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Learning to Play, Playing to Learn: The Bank Street Developmental Interaction Approach in Liliana's Kindergarten Classroom

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

Learning to Play, Playing to Learn: The Bank Street Developmental-Interaction Approach in Liliana's Kindergarten Classroom

By 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 Swing

How do you like to go up in a swing,

Up in the air so blue?

Oh, I do think it the pleasantest thing

Ever a child can do!

—Robert Louis Stevenson

Introduction

The Bank Street College of Education’s developmental-interaction approach to teaching and learning centers on understanding, valuing, and meeting the needs of the “whole child.” The 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). According to longtime Bank Street faculty members Edna Shapiro and Nancy Nager (2000), educators who take on the developmental-interaction approach to teaching recognize that students’ development unfolds at varying paces and through interaction with the world. They regard the school and classroom as places that should recognize and utilize:

the changing patterns of growth, understanding, and response that characterize children and adults as they develop; and the dual meaning of interaction as, first, the interconnected spheres of thought and emotion, and, equally, the importance of engagement with the environment of children, adults, and the material world. (Shapiro & Biber, 1972, p.11)

Bank Street further defines its approach as the ways

in which cognition and emotion are always interconnected in any teaching situation. Meaningful content (provided by a teacher) and active relationships and collaborations with student peers and teachers provide the basis for learning. By closely observing the reactions, reflections, and interactions of students; by guiding with her own comments and questions; and by encouraging every ounce of student curiosity, the educator teaches her students. (Bank Street College of Education, 2014e)

Liliana¹ earned a master’s degree in early childhood special and general education from Bank Street, and the college’s developmental-interaction approach permeates her teaching practice. She is a kindergarten teacher in a full inclusion (joint general and special education) classroom at the Brooklyn New School (BNS) in New York, a school with a long history of close ties to Bank Street. Liliana has been teaching at BNS since 2008 as the special education teacher in one of the school’s integrated co-teaching (ICT) classrooms. In this model, one special education and one general education teacher team up to lead an integrated classroom that includes up to 12 students with disabilities. While both teachers share responsibility for the instruction

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

of all students, the special education teacher is specifically responsible for ensuring that the needs of students with disabilities are met in this inclusive setting. Liliana is therefore keenly aware of the individual needs of each student, as she and her co-teacher, Yazmin, foster an environment where children can interact with the world at their own pace and in their own style.

Liliana and Yazmin regularly and substantively incorporate the goals of the developmental-interaction approach into their practice. They set up their classroom in activity centers and establish routines early on to allow students to independently engage in learning at their own pace and with materials that stimulate them. Children are regarded as whole beings and attention is given to providing opportunities for development across the wide domains of human growth: physical, cognitive, linguistic, social, emotional, and ethical. Liliana attributes her holistic focus to her preparation at Bank Street. As she explained:

