problem in the right corner of Wendy and Lee’s poster about Lucia, who ran three-quarters of a circuit in 15 minutes. The students must figure out Lucia’s rate for one entire circuit.

Lee explains that the problem said that three-quarters of the circuit is 15 minutes, which would mean that one quarter is 5 minutes. “So for the whole circuit, just add 5,” Lee concludes. The student looks at Lee with a puzzled face. “For each fourth of a lap is 5 minutes,” Lee tries again. “So we added 5 minutes at the end to get the whole.”

This is followed by some debate about whether it would have been more “efficient” to multiply using fractions or decimals to solve the problems. Trevor transitions to another poster for the class to discuss. This poster has number lines on it for each problem. The number lines have been divided into sections marked off by small hashes. Above each number line are drawn small arches or “jumps” between the segments. Each line has only one arch that either spans the entire line or covers one segment.

A small student in a light blue polo shirt, Antonio, comes up to explain his work while his partner sits nearby: “We used a double number line to show sort of the relationship.” Tracing his finger over the curves drawn from point to point on the number lines, Antonio continues, “We used the jumps to show how long the whole circuit is.” He then points to the bottom right corner of the poster, where he and his partner wrote explanations for their work.

Antonio concludes, “We sort of got an answer that makes sense instead of a crazy answer like two,” referring to Trevor’s encouragement that students consider the “reasonableness” of their answers as a guide to the quality of their work.

In the fourth–fifth grade loop, Trevor and Amanda begin fostering productive intellectual discourse in September and October of fourth grade. Trevor explains that they spend a fair amount of time “using [students’] misbehavior or problems as they go through the day, and then we problem-solve together in a sort of Socratic seminar.” He continues:

And we work out the problems available...we work together in harmonious ways to solve our own problems. Before getting upset. And then understanding that some people will get upset, and as we’re human beings, it’s our nature...and then we build on it throughout the two years that we have them.

In fourth and fifth grades at Midtown West, regular communication in class meetings and small groups helps students use skills such as empathy and perspective-taking to understand the actions and decisions of others. Language and logic become highly intertwined, with discursive reasoning being viewed as important for problem-solving. For Trevor, developing intellectual discourse is necessary in order for the classroom to be a community of scholars.

The intellectual discourse found throughout the classrooms at Midtown West is at the core of how the school develops habits to engage as scholars. When students push each other on their ideas and construct knowledge collectively, the “voice” of the teacher becomes facilitative. Teachers still play a central role in organizing the intellectual work and forums in which students engage with one another, and they provide guidance, support, feedback, and encouragement. But these learning experiences are shaped by the student-centered orientation of the teachers—a deep respect and trust for the ways in which students can and should be directly involved and responsible for their own learning and the learning of their peers. As Johanna explains:

That’s been at work throughout the school, something we felt was really important to really look at—the level of discourse and the quality of it. Because we are a “talky” school. We just happen to be that way. But we were really looking over the years [at the quality of children’s discourse]. What were they saying when they were talking, and how many children were talking? Was this really carrying the conversation? Because you really want to get to that place where you are the listener as the teacher...there’ve been many lessons around how do you talk to people in a group—How do you make sure people’s voices are heard? What are the prompts? —because we really had to train [the students]...they’re talking to an audience and really listening to each other...they’re picking up on what each other’s [saying]—they’re not just talking for the sake of talking...they’re really trying to build their thinking based on what they’ve heard. And that’s the goal!

Approach to Curriculum

Social Studies at the Core: Extended, Integrated Studies at Midtown West

I think the school itself was really founded on the principles of diversity and people coming together and celebrating that, so I think social studies is that obvious lens to frame everything. So with the history before that of just celebrating diversity and cultural celebrations, here is a way to do social studies: to start with the individual child, and then let's move into your family. Then move into your school and community, and as it keeps going through the grade levels, keeps expanding on that.

—Darren, K–1 loop teacher

When we all discussed social studies, we realized it's about helping children understand themselves and their placement in the world and how that just grows...So starting in kindergarten with this idea of family and moving into a school study and to [the community]—it gets larger and larger, and you see that.

—Johanna, 2–3 loop teacher

At the center of the curriculum at Midtown West are a series of “integrated studies”—rich, extended, social studies–based curricular units. When a student starts in kindergarten at Midtown West, she is first immersed in the Family Study, a highly individual look at families with both a personal and a community focus. Her family may even be selected to serve as one of the focal families for the class study, including a class field trip to her home. She then learns about other, more distant families during the fairy tale unit that closes her kindergarten year. This child then moves on to first grade, where she is immersed in the Theater Study discussed earlier. She learns about the community surrounding Midtown West and all the players who help make the theater industry thrive. At the same time, the student will read about Virginia Lee Burton during the first grade Author Study—exploring ideas of homes and communities, themes of urban and rural life—that culminates with the creation of her own picture book featuring a “little house” or a “little skyscraper.”

In second grade, this child will travel around New York City and its suburbs for the bridges and subways study. She will learn about how the various communities of New York are interconnected. At the end of second grade, the student will take a subway ride with her classmates to Chinatown, which launches the beginning of the cultural studies of third grade. With her peers and teachers, the student will branch out from the cultural communities of New York to learn about distant peoples in China and Africa. The research and study skills she learns in third grade will help her in the next two years as she takes a leap even further away from her own life to learn about historical times. The fourth and fifth grade studies of New Amsterdam, the American Revolution, immigration, and westward expansion wrap up the child's journey with social studies at Midtown West.

The model of these extended studies is closely aligned to the goals of one of the earliest courses offered at Bank Street, entitled Environment. This course was developed by Mitchell to address a major area of personal and professional interest around which the original curriculum of the college was developed: learning the world. In the Environment course, prospective teachers were taught how to “learn the world.” This course “focused on learning the community, its patterns, and the social, geographical, and economic characteristics. It was used for learning to teach social studies, for learning to do research, and for learning firsthand social issues” (Grinberg, 2005, p. 32).

The first iteration of the Environment course, taught by Mitchell, involved a community study much like the ones Midtown West students engage in during the first and second grades. The study began with an investigation of the school community and the local community where prospective teachers were placed for their training. As Grinberg (2005) explains:

During the first part of the course, each student investigated, observed, conducted interviews, and also used other sources of information as, for instance, statistics, journal articles, and magazines. The projects ranged in topics such as food, housing, everyday routines of people, businesses, institutions, and life conditions. These experiences allowed them to start the process of making conceptual connections about social and material relationships in the community and the influences on the school setting in order to analyze cultural patterns of the community where the school was located. (p. 42)

According to Principal Bourke, Midtown West students engage in extended studies to learn “how humans interact with their environment.” The format of gathering data via multiple sources to deeply understand the connections between a community, its environment, and its history is directly modeled off of the Bank Street approach to extended studies. Further, the sources of data include firsthand experiences in exploring the topic, such as multiple field trips, direct interviews, mapping, and the like.