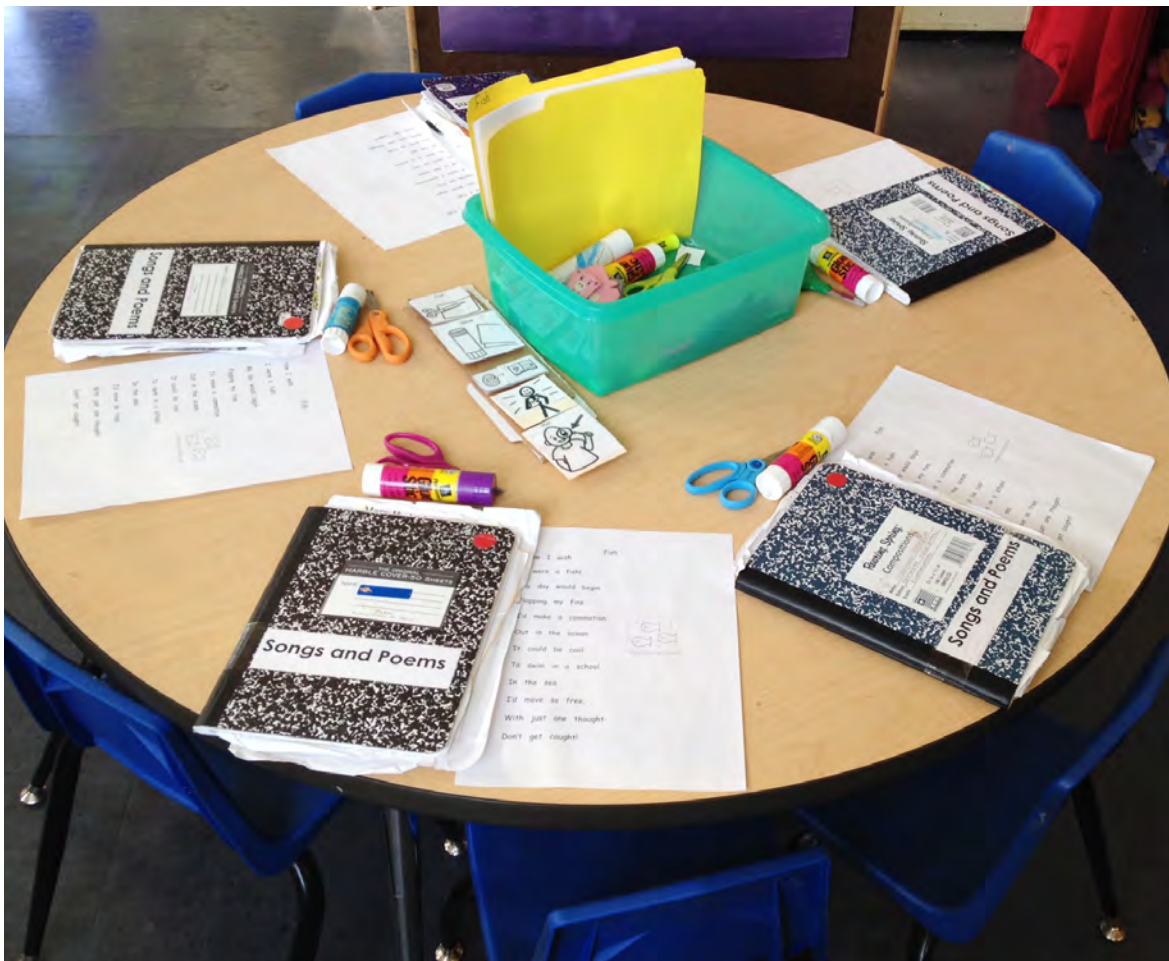
Most of my work at Bank Street had to do with really looking at children as a whole. We focused on gaining a deeper understanding of how children develop and how to meet their individual needs. This kind of work was about zooming into the different developmental areas—so we were thinking about the social and emotional piece, the cognitive and language component, and the physical development. A lot of emphasis was placed on self-regulation and helping children figure out what self-regulating strategies work for them. We learned how to look at the whole child by making informal and formal observations and writing descriptive reviews and case studies of students.

Liliana's commitment to the developmental-interaction approach she learned while at Bank Street defines her classroom and practice. She creates opportunities for students in her class to develop cognitively, emotionally, socially, and physically in a safe and warm classroom community. Liliana's practice embodies the Bank Street development-interaction approach in action and makes real the adage, "I know a Bank Street teacher when I see one." (See Afterword for a detailed description of the Bank Street approach.)

The Case Study of Liliana

This case study of Liliana presents a portrait of a Bank Street alumna in her classroom. Liliana strives for her classroom to be a space where the core principles she learned during her Bank Street education guide the experience of children. A commitment to the developmental-interaction approach anchors her efforts in the classroom. The study of her work begins by exploring how a commitment to educating the cognitive, physical, and social-emotional domains of the whole child involves developing systems that promote play as the learning tool to achieve academic and social outcomes. After exploring how Liliana creates conditions

for children to engage and learn through play, the case study focuses on how the habits and processes of close observation of children help Liliana develop theories of understanding about each individual learner. The practice and process of looking closely at children, a staple of the Bank Street approach, informs Liliana's instruction. The case study concludes with a nuanced portrait of a day in Liliana's classroom that is infused with her commentary and reflections about children, curriculum, and the central and enduring role of her Bank Street preparation in her practice.



“Play as the Work of Little Ones”: The Centrality of Play in the Developmental-Interaction Approach

*“La lechuza,
la lechuza
hace shhhhh
hace shhhhh,
¿Cómo la lechuza?
¿Cómo la lechuza?
hace shhhhh
hace shhhhh.”*

Liliana sits on the rug, beating bongos and leading the students in this Argentine children’s song as they make their way from early-morning activities to the meeting area. Once everyone is gathered in a circle, Liliana hits a few more beats, gradually fading out the drumming sound, signaling a transition to the meeting’s opening.

Next to Liliana stands an easel that holds a pocket chart. On the left-hand side of each row of the chart is an icon that represents each of the activity centers in the classroom: blocks, writing, puppets, water table, painting, and more. Next to each of the activity center icons is a number card.

Liliana calls one of her students to join her at the head of the circle. Gina, wearing a long-sleeve flower-print shirt, stands and walks over to the easel. Liliana then asks Gina how many children are allowed at each of the centers.

As Gina begins calling out the centers and reading the numbers, other students start to chime in with voices louder than hers.

“I can’t hear Gina, because everyone’s saying the numbers!” Jessie calls out.

“You’re right!” Liliana nods to Jessie, and then looks dramatically to Gina. The students refocus their attention to Liliana and Gina.

“Let’s take turns,” Gina suggests. “I’ll say it first and then everyone can say the numbers.” Gina proceeds to read the numbers aloud. She then looks to the class and says, “Your turn.” Gina points to each number and guides the class in a choral reading.

Liliana, beaming, turns to the group and asks, “Did that work?”

Everyone exclaims, “Yes!”

Liliana then looks at Gina, cueing her to sit in a chair by the easel and hold a basket full of small squares that have students’ headshots on them.

“Jamie.”

“Rose.”

“Eli.”

“Raul.”

As Gina calls out names, her peers go up to take their pictures and place them in the pocket chart hanging on the easel. They put their headshots next to the icons signaling the center at which they would like to go for work time. During work-time, students engage in play activities aimed at fostering their holistic development, including cognitive, physical, and social–emotional.

The room begins to fill with the buzz of active and engaged children, as a number of activities commence simultaneously:

- Several students pull out stethoscopes and imagine that they are doctors.*
- Some children use plastic shovels and buckets to figure out how they can drain water out of the water table.*
- Two girls draw an intricate outdoor scene with markers on a giant sheet of Plexiglas.*
- A group of students standing at a rectangular table sing together, “Everybody dance now,” as they paint watercolor portraits of sea life, as part of the class’s extended Shore Study.*
- At the block activity center, two girls begin stacking rectangular blocks to create a large structure.*

The energy is high as students joyfully interact with each other during work time. Children are free to move their picture to a different center whenever they want, so long as they do not exceed the number of students allowed at each station.

Liliana and Yazmin regard work time as an essential component of their kindergarten curriculum. It is not the only time play occurs within the curriculum, but it is also a sacred time set aside each day when students know they will be able to make independent choices, pursue particular interests, and let their imaginations run free. After completing the program at Bank Street College, Liliana knew she wanted to work at a “school that really values play, and sees play as the work of little ones, and gives you that freedom in your classroom to really use play as a learning tool.” She describes play as being at the “core of [her] actual practice since [she] started.”

According to Franklin (2000), developmental-interaction thinking as put into practice by the founders of Bank Street is

grounded in a theory of the developing child. In addition, educational practice was informed by an implicit theory of symbolization—namely, the idea that recasting experience in symbolic form (as in play) is not only a matter of expression but a prime means for consolidating, extending, and creating knowledge...Psychoanalytic thinking, primarily in the form of ego psychology, emphasized the functions of play as a pathway for personal expression and growth, a means for gaining emotional insight and resolving conflict. (pp. 47–48)

Bank Street describes a current course on play techniques in the following way:

Bank Street College promotes childhood play as a critical component of all children’s development. Play is a child’s primary mode of expression and of learning about the world. In this course, a variety of play techniques are introduced, such as child-centered play and the Floortime approach. Participants explore and practice techniques that promote self-regulation, self-esteem, mastery, and social, emotional, and cognitive development in typically developing children, as well as in children with special needs. This course is appropriate for general and special education teachers, parents, caregivers, child life specialists, social workers, therapists, and counselors. (Bank Street College, 2014d)

Because play helps young children develop intellectually as well as socially and emotionally, it has always been a central component to the developmental-interaction approach. Children can use play to create their own worlds where they practice

expressing their individual narratives and working out conflicts. As Anne Tobias, who teaches four- and five-year-olds at the Bank Street School for Children, explains when engaged in play “children can actively try out their thoughts and feelings in a way that seems real or almost real in the moment but exists with an understood degree of separation from reality” (Tobias, 2014).