This connection to Bank Street’s curriculum is no surprise given that over the years a Bank Street faculty member has always been heavily involved in the development of the integrated, extended studies at Midtown West. Anita, the parent coordinator at Midtown West, believes that one of the primary ways Midtown West reflects the Bank Street approach is in its social studies core. This core curriculum was solidified in the late 1990s when a group of teachers formed a committee to look at the social studies curriculum and align it more with the Bank Street approach. The committee brought in a faculty member from Bank Street to work closely with the Midtown West faculty, creating a position that still exists to this day. Over the years, a Bank Street faculty member has supported the school and its faculty in numerous ways, including as a mentor and coach, a professional developer, and a curriculum designer. According to Anita, the current Bank Street faculty member leading professional development at Midtown West visits the school once or twice a month to help “fine-tune” and “finesse” the social studies curriculum and ensure that it is “building from one year to another.”

Not only do the social studies curricula build off of each other from year to year, but they also serve as a framework for integrating a range of content area studies within each grade. For Andrew, a 2–3 loop special education teacher, social studies are “that umbrella that everything is falling under.” He explains that even though his students may be working on academic units not based centrally on their social

studies unit, such as subways and bridges in second grade, he works hard to make connections to the integrated studies in other areas, including math, writing, and read-alouds. Additionally, art is incorporated in all of the integrated studies both in the regular classroom and in the arts courses: Frank, the art teacher, structures his curriculum for each grade level around the studies they are doing, whether it is building bridges with newspapers and cardboard or designing costumes for the first grade musical.

K–1 loop teacher Darren feels that the integration piece is why social studies almost needs to be at the core of his curriculum:

I just think for me the social studies piece is so important...I would say if I could take the social studies core out of it, I wouldn't know how to teach; 'cause it's so much easier for me to see reading and writing, how to connect through a study, rather than as all separate things.

This integration of other content areas into social studies is clear in every classroom you walk into at Midtown West. There are giant Venn diagrams comparing Africa with China hanging up in the third grade classrooms. Rulers and pencils can be found scattered on the floor beside the large model bridges in second grade. Voices of students reading poems based on *Letters from Rifkin*, a historical fiction novel on immigration, can be heard in the halls of the fifth grade classrooms. Books about New Amsterdam fill the shelves of the fourth grade classrooms, while books on families are abundant in kindergarten.

As 2–3 grade loop teacher Beth notes when speaking about Midtown West's curriculum: "Social studies in the middle, and then everything else."

Trips, Trips, and Trips: Out of the Classroom and into the World

Two boys sit on the floor amidst a jumble of LEGO pieces and wooden blocks. They have a plan and are systematically assembling three multicolored LEGO stanchions. "Hi, Andrew, come here and look at this," one of the boys says to the teacher. The student is wearing bright white sneakers and a New York Yankees T-shirt.

Andrew's adult-sized sneakers look somewhat dissonant amidst the miniature Lego pieces. "Hmmm, let's see what happens when you put this together," says Andrew, who teaches a self-contained special education class.

The boys quickly lay a LEGO roadway across the two stanchions and create a representation of a bridge. Andrew watches them and then says, "Okay, let's give it a test," and he pulls a large imposing textbook and lays it across the span of the bridge, which immediately arches inward. "Okay, fellows, what happened?"

A quick conversation ensues about counterbalancing and considering whether a suspension system would hold the integrity of the causeway. The LEGO bridge eventually collapses into itself. The boys grin together and start working again on their structure. “Andrew—” the other boy says, “I know what we’re going to do. We’re going to add some strength.” Andrew grins, shakes his head, and says, “Okay, back at it. And remember, let’s build something stronger than the Tappan Zee,” and he laughs. “We went to visit and study the Tappan Zee Bridge in Tarrytown—remember that?” he says to the class.

The second grade social studies unit is the study of bridges and subways. In classic Bank Street fashion, the study focuses on a combination of the historical, geographical, social, and community contexts that helped to shape the history and utility of the bridge. In addition, science, math, literacy, and the arts are all woven into the study along the way.

In order to engage and support children in a deep understanding of the many facets of bridges, the teachers designed a series of trips that included the Brooklyn Bridge, the Queensboro Bridge, the 145th Street Bridge, and a Circle Line tour where the boat circumnavigates Manhattan island and crosses under 20 bridges.

The teachers at Midtown West believe in the educative power of moving children “out of the classroom and into the world.” The role of the field trip is a pedagogical anchor throughout the school. As the principal explains:

Field trips are an integral part of the school. I think there’s the expectation from teachers, students, and parents that we will participate on field trips. We do about 20 to 30 trips a year. The idea being that the trips will enhance the learning that occurs in the classroom, that the trips are intimately connected to curriculum, and that it will provide an experience for kids that otherwise they would not be able to get being in the classroom.

Longtime Bank Street professor Salvatore Vascellaro’s book *Out of the Classroom and Into the World* articulates a framework of ideas that support why teachers should venture on trips with students. These ideas correspond to many of the explanations we heard around the significance of trips for children’s learning. The taking of trips:

- enables learners to experience the deep connections that exist between the physical and social worlds around them and understand how these connections affect their lives...;
- builds on learners’ natural desire to make sense of and be competent in their environment and sparks their imagination and stimulates questioning and the search for explanations;

- uses what are commonly called “the skills”—reading, writing and math—and “the arts”—painting, drawing, music, and movement—in service of learners’ investigations and in representing and deepening their experiences;
- fosters a community in the classroom that includes the people and places learners have encountered; this process of going out into the world together and the discussions and shared work that follow all offer the learning opportunities essential to community;
- enlarges a learner’s circle of understanding, caring, and commitment through the encountering of the realities of others. (Vascellaro, 2011, p. 9)

The second grade classroom is deserted, but the jumble of models, sketches, draft plans, and illustrations give it the feel of an architect’s office in the midst of an impending deadline. “They are getting ready for their presentation,” says Kevin, 2–3 grade loop teacher. “We studied every aspect of bridges from what they are used for, how they are designed, and how they connect the five boroughs. We looked at the science of bridge building, the economics of what they mean, and the sociology of how the bridge and communities connect .”

He points to a whiteboard that lists the questions: What do bridge designers think about? What shapes would be best for each bridge? “At each bridge we visited, we did sketches,” Kevin says. “We really focus on understanding the shape and structure of the bridge. We sketch top view, horizon view, side view and front view, bird’s-eye view—all of which helps us understand the structure.”

He then picks up a student watercolor painting that resembles the Brooklyn Bridge’s iconic shape. “One of our favorite trips is our study of the Brooklyn Bridge. We walk across, and they learn the story of [the bridge’s designer John A.] Roebling and how the father died and the story behind the tragedies that plagued the building of the bridge.”

The culminating project for the Bridge Study was designed in collaboration with faculty from Bank Street. The model of ongoing curriculum support provided in collaboration with the college is one that teachers and administrators describe as pivotal to binding the practice of Midtown West to the core principles of Bank Street. This collaboration inspired a project that brings together—in true social studies fashion—what Biber (1973) describes as the Bank Street ethos: “Active investigation, independent pursuit, [and] learning through discovery.”

The culmination of the Bridge Study involved students developing a plan to replace the Tappan Zee Bridge, which crosses the Hudson River from Tarrytown to South Nyack.



Over the spring, students had studied urban bridges, like the Robert F. Kennedy Bridge, which connects Queens, Manhattan, and the Bronx. They also studied rural bridges. The trip to study the Tappan Zee Bridge involved a train trip to suburban Tarrytown and an investigative walk around the leafy suburbs of Westchester County.

The teachers introduced the Bridge Study's final project in the context of a major policy speech by President Barack Obama about the importance of investing in America's transportation infrastructure. Students listened to a recording of his speech, which was delivered at the Washington Irving Boathouse on the Hudson River in Tarrytown. President Obama proclaimed that the United States needs to do:

a better job rebuilding our roads, rebuilding our bridges, upgrading our ports, unclogging commute times. The alternative is to do nothing and watch businesses go to places that have outstanding infrastructure.

And behind me is the old Tappan Zee bridge, the longest bridge in New York and one of the busiest bridges around. As any commuter will tell you, it is crowded. (Laughter.) It carries a lot more traffic than when it was built back in 1955. At times, you can see the river through the cracks in the pavement. Now, I'm not an engineer, but I figure that's not good. (Laughter.)

The project students undertook involves bringing all that they had learned through their trips, lectures, readings, interviews, sketching, and study to do the following task, posted prominently in the classroom:

The Job: We are all bridge designers and the Tappan Zee Bridge is failing. Obama wants a new, safer, sturdier bridge to cross the span. It is your job to figure out a new bridge that serves multiple functions.

The Site: The bridge connects Tarrytown and Nyack along a wide span of the Hudson River. The river is very deep and very busy with many types and sizes of boats. Both sides of the river are approximately the same height.

The Challenge: The Hudson River is a tidal river so the water level goes up and down at different points of the day. It is an extra long span with heavy traffic going over and underneath it throughout the day. The taxpayers want a bridge that is both functional and pretty to look at, something that blends into the suburban area.

Things to Consider: The taxpayers are nervous about the bridge cost. In choosing certain materials make sure that you are not wasteful and that you place materials through the bridge wisely.

The project embodies the Bank Street approach to social studies as it invites students to work with live tensions and weighty trade-offs that occur when a community engages with work that has purpose and relevance. Long-time Bank Street educator Charlotte Winsor described the goal of social studies as being ultimately about:

relationships—man and his environment, physical and social, scientific and artistic. The frame of reference remains our own community. The likenesses and the differences among peoples are constantly examined against the pattern of our culture. A way of life as an adaptation to man’s environment is the major concept stressed and developed. (Winsor, 2014/1952)

The second grade Bridge Study focuses on “relationships” in many ways. Students explore how bridges connect people, and the social and economic implications of connecting across water. They consider the science and physics of bridge design, and evaluate materials in regard to both design and cost. They tangle with design aesthetics considering trade-offs between how something will look and what utility it will offer. A collaborative and long-term project, the Bridge Study entails examining a myriad of relationships, including between ideas, design, and the social and environmental ecosystems a bridge impacts.

Pre-Tripping: Planning for Meaningful Experiences

In the Bank Street tradition, the teachers at Midtown West often call field trips simply “trips” and view them as much more than just an opportunity for students

to engage with and explore the world outside of the school. From Bank Street's early days (Vascellaro, 2011), trips have been serious curricular endeavors, requiring significant and careful preparation so that students are most likely to come away with the beneficial learning outcomes and meaningful experiences their teachers envisage.

In describing Bank Street's long and rich tradition of careful planning for meaningful learning through trips, Vascellaro (2011) notes:

Any consciously designed curriculum reflects a view of what knowledge is most worth knowing. For Mitchell [Bank Street founder] and Hogan [early faculty member], that knowledge was not divorced from the context in which education takes place—the world in which children lived. What they selected from that world and the seriousness with which it was planned and taught revealed their values and a vision of the kind of teacher they wanted the student to become. Unlike the popular stereotype of the progressive teacher interesting primarily in how one learns with only perfunctory concern for what is learned, the trip leaders believed that knowledge of the working world of American society and the relationship of that society to the natural world was essential. (p. 118)

And thus the trip leaders carefully, meticulously planned and prepared for every outing with both engagement and learning outcomes in mind, according to Vascellaro.

Teachers at Midtown West actively utilize this practice of in depth preparation, known as “pre-tripping,” as demonstrated by Johanna's and Beth's preparation for trips for the Bridge Study:

Each year, the second grade students at Midtown West engage in an extended study of subways and bridges. An integral part of this study is going on trips throughout the city. Students take the subway to travel to various neighborhoods and boroughs. They also cross an array of bridges connecting Manhattan to other parts of the city's larger metropolitan area, called the Tri-State Area because it includes parts of New Jersey and Connecticut. One of Johanna's favorite bridge trips is crossing the George Washington (GW) Bridge. Prior to starting the Bridge Study in the spring, she and her grade-level partner, Beth, meet to plan out which bridges they would like to visit with their students, though they have been thinking and talking about this informally since June of the previous school year. She explains:

In choosing the trips that we take for our Bridge Study, we're thinking about helping the kids get a sense of New York City and what that entails. So we wanted bridges that connected to other boroughs, and we wanted bridges that connected to also out of the city. So they get

the sense of a little bit more far away. So in thinking about the George Washington Bridge, with that said, we knew that it was accessible by train. And we also knew that it was a bridge that we could walk across because there were other bridges that we were very interested in as well, but not all bridges have pedestrian pathways. So it really begins a lot, first of all, thinking about the bridges in New York City and the ones that are different because we try to hit different kinds of bridges. From suspension to drawbridge and so on. And the ones that have people access, so that's key.

Johanna and Beth spend these planning sessions conducting online research on the different bridges they might explore with their students, keeping in mind categories of bridges they want to study (e.g., suspension bridge, drawbridge, cantilever bridge). As they conduct their investigations, they discuss their own experiences walking across various bridges and what they were like for them. Johanna also highlights the importance of listening to children reflect on and analyze bridges they have already experienced:

We listen to the kids talk about what experience they've had. We have kids say, "My country house, we always go over the George Washington Bridge." Like that's definitely gonna be a bridge. Or "My cousin's in Brooklyn, and we love driving over the Brooklyn Bridge." That's definitely gonna be a bridge that we go on. So we also listen about what the kids know about bridges and which bridges they know something about.

All of this information helps inform the final list of bridges the classes will visit as part of their Bridge Study. These trips are never entirely the same from year to year. "Field trips like anything can't be stagnant," Johanna notes. "You can't have the same trips year after year just because...Field trips have to be dynamic. They have to change. They have to make sense in terms of what you're doing now." Even when Beth and Johanna have a set plan for which bridges to visit, they are flexible and responsive to the developmental needs of their students, making changes as needed from year to year, month to month, or even from week to week.

At the beginning of the week that the second graders are going to visit the George Washington Bridge, Johanna and Beth "preview the trip," meaning that they walk across the bridge themselves to see what it is like. As they cross the bridge, they consider and discuss the various challenges of bringing 56 children across the GW, as well as what they want the students to notice. When Johanna and Beth most recently crossed the GW, they particularly loved the idea that it was going over the Hudson River; they knew that they were going to incorporate that fact into the students' "trip sheet"—a handout that guides the students through their data collection during the trip investigation. Johanna and Beth also discussed having the students think about what it means to be "joined by a river or separated by a river," and they made notes to add related questions to the trip sheet.