This idea that play is a safe space where students can learn about themselves, their peers, and the world on both an intellectual and socio-emotional level inspires Liliana to see play as, “what [children] do; it’s like their work.” From her early days as a graduate student at Bank Street and while teaching preschool for five years after earning her master’s degree, she discovered that through play “children develop socially, cognitively...it helped children problem-solve. There are so many areas that play just supports the growth in all of these different developmental areas.”

The Making of a Developmentally Oriented Teacher

Liliana’s appreciation for a developmentally oriented, whole-child approach to teaching began during her days as an undergraduate at New York University (NYU). As a childhood education major she encountered child-centered educators who valued and supported Liliana’s desires to deeply understand “little ones,” as she tenderly refers to her kindergarten students. This was the case particularly in her school field placement experience.

While at NYU, Liliana’s first student teaching placement was at BNS, where she currently teaches. The student teaching placements in her program at NYU typically lasted one semester each, with students serving two placements at different schools. Liliana, however, deeply connected with BNS’s emphasis on child-centered teaching and learning. She pleaded with her supervisor to let her stay an additional semester as a student teacher at BNS. Her request was granted, and Liliana spent the entire year at BNS.

BNS has extensive connections to Bank Street College. The school’s first director, Paul Schwartz, a Bank Street alumnus, helped align BNS’s academic program with the Bank Street approach to developmentally-oriented, progressive education. In the 2013–2014 academic year, 20 of the 36 BNS faculty and staff members held degrees from the Bank Street. The school leaders are often drawn to hire teachers with Bank Street degrees because they feel that those teachers are likely to understand the inquiry-oriented, project-based, progressive approach of BNS. Each year, BNS also supports a number of student teachers from Bank Street. The faculty and staff at BNS speak highly of their close ties to the College and its developmental-interaction approach to teaching and learning.

Liliana first heard about Bank Street in one of her classes at NYU when a friend shared about her experiences at Bank Street’s Graduate School of Education. Liliana

decided to look into the school for getting her master's degree after she graduated from college. As she explains, "the minute I stepped inside Bank Street, I kind of knew that was like a great fit for me." Much of this had to do with the college's developmental-interaction approach and its emphasis on play. Liliana enrolled in Bank Street to pursue a master's degree in early childhood special and general education. She describes her experiences at Bank Street as transformative and draws heavily from her preparation there in her current work as a classroom teacher. Liliana also speaks highly of her Bank Street advisor, who continues to be a mentor and close friend to this day.

While reflecting on her time at Bank Street, Liliana recalls focusing on the "whole child" in her courses:

Bank Street challenged me to see beyond the physical presence of the child and take a deeper look at the child's interaction with his or her environment. We used many of our sessions at Bank Street to interpret and reflect on our observations, and we spoke about possible things that we might want to try, things that we need to consider to support the whole child. We were given the opportunity to work with our advisors or with a partner or in a smaller group where we learned a lot about collaboration and talked about ways to support children across the developmental domains.

After completing her master's degree, Liliana worked at a dual-language preschool on the Upper West Side of Manhattan for five years. One of her current colleagues who also went to Bank Street then contacted Liliana in 2008 to let her know that a position had opened at BNS. Liliana has been the special education teacher in an integrated co-teaching (ICT) kindergarten classroom at BNS with Yazmin ever since. Yazmin received her BA in childhood education and MA in special education from Brooklyn College. She was a student teacher at BNS, where she "fell in love with the school and its philosophy." She worked as a full-time substitute at BNS for a year before being offered the kindergarten placement with Liliana.

Liliana is enthusiastic about her experiences at BNS and is particularly grateful that the school leadership supports the Bank Street approach:

[W]e have a principal in this school that believes in the Bank Street philosophy of progressive education and is committed to making inquiry-based and experiential learning the core of our curriculum. Her heart is in it. And I think that facilitates us being able to really get to know our students through observations, reflections. I am able to implement all the things I was taught at Bank Street about how to develop learning opportunities that promote academic and social-emotional growth.