In addition, their proximity to New Jersey stood out to the teachers. They decided to have their students think about how seeing the closeness between New York and New Jersey helps them to better understand the notion of the Tri-State Area, which comes up often in the news and in their conversations at home. Johanna and Beth also thought about how important it would be for students to compare the two states. By standing and looking at New Jersey, they hoped their students might realize that New Jersey was not all that foreign and, at least from the perch of the GW, actually looked rather similar to New York.

In addition to coming up with some aspects of the bridge, the local geography, social connections, and the like that they wanted the students to focus on while working on their trip sheet, Johanna and Beth considered the logistics of crossing the bridge with their two classes. They thought about, “How far are they going to go? How long will it take?” Johanna explains, “In the case of the George Washington Bridge, we realized that if we walked all the way to the New Jersey side...unfortunately, there was nowhere to go when we got off the bridge on the Jersey side that was safe to be.” There was no area for the class to sit as a group and talk, only space for cars to drive by. Because of this, Johanna and Beth decided that the class “would walk halfway across the George Washington Bridge, as close as we could to the land so the kids could say, ‘I’m in New Jersey!’” They also thought about which day of the week would be best to go, looking up whether there were events like bike races happening on the bridge and considering when it might be most congested. Johanna and Beth were highly aware that many cyclists as well as pedestrians cross the bridge. This guided them to think about what lessons around safety they wanted to do with their students (e.g., walking in a single file line because the pedestrian walkway is so narrow) and how many parent chaperones they should have.

The “pre-trip” is of great import to Johanna and Beth because it allows them to “tailor the trips more according to what [their] kids’ needs are and what [they’re] doing in school.” Johanna explained:

When we do it ourselves, we can first of all present the trip sheet in a way that adds on or builds on what we’ve already been discussing and thinking about in class and that would kind of push them a little bit more...Also, we want to be knowledgeable, too. We want to feel like we have something to offer to the kids. And if we don’t have the opportunity to think through ourselves and find out, then I feel it—then it just becomes a trip for a trip’s sake rather than a real learning experience for all of us.

It is because of this that Johanna and Beth “pre-trip” every trip that they take their students on so that they can guide the trip experience in ways that give meaning to the experience, building on what the students have already learned about in class, and expanding the learning opportunity by providing purposeful, guiding experiences in the field.

In the weeks and days leading up to the George Washington Bridge field trip, there is much work happening in the classroom to prepare the students for their visit. The second grade classes conduct research online and in texts on the bridge and have numerous meetings to talk about what they learned. The classes also study pictures of the bridge. Just before going on the trip, the students discuss a multitude of guiding questions, such as:

- *What do you expect to see?*
- *How do you think people might use the bridge beyond just crossing it in cars?*
- *Why is the bridge located there in particular?*
- *How does the bridge make people's lives easier, and what challenges does it pose?*

On the day of the trip, the second graders take the subway to the Fort Washington Park entrance of the George Washington Bridge. While crossing the bridge, each student carries a clipboard, a trip sheet, and a writing implement. Johanna was very clear with the students that "They're there for a specific job. It's not just sightseeing." It's about "their research." Written on the trip sheet are some guiding questions as well as space for the children to write down their "wonderings or their thoughts or extra questions." Johanna said, "There's a lot of writing that goes on on trips because we tell them that we're going as researchers. So researchers are collecting data, they're collecting information, and we need to be able to have that, so that when we go back to school we can talk about it fully." The second grade students keep all of their trip sheets and research notes, so they can refer to them when they are constructing their own bridges at the end of the study.

While taking copious research notes, the students make important observations that helped them to better understand the George Washington Bridge and its role in connecting New York to New Jersey. Johanna recounts that the students realized during their time on the bridge, "Wow, this is a really quick way to get to New Jersey." She also explained:

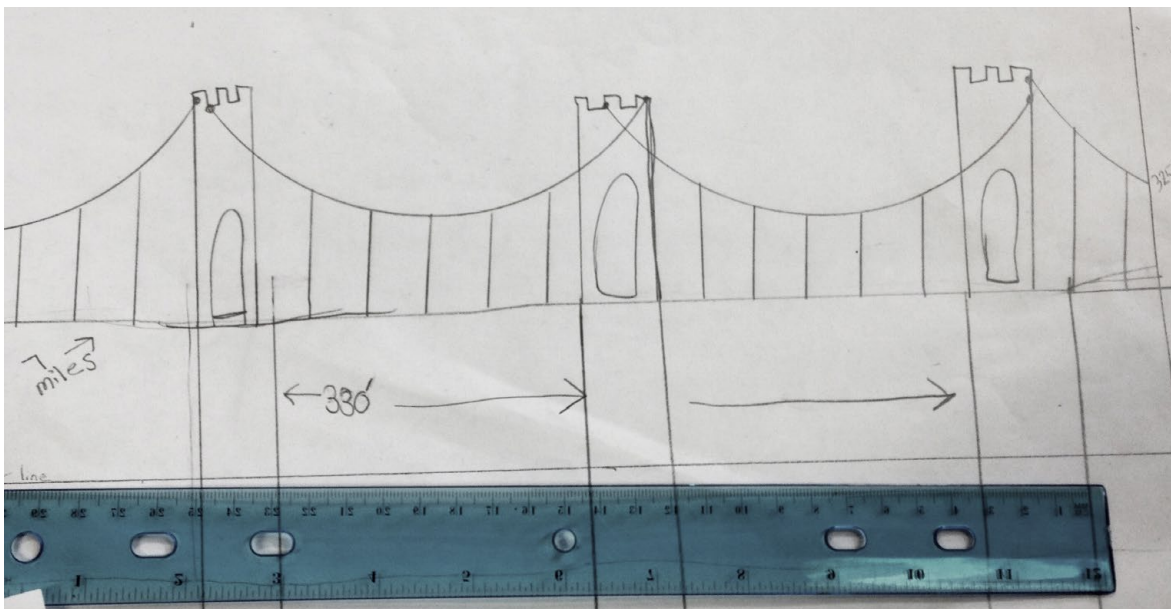
Being overhead, they could really see how these two landmasses were connected...And the children are able to see on the actual bridge itself, how this bridge services so many people in so many different ways. They see cyclists. They see people running across. People walking across either to get to work or get home. They see all sorts of vehicles across. They see the different jobs. In the past, they've seen police officers, construction workers. They've seen how tourists are using it. They look at how can people get around and be informed. They look for signs. Both the signs that cars and trucks are using to get around, so they know where they're going, but also people. They see what things are put in place to keep people safe while they're walking over

bridges. Is it really safe what we're doing, and how do you know it's safe? How do you know it's ok for people to walk over?

In addition to taking observation notes in their trip sheets, the students spend a good deal of time sketching. As they sketch the George Washington Bridge, they are asked to think about what makes this bridge different from other ones they visited. They are also prompted to consider the materials used to build the GW Bridge. These investigations serve as useful background for the students when they are tasked to build their own bridge models at the end of this integrated study.

When the children return to the classroom, Beth and Johanna sit them on the rug and have the students share what they learned. Students share in small groups, then present some of their big ideas or wonderings to the whole class or produce written reflections on their trip experiences. The focus of the debriefing is often based on patterns in the students' observations that Johanna and Beth noticed while looking at students' research notes during and after the trip. The purpose of this time is for students to process their experiences on the bridge and to draw connections to what they have already learned about bridges in their intensive study.

For Johanna, this entire field trip cycle is at the core of her philosophy about learning. "I think that kids learn best from doing, or from experiences, so that's key," she said. "I think particularly with this age group, that they need to be able to see it, touch it, feel it, experience it, to really talk about it and have it make much more of a lasting impact." She also believes that going out on trips helps children better understand the "environment, the community, the city" that they live in. Johanna describes how former students will come back to visit her and will primarily share



their memories of the different trips they took in her class. What children experience on field trips appears to be what sticks the most with students and what is most indelible years after they have left Midtown West.

When asked if there was any class or person at Bank Street who most shaped her ideas about field trips, Johanna mentions a classroom teacher at the Bank Street School for Children. She remembers being in a “6/7s” class (6 and 7 year olds) as a student teacher where the children were studying produce markets. This was her first experience with social studies being taught as an integrated study, and she recalls thinking to herself, “This just makes so much sense.” Instead of studying produce markets in a textbook, the class:

took neighborhood walks to markets. We went to Hunt’s Point, and at that time Hunt’s Point was this huge wholesale market, and children didn’t go there. They had connections to these places. The experiences the children had were incredible, and I saw how when we came back into the classroom how their experiences were reflected in the block area, in their play. It was reflected in their writing. The literature connections that they made. The books that were tied in. Lots of books on markets and things. And I thought, “Wow the children aren’t just studying social studies. They’re living and breathing it.” It really became a part of them.

Johanna also speaks of the Bank Street faculty member who supports the social studies work at Midtown West as someone who is always pushing the teachers to think about how they are going to make their content meaningful to students. For Johanna and many other teachers at Midtown West, a key ingredient is taking children on field trips to make their learning “experiential and dynamic.” The depth of the preparation and consideration the teachers employ in service of those aims is essential to the impact the trips have on student learning, and are emblematic of the approach to teaching and learning employed at Midtown West.

The Bridge Study represents an illustrative example of the way teachers at Midtown West employ field trips in service of student engagement and learning as part of their integrated studies. Across the grades and studies, trips are liberally employed to allow students to engage in “lived experience” through trips. For example, during the fourth grade Immigration Study, students have the opportunity to engage in eight or nine related trips, including Ellis Island, the Tenement Museum, and the Museum of Chinese in America. During their New Amsterdam Study, they explore the National Park Service’s African Burial Ground in Manhattan, the New York Historical Society, and a Dutch farmhouse, to name a few. “Field trips give kids a way to access the information in a very real kind of way,” fourth grade teacher Paige said. “Field trips are really important here at this school and just sort of that experiential thing. That to me is very Bank Street-y.”

Intensive and Purposeful Arts Focus

The walls outside of the school's Family Center room vibrate with the lustrous sounds of Maurice Ravel's "String Quartet in F Major." A small chamber group made up of two violinists, one violist, and a cellist face rows of fifth grade students swaying along to the melody. Eyes sparkle in amazement as the four string players reach the allegro section concluding their introduction to this Lincoln Center Chamber Music Concert. The awe-struck silence is broken with roaring applause.

This is the third in a series of interactive concerts given by Lincoln Center chamber musicians. The artists perform for the students and then engage them in a lesson about motifs, rhythm, and texture. The children are challenged to identify which instruments are playing different variations on Ravel's mesmerizing motif. They also get to play the role of composer by asking each artist to play their lines using different textures like pizzicato or legato. At various points in the session, students take on the role of artists as well, sharing what they visualize during different sections of the piece.

The Lincoln Center Chamber Music Concerts are one of the many authentic artistic experiences available to students at Midtown West. As Principal Bourke explained, Midtown West teachers "use New York City as the classroom." Fewer than 20 blocks uptown from the gates of Midtown West sits Lincoln Center, the heart of performing arts in Manhattan. Around the corner shine the bright lights of Broadway. Across the park lies a row of world-renowned museums along Fifth Avenue. This mecca of art becomes a part of the classroom as professional artists and performers from all over the city come to work with students at Midtown West, and the students have the opportunity to explore the rich resources of their neighborhood and city. These include the Lincoln Center chamber musicians; TADA! Youth Theater, which works with fourth graders on their musical; and Studio in a School, which helps the first graders create sets for their musical.

Walking down the hallway during at lunch, one hears the melodious, yet discordant sounds of practiced musicians tuning up for a rehearsal. Upon entering Darren's first grade classroom, the sight of 10 adult musicians neatly yet oddly arrayed amid a collection of small chairs and tables, and various other materials designed for seven year olds, is at once surprising and compelling.

Darren has organized a practice session during his lunch break of 10 local professional musicians—parents, friends, and orchestral musicians working in shows in the local theater district. This assembly—four violins, a bass, a keyboard, a clarinet, a flute, a horn, and a saxophone—will serve as the orchestra for the first grade production of "The Golden Kingdom," the class project for the students' extended Theater Study.

After the orchestra warms up, Darren begins to bring in students in pairs and small groups so they can practice singing to the live musical accompaniment.

Darren: “You will have four measures before you sing, girls. One, two, three, four.”

On cue, two students begin to sing—one, an African-American girl with two tight, neck-length braids, a flower print dress, and pink shoes; the other, a White boy with shaggy brown hair nearly covering one eye, wearing a faded blue T-shirt and jeans:

“Getting to know you!

Getting to know all about you.

Getting to like you,

Getting to hope you like me.”

For the next 30 minutes, a revolving group of students enters and leaves the music session, taking their turn at a professional-style rehearsal of their first grade play, accompanied by accomplished musicians set up amid picture books, wooden blocks, crayons, pencils, papers, and sundry other accouterments of their first grade classroom. From time to time, Darren or Carla, the school’s music teacher, stops the rehearsal to give notes to the musicians or the singers:

“Let’s add a retard [a slowing of tempo] here,” Carla suggests to the musicians.

“We will play the intro here one time first, so you can hear how to come in,” Darren tells the students. “Let’s try it once more.”

“Let’s do the chorus a second time,” he says. “Try to get the ending. Are we going up or down at the end?” He encourages the students, moving his arms up to suggest the flow of the tune.

This is an authentic arts experience. Working with real musicians. Using real language of the field. Were it not for the incongruous setting, one could easily imagine this as a practice for one of the local stage shows prepping down the street, likely right at the same time.

Not only do the Midtown West children get to listen to, watch, and learn from accomplished world-class artists, but they also have multiple opportunities to showcase their own artistic and musical passions in a myriad of ways, because the arts are infused throughout the school’s curriculum. The principal says the school’s commitment to the arts is “a commitment both ideologically and philosophically.” He believes:

A well-rounded education is one that does include the arts. It is not just the three Rs, so to speak, that kids need to learn to love education.

They need to learn to love life, and they need to learn the finer things in life, which of course the arts encompass.

This commitment to the arts manifests in a variety of ways. As Bourke puts it:

[T]here's a commitment to hire teachers that will support [the arts]. There's a commitment to leverage the schedule to allow time for that in the school day. There's a commitment to budget money towards supporting the arts, and in our particular case, there's a very strong parental commitment that supports the arts through the PTA fundraising. So it's a combination of all of those things that really allows the arts to be so present in our school as a part of our school.