Brooklyn New School

Founded in 1987, Brooklyn New School (BNS) is an elementary school serving approximately 650 students from pre-kindergarten through fifth grade (90 students in each grade, nearly 30 students per class). BNS shares a building with its sister middle and high school, the Brooklyn School for Collaborative Studies, founded in 2001. The student body is diverse, with the demographic composition in the 2012–2013 academic year shown in Table 1.

BNS was founded by a group of teachers and parents who wanted an alternative school in the Red Hook neighborhood of Brooklyn that adhered to the following principles (Brooklyn New School, 2014a):

A school...

- With a racial, ethnic and economic balance
- Where children [are] engaged in active learning
- Where children of different skill levels work together
- Where parents are involved in their child's education

Principal Anna Allanbrook, a graduate of Bank Street, first joined the staff at BNS in 1987 as a substitute teacher—the year the school first opened. Back then, a teacher-director, instead of a principal, typically led alternative schools. As Anna explained:

I started as a sub, because I had visited the school. It was housed in Red Hook, and it was very much in its beginning stages. It had a wonderful leader named Paul Schwartz, who was the first director. In those days—that's another part of the history—schools like Brooklyn New School were started as alternative schools. And they had different rules, including they were not led by principals. They were led by teacher-directors. And so Paul Schwartz, who came out of Bank Street too...he was a teacher-director...And he hired me as a substitute. And I came with the idea that this might be a good school to send my children to.

The school serves a substantial proportion of students with special needs (approximately 25%). BNS offers two different types of experiences for special needs

Table 1. Demographic Composition of Brooklyn New School, 2012–2013

Eligible for free or reduced lunch	28%
Black/African American	29%
Hispanic or Latino	24%
Asian or Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	7%
White	38%
Multiracial	2%
Special education	29%

Note. Adapted from P.S. 146 enrollment (2012–2013) by New York State Education Department, <http://data.nysed.gov/enrollment.php?year=2013&instid=800000045176>

students. The integrated co-teaching (ICT) model is utilized in one class at each grade level. The approach is described on the school's website:

An ICT class is a general education classroom that has the full-time support of a special education teacher who helps insure that the curriculum is accessible to all. Within the ICT class, 8–12 children (40%) have been identified as having special learning needs that special education teachers are trained to address. While all teachers at BNS differentiate the curriculum to meet individual students' needs, with two teachers working together as a team, much more differentiation is possible. Whether a student needs extra help or an extra challenge, having two teachers means one will be available to meet that need. Since ICT classes benefit all children, we try to make sure that every child is placed in an ICT class at least once during their time at BNS. (Brooklyn New School, 2014b)

Liliana and Yazmin lead the kindergarten ICT program for the school.

BNS also offers more intensive specialized programs for special needs students who are not well served in the ICT model. As explained on the school's website:

Sometimes children do not experience success in a general education classroom. They need more individualized attention or a smaller class environment. To support these children we have three special classes (grades 1/2, 3/4, 4/5) with only twelve students each, taught by special education teachers with the support of para-professionals. Wherever and whenever possible, these children join with their peers in other classes so that all students benefit from interactions with all their peers. (Brooklyn New School, 2014b)

Parents as Partners

“Families are crucial to their children's education,” reads the BNS brochure (Brooklyn New School, 2013a, p. 1). Collaboration between parents and teachers has been an essential quality of BNS since its inception. Parent volunteers fill the classrooms and halls of the school, helping the faculty and staff through what Janet, the school librarian and a graduate of Bank Street, calls its “growing stages.” In the late 1990s, Janet enrolled her son at BNS and began serving as a parent volunteer before she was hired to open the school library. According to Janet, parents and teachers working together served as the building blocks of BNS during those early years:

So at that point it was the kind of place where you rolled up your sleeves and parents just came in, and it was that collaboration between teachers. So at that point I came in. There was certainly a culture of

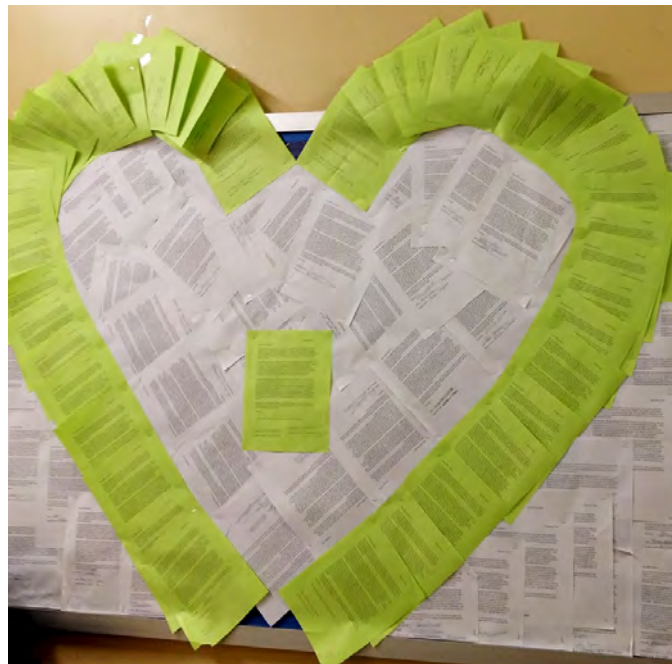
parent volunteers...working in collaboration with teachers. They were coming in. They would make curtains for the windows. They were painting benches. They were...having all these parent potlucks. So it was a very communal feel to it. Breaking bread together.

Parents continue to play an important role in the life of the school. BNS is governed by a coalition of parents and staff who meet monthly. For years, parents have served on hiring committees, participating in crucial decisions about what teachers and administrators should be brought in. The principal also expresses tremendous gratitude towards the Parent Teacher Association, which raises money to help pay “for all of the stuff that we have in the school, everything.” In recent years, parents’ voices have become instrumental in the school’s resistance to the high-stakes testing movement. BNS’s parent community was among those at the forefront of the opt-out movement. As the principal, Anna, says about testing:

I think it’s gotten so out of control in terms of it being the priority of the state. And, also because they’re now using the New York State test to evaluate teachers. That to me is very problematic. So because of that we have an opt-out movement going on in the school....It’s interesting. It’s growing. It’s a growing movement, and I imagine that we’ll have most of our fifth grade children not taking the test, many of our third grade children not taking the test, and even some of our fourth grade children [are] not taking it.

The parents’ commitment to the school’s vision for holistic, student-centered, project-based approaches to teaching and learning is evident the moment one walks into the main hallway of the school.

Prominently displayed by the entrance is a bulletin board overflowing with signed letters from families voicing their appreciation for the school’s teachers. The parents laud the curricular approach at BNS and offer their strong support and commitment to the school sustaining its progressive teaching and curriculum in the face of today’s high-stakes testing climate. The letters are printed in two colors of paper and arranged to display a white backdrop and a green heart, expressing the parents’ love and support of the BNS faculty.



To the faculty, staff, and parents at BNS, their collaborative efforts are a direct connection to the founders' vision for the school:

The Brooklyn New School is committed to academic and personal success for all students. We believe that children are creators of meaning in their own lives. They are naturally thoughtful and curious, and they work to gain understanding of the world they inhabit. When the adults who care for children foster this effort, children become lifelong learners. (Brooklyn New School, 2014a)

The Brooklyn New School Program

Children who reside in Brooklyn can apply to attend BNS by entering a competitive lottery system. Once admitted, the students engage in a child-centered, project-based academic program rooted in principles aligned with the Bank Street approach. As described in the school's mission statement posted on its website:

Brooklyn New School students master concepts as active thinkers and doers. Math, science, social studies, art and music are integrated in hands-on exploration. Children study the city, the environment, history and culture. They learn to ask questions, use tools to measure, make estimates and draw conclusions about what they see and feel. Children learn their ties to other people, to the past and to the future. They become stronger readers and writers by using reading and writing as tools to carry out their investigations.

The Brooklyn New School is a diverse learning community. Instruction is experiential and hands on with a standards based curriculum that also focuses on children's individual needs and interests. Adults model life-long learning by engaging in ongoing professional development. The governance structure assures collaboration among parents, staff and administration.

Our inquiry based curriculum enables students to problem solve and to effect change. They apply knowledge gained in school to real life situations. Students develop projects with teachers in and outside of the classroom. We are committed to education which stresses cooperation rather than competition. Classes are not tracked and there is no gifted program. (Brooklyn New School, 2014a)

Learning at BNS hinges on what the school calls its "interdisciplinary core curriculum." Each grade-level team selects a minimum of two developmentally appropriate long-term social studies or science units that serve as the primary foci for instruction across a range of content areas. The rationale for this type of curriculum is outlined in the school's brochure:

We believe that less is more, that when children study fewer topics in greater depth, they learn how to focus and they develop the work habits they will need throughout their lives. Students work alone and in groups, they collect data, do authentic research from a variety of sources and record information in many different formats. This is quite different from textbook learning in which many topics are covered in little depth and children are expected to memorize many unrelated facts (Brooklyn New School, 2013b, p. 1).