On-staff at Midtown West are a full-time art teacher and a full-time music teacher, uncommon in this country for a public school of Midtown West's size and the diversity of its student population. Because of this, each grade level is able to have one period of chorus, one or two periods of music, and one or two periods of art every week—a minimum of 150 minutes of arts-related classes.

Midtown West also offers an extensive after-school program that Anita, the parent coordinator, runs. Currently, over 200 students enroll in extended-day classes. Many (e.g., comedy/improvisation, story theater, and violin) focus on the performing arts. Students can also take classes in a number of dance styles, including ballet, breakdancing, hip hop, modern, step, and tap. Arts and crafts are also represented. Midtown West students thus have many opportunities throughout the day and week to experience, be trained in, and be engaged with the arts.

“Are you happy?” A young second grader stomps her feet together and raises her fists up in front of her chest, making a T formation with her body.

The students in the audience lean forward and respond, “Yes!”

“I can't hear you. Are you happy?!” The young girl stands firm as she prompts the audience to shout louder in response.



“Yes!” they reply.

Another student positioned in the clump of dancers standing on the right side of the stage counts, “5-6-7-8!” The dancers begin stomping in total synchrony.

In the audience, eyes widen and mouths gape in awe at the professionalism of the young step dancers on stage. The dancers direct themselves, as various children from the group call out different steps and numbers to signal transitions. The run-through of this number concludes with the performers exiting the stage to Pharrell Williams’ song “Happy,” while the audience sings and dances along in their seats. This is just the beginning of a series of dances and choral performances the school has put together for their spring show. Throughout the two-and-a-half hour dress rehearsal, the Midtown West students watch each other in amazement, directing their focus to the stage as soon as they hear music playing or being sung.

The young artists at Midtown West showcase their talents three times a year in the auditorium they share with the Professional Performing Arts High School. In early December, the school puts together a winter concert for the holiday season. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day brings about a social justice and diversity-themed concert. In May, the students close out the year with their spring show. This is all in addition to the various plays, musicals, and graduation dances students at different grade levels participate in throughout the year.

Artwork is also regularly on display at Midtown West, the walls filled with work created by students in Frank’s art studio and in their regular classrooms. Each extended study has at least one major art project that the students work on with Frank. Creating art happens in each of the classrooms as well, as students work on art projects related to their grade-level curricula. Numerous extended-day activities and clubs also focus on the visual arts. The classrooms have open bins full of artists’ supplies for students to use, for example, to create covers for their writing work, draw pictures to go along with their mathematical problem-solving, and paint images of things they experience on their field trips.

At Midtown West, the arts are taken just as seriously as any other academic content area. This approach to the arts as an integral part of learning mirrors the arts emphasis at Bank Street College. Bank Street’s founders saw the arts as “central to children’s developing understanding of their world” (Gwathmey and Mott, 2014). The classroom, then, was to be just as much an artist’s studio as it was a scientist’s laboratory. Edith Gwathmey and Ann-Marie Mott (2000), art instructors at both Bank Street’s School for Children and Bank Street’s Graduate School, explain, “The visualization of experience through art can enrich and deepen children’s ability to make meaning from their lives and work in school. Art, along with other subjects, is a means for investigating, hypothesizing, and discovering essential relationships between self and world” (p. 140).

Alumnus and longtime faculty member of Bank Street Harriet Cuffaro (1991) refers to materials as the “texts of early childhood” (p. 16; materials are also one of the “texts” used to educate teachers studying at Bank Street, with the college’s students experiencing firsthand the excitement of discovery, invention, and mastery. This is the rationale for many workshops in which students paint, model clay, make collages, build with blocks, make musical instruments, work with manipulative math materials, stretch, leap, and dance. The purpose of engaging student-teachers in manipulating materials in Mitchell’s view is to:

allow the [student-teachers] to experiment directly with color (painting), form (clay and drawing), movement (dance and dramatics) and an experimental attitude is taken in language and music—art media more difficult to think of as undictated. What happens inside the students we consider more important than the quality of their products. We are eager to have the student-teachers apply their experiences directly to the curriculum for children” (Mitchell in Nager & Shapiro, 2000, p. 131).

The link between the arts-embedded curriculum at Midtown West and the school’s roots in Bank Street College are clear. Just as artistic expression and discovery are interwoven throughout the graduate program at Bank Street, so too do painting, dance, theater, and song pulse through the veins of the young artists at Midtown West.

Approach to the Profession

Collaborative Practice in a Professional Learning Community

“What I like best about working here is that it seems that we’re engaged in this unfolding, never-ending conversation about teaching and learning,” says Johanna. “The conversations keep on going, and we keep on learning. It never ends, and you always feel as if you’re growing.”

Teachers depict a spirit of collaboration and collegial interaction at Midtown West. They describe how working at Midtown West means participating in an ongoing conversation about practice that involves thinking together about children and their families, planning courses of study, revising lessons and units, planning around school schedules and needs, and generally committing to an ethic of practice that entails inquiry, reflection, ongoing revision, and hard work around school and instructional practices.

The sense of collegiality at Midtown West does not exist simply because the faculty gets along well, though many do report that Midtown West teachers are friends as well as colleagues. Midtown West teachers come together over a common desire to continually better themselves, their work, and their impact on students, families, and their community. Collaborating and regularly communicating with each other, even through debate, is seen as essential for this refinement of practice to occur.

Beth and Johanna regard the notion that teachers should be engaged, reflective, learning professionals who work collegially and are constantly learning together as emanating from the school’s close connections to Bank Street. “I think that one of the elements that I identify with as Bank Street is the importance of always reflecting and being engaged in ongoing discussion with your colleagues,” says Johanna. She explains that the Bank Street faculty member who assists with professional development helps facilitate this close collaboration across and within grade levels. With the Bank Street faculty member’s help, “the teachers come together to talk about kids, and talk about good practice.”

Beth and Johanna explain that teachers also frequently observe each other in one another’s classrooms, so everyone knows what is going on throughout the school. The idea is that if someone asks a teacher to teach a different grade level for a day, “You’d be able to do it without missing a beat.”



The leadership at Midtown West ensures that structures are in place to allow for teachers to regularly meet and plan together. According to the principal, because the school budgets for full- and part-time specialty teachers (including art, music, science, and gym teachers) grade-level teachers each have two or three prep periods a day:

where they can come together with their grade colleague and plan, where they can come together in a loop and take a look at student work, participate in inquiry and have these instructional conversations, or participate in PD [professional development]. So that again is the culture of the school that...we are able to free up teachers regularly and once a week for loop meetings, at least once a week for creative meetings, so that that PD can occur.

As demonstrated in the sample weekly schedule (see following page), the school administration and faculty work collectively to organize time throughout the week so that key school priorities can be supported, including significant time for faculty collaboration and professional growth, as well as opportunities for student enrichment and family engagement.

Table 2. Sample Weekly Schedule: Midtown West

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Weekend
8:00 a.m.	Extra help	Extra help	Extra help	Whole staff PD		Faculty often use weekends to plan units or to “pre-trip” upcoming field trips in their grade-level teams
8:40 a.m.	Morning meeting Short academic activity (e.g., DIRT, math problems)	Morning meeting Short academic activity (e.g., DIRT, math problems)	Chorus Loop team planning meeting	Family math (Students play math games with parents and family members.)	School-wide community meeting Morning meeting	
9:30 a.m.	Academic block	Academic block	Academic block	Academic block	Academic block	
10:20 a.m.	Academic block	Music Grade-level planning	Art (half group)	Academic block	Library	
11:00 a.m.	Academic block		Academic block	Academic block	Academic block	
11:50 a.m.	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	
12:40 p.m.	Art	Academic block	Gym	Library (half group)	Academic block	
1:30 p.m.	Gym	Academic block	Science	Science	Academic block	
2:15 p.m.	Academic block	Academic block	Clubs	Academic block	Academic block	
3:00 p.m.	Extended day Teacher in-classroom planning; periodic full-faculty meetings					
Evening	Evening activities often include school-wide music concerts (Winter Concert, Martin Luther King, Jr. Concert, Spring Concert), grade-level musicals, open houses, and PTA meetings					

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 social studies, readers’ workshop, writers’ workshop, math, handwriting/spelling, DIRT (Daily Independent Reading Time), or read-alouds.

Red text: Specials. Students occasionally go to specials in half groups. Teachers work with the remaining half on an academic activity, allowing them to provide individualized attention to students. The activities might include one-on-one writing conferences, small group math support, or working on social studies projects. Teachers use specials periods to prepare for academic blocks and/or to have weekly grade-level team meetings and weekly loop team meetings.

Blue text: Extracurricular student activities. Extra help is held in students’ classrooms for those who need it. Many teachers lead the clubs and extended-day activities. Clubs include cooking, journalism, strategic games, etc. Extended day includes visual and performing arts classes, such as different styles of dance, homework help, etc.

Green text: Faculty-specific activities. Professional development (PD) sessions are led by the principal, staff, or by out-of-school consultants.

Purple text: In-school activities for which families are invited to stay and participate. Both parents and teachers often help out with lunch and recess. Teachers then spend the remaining time in their classrooms preparing for upcoming academic blocks. Teachers might also meet in grade-level teams to plan. Additionally, they may have meetings during lunch with administrators and parents to discuss individual students. Often, students go back to their classrooms during lunch, volunteering to help their teachers with tasks, like organizing materials.

The school's approach to looping is particularly conducive to fostering collaboration among teachers. All teachers from kindergarten through fifth grade are part of a looping team: K-1, 2-3, and 4-5. The kindergarten teachers will move up with their students to first grade next year, while the current first grade teachers move down to kindergarten with a fresh group of children. This is the model for all of the looping teams. K-1 loop teacher Denise explained:

Because we loop, too, I think that you rely on the other half of the loop to give you some feedback in terms of how it worked for them this year. So we're kindergarten now, they're first grade....So if we have questions about things that they did this year, that's a collaboration piece.

Years ago, the teachers themselves pushed to have weekly loop meetings, as they saw tremendous value in this type of collaboration. According to Johanna, Midtown West teachers have historically come together as an intentional professional community to have conversations with their principals about the types of structures they needed in order to better collaborate with each other and meet the needs of their children:

Well, one of the first things that was really important for us, and we started this years ago, [was] that we would have loop meetings to provide teachers an opportunity to meet, not only with their grade level, but with their loop, and that's been really important to us. And teachers were instrumental in coming together to form a schedule to make sure that happens....And teachers said things like we wanna have loop meetings, we wanna have half classes because we struggle with sometimes having 28-30 kids in the room. Are there opportunities that we can meet with half of the classes? And we've got principals who are wonderful about that. Some of them brought that to the table and others we had to go, well you know, we've done half-classes. How can we make this work?

This view of teachers as a community of practitioners harkens back to the early days of Bank Street College. The founders of Bank Street designed their program and curricula to intentionally build a learning community among their prospective teachers. Grinberg (2005) explains that the Bank Street model "encompasses learning in community, which includes a constructivist view of learning with and from one another, building and relying on each other, intellectual challenges, and collaboration and growth" (p. 77). The prospective teachers' opportunities to learn were contingent on the depth of their community with one another, as it was through communal interactions that they learned to push each other and co-construct their knowledge of teaching.

The teachers at Midtown West have formed a professional learning community similar to the model that Bank Street’s founders envisioned for their prospective teachers. This community of teacher learners at Midtown West is passionately committed to the teaching profession. Teachers are frequently found visiting each other’s classrooms or attending professional development sessions in order to better their own practice. As Trevor notes:

And we’re all willing to teach each other. We’re willing to go into each other’s classes. We’re willing to [go to] staff development on Thursday mornings. Our school, every single Monday has voluntary professional development for an hour to two hours. Even three hours at times.... that level of respect is amazing.

Teachers spend surprisingly long hours at the school each day. Several faculty members comment that few teachers leave the building when daily instruction ends at 3:00 p.m. Early in the morning, 30 minutes to an hour before the school day officially begins, many teachers are already preparing in their classrooms or are meeting with students to provide additional academic support. A couple of grade-level teams joke that they see each other more than they see their life partners, and several teachers describe themselves as “living at the school.”

These characteristics of the faculty and professional community at Midtown West are not happenstance. Rather, the character and composition of the faculty have been carefully curated and strategically shaped over the years. From its inception, the school sought out a diverse, committed, hardworking, and collegial faculty whose perspectives resonated with the stated mission of the school. While faculty turnover is low, new hires are selected with significant input from current faculty and parents along with school administrative leaders. New teachers are often selected from the ranks of student teachers who have demonstrated a “rightness of fit” in the course of the student teaching experience.

This level of commitment to their teaching practice—both as individuals and as a shared community of educators—is described by Vanessa as “professionalism at the highest.” In her view, teachers at Midtown West are taken seriously as autonomous, intellectual professionals:

You’re held accountable for really knowing your stuff and really saying that this is the reason why I’m doing these things....You never have to go to somebody and say, “Can you do this for me?” It’s more of you [as a staff] hav[ing] to take initiative by yourself and also do[ing] all these things. You’re a professional. We’re treated as professionals to make a lot of...choices ourselves and do all the planning ourselves and do a lot ourselves. We do the scheduling. We do everything. We ran [the school] for two months without a principal. We’re fine. We’re self-motivators.

Such collegiality does not mean that teachers always agree on what the best course of action is for their students. Tensions occasionally flare in these ongoing conversations about best practice, various courses of action, or even long-held traditions, but these are generally viewed as useful and productive tensions, as Amanda explained:

I love when things [get] heated, and we're really questioning each other and pushing each other to defend our motives or [asking,] "Why is it that something has to stay this way just because it's always been this way? What is the true reason that we do this?" And then we walk out from there and everything's fine because the whole idea is that we have to have those kinds of conversations in order to move forward and, you know, have a solid foundation as opposed to being fractured. And we're not scared to get into those difficult moments.

What matters at Midtown West is not a uniform vision of practice, but rather a sense of shared purpose and collegial respect. The professional community fits a professional ethos described by longtime Bank Street faculty member Frank Pignatelli: "A mix of personal, professional affinities and dispositions are at work here, a commonly held set of values, an abiding shared vision of what needs fixing and repair in schools" (2011, pp. 220–221). Based on this model, Midtown West teachers are highly accountable to each other as they work together with collegiality in order to continually improve their collective practice. Their goal is to share everything openly, to push each other fervently, and ultimately to make tough decisions as a team in the best interest of children.

At the core of this collaborative professional spirit is a sense of moral accountability. Pignatelli says when teachers are morally accountable to each other, they develop collegiality that involves "mutuality, reciprocity, attentive listening, mindful watching, and...selflessness. One roots for another's success, puts oneself to the side as it were, in the interests of supporting a colleague's growth" (2011, p. 218).

Conclusion: Parents, Teachers, and Teacher Educators in Partnership at a Community School of Choice

In 1896 when John Dewey was a philosophy professor at the University of Chicago, he founded the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools to challenge prevailing attitudes about childhood and education and to create a “lab” where educators could be involved in the ongoing project of discovering “how a school could be come a cooperative community” (Mayhew & Edwards, 1936). Dewey intended the lab school to be a place where educational innovation could be fostered and where educators would be prepared to bring child-centered approaches to the larger profession. While Midtown West does not explicitly describe itself as a “laboratory school,” the character of its contributions since the founding of the school resembles the original intent of Dewey’s lab school: to serve as a place of progressive innovation in service of the children, families, community, and the teaching profession, as well as a school committed to providing future educators the opportunity to apprentice in a school consciously attentive to enacting practice aligned with ideals of a Bank Street education.

Founded as a formal “collaboration between Community School District Two and The Bank Street College of Education” (Midtown West School – P.S. 212, 2014a) in 1989, the school was initially envisioned as a partnership among devoted and motivated parents seeking a broad-based, student-centered educational experience for their diverse families, a core of founding teachers, and a team of teacher education faculty from Bank Street College. The founding vision of Midtown West was to be a public school actively committed to Bank Street’s progressive developmental-interaction approach. Like all public schools, Midtown West has been affected by the tremendous changes that have occurred within public education. Our extended observations of classrooms, interviews with teachers, administrators, and staff as well as our exploration of the written curriculum, however, reveal a story of a public school where a fundamental commitment to the core precepts of the Bank Street approach guides how the school has responded, reinvented, and adapted over the years.

The Bank Street developmental-interaction approach permeates life and learning at Midtown West. Collectively, the structures of the school work to support the school’s approach to teaching, learning, and child development. The faculty, aligned in distinctive looping teams, displays a robust and deep collegiality and professionalism, which is well supported by the school administration via substantive opportunities for professional engagement and professional development. The school connects meaningfully with its families and community via its extended studies, numerous field trips, ongoing community and arts presentations, and robust after-school programs. The formal

connections between Bank Street and Midtown West continue through student teaching placements and the presence of Bank Street faculty serving in advisory and mentoring roles to support and promote collaboration around curriculum, expansion, and development of integrated social studies units, and other practices.

The story of Midtown West is one of continuous adaptation, creative experimentation, and refinement of core practices. The connection to Bank Street is woven into Midtown West's institutional identity; however, there is also a sense that as a public institution the school must continually adapt. In reflecting on the relationship to Bank Street, the principal noted, "I think there's a sentiment within the staff that, 'Yes, we do have connections to Bank Street,' but there's also a very strong sense of we're independent; that, 'Yes, Bank Street has been influential—it is influential—but we are Midtown West.'"

Midtown West is not immune to the formidable changes wrought by numerous policy directives around testing, standards, and prescriptive curriculum mandates at the local, states, and national levels. At the same time, the school has experienced the natural transitions that happen in any maturing organization: retirement, leadership change, and teacher movement. Despite these influences, the commitment to the progressive ideal of attending to the whole child still defines Midtown West. Midtown West is a school that focuses on creating experiences for children that are meaningful, purposeful, child-centered, and developmentally oriented. As fifth grade teacher Amanda expressed, a child's developmental growth guides practice: "Every day...[e]motionally, socially is about feeling out the vibe....Thinking about what children are interested in and making it, or presenting it, in a way that draws them in."

For Daren, supporting the individual development of the whole child through many of the tools and practices he learned at Bank Street is how he defines his current teaching practice:

And just a lot of work on how to really look at what's going in your classroom. How to reflect. How to look at all the children. How to step back. And, a lot of training and just taking anecdotal notes and doing observational O&R—observation and recording—and seeing what you observed and then how that informs your teaching. I think that's what we do here. We're always looking at the studies, what's working, what's not working, how it's affecting children in different ways and then how we either scaffold back up, change it, modify it for certain kids. I think every year we do our work or studies. It's always differently. It always depends on the population that's coming in.

Biber (1972) believed that developmentally oriented schools are environments where one can find "children learning actively, interacting with each other, taking initiative, finding pleasure in accomplishment and creative expression, with teachers who were

enthusiastic and who established a generally democratic style of school life” (p. 52). The spirit of this idea binds Midtown West to Bank Street. The ongoing challenge of keeping that relationship alive can be linked to the idea that Bank Street prepares teachers to be independent and critical practitioners engaged in their own habits of inquiry and reflections. In his book tracing the history of teacher education at Bank Street, Jaime Grinberg (2005) quotes a document from 1935 to describe the nature of how Midtown West teachers and administrators think of their connection to Bank Street: “None of us is leaving Bank Street with a packet of ideas neatly sealed and ready to be pigeonholed. We all have the feeling that given the Cooperative School as a Springboard, there is no limit to where one can leap” (p. 24).

The ongoing project of teachers working to create a public school animated by progressive ideals where faculty and administrators continuously engage in the reinterpretation and critical inquiry of practice and curriculum is what defines Midtown West. In this manner, it resembles the spirit of Dewey’s original lab school as well as Mitchell’s and Biber’s iterations of the progressive education movement at Bank Street.



Afterword

Our aim in this case study of Midtown West 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*, which 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 at Midtown West over the course of two weeks in spring 2014. 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.

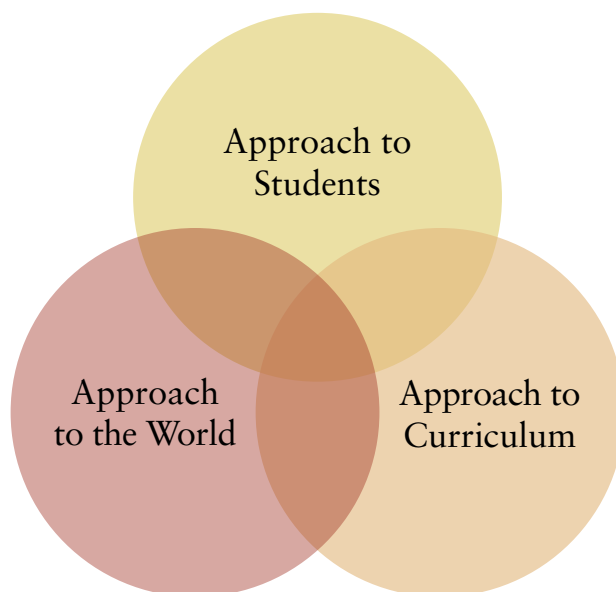
2. The teacher has a deep knowledge of subject matter areas and is actively engaged in learning through formal study, direct observation, and participation.
3. Understanding children’s learning and development in the context of family, community, and culture is needed for teaching.
4. The teacher continues 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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