The following are typical curricular themes for each grade level:

- Pre-K: the self, family and babies; how things change
- Kindergarten: birds, dinosaurs, the shore
- First grade: green space, community
- Second grade: New York City, structures, rocks and minerals
- Third grade: history and geography of China and Africa
- Fourth grade: New York State during colonial times, Native Americans, woodland ecosystems, electricity and landforms
- Fifth Grade: Mayan culture, the Holocaust

The curriculum of BNS is sensitive to the developmental continuum of children. The youngest children at BNS begin by learning about themselves and their immediate environments. As students get older, they gradually learn about topics that are increasingly complex, abstract, and removed from their personal experiences. Literacy, math, technology, art, and other subjects are integrated into these long-term units of study. Children read and write texts that are directly related to the research they conduct in each thematic unit. The inquiry skills students develop are applied to their math Investigations curriculum. By becoming adept at technology, BNS youth are able to analyze data, present findings, and publish their writing through multimedia platforms. Students also have opportunities to express themselves and their learning through the performing and fine arts. BNS has a long-standing relationship with the Brooklyn Arts Exchange, which brings in artists-in-residence each year to help students develop artistic projects for their units of study.

BNS also has an ongoing relationship with the Emotionally Responsive Practice (ERP) program at Bank Street. ERP at Bank Street

builds on the well-documented connection between emotional well-being and learning potential to collaborate with early childhood and elementary school programs to develop emotionally responsive school routines, curriculum and adult-child interactions throughout the school day. The program provides ongoing professional development services and on-site consultation to early childhood and elementary school program collaborators. (Bank Street College of Education, 2014b)

All of the teachers who work with the early childhood grades at BNS attend the ERP workshops where they learn, among a variety of approaches, to incorporate a teddy bear unit into their curriculum. Liliana has integrated the ERP program into her kindergarten curriculum. Each of her students is given a teddy bear that is used to help the child think about and express her own emotions. As Liliana explains, the bear “serves as a tool that [the children] could use to transmit and share their curiosities or their wonderings.” At the beginning of the year, BNS kindergarteners create “bear portraits”—watercolor paintings of each child’s bear. This is part of a larger teddy bear book project that culminates in students writing books about their bears’ ages, what the bears are good at, and what would be inside their bears’ homes. Through the book project, students reflect on and share the things that are important in their own lives. The children also eventually give names to their bears, which launches a collaborative project with students’ families where the children write accounts of their own name stories.

Infused throughout BNS is an emphasis on peace education. Peace education starts in pre-kindergarten, when students actively practice conflict resolution through role-playing. In fifth grade, BNS children receive training to become mediators for conflicts that arise in the school. This prioritization of peace is evident in the school’s theme song, written by one of the Brooklyn Arts Exchange artists who has been with the school for about 20 years:

We are the children of the Brooklyn New School
We are the ones born into the belly of the beast
And if the worldwide struggle was a jigsaw puzzle
We’d be the ones holding the very last piece



Teacher's Role in a Play-Based Curriculum

“What are you working on?” Liliana gasps in amazement as she looks at the tall structure Ada and Katie are building in the block area.

“We’re building a hospital!” Ada whips her blond ponytail around as she turns to face Liliana with excitement.

“Yeah,” Katie continues, “And we named it Methodist Hospital because we both went there when we got hurt.”

“When you got hurt?” Liliana asks, crinkling her forehead in concern.

“When we got hurt outside,” Katie says.

“Oh yes, that’s right!” Liliana nods in understanding.

The girls turn back to their structure and continue to build. There are different compartments for the various rooms in the hospital. So far, the girls have made a sign-in room, a surgery room, a wheelchair room, and a waiting room.

After watching the girls for a few moments, Liliana walks over to some shelves in the back of the room. She pulls out a clear pocket folder and takes out an envelope full of students’ headshots. As she flips through the stack of photos, Liliana pulls out pictures of Ada and Katie. She then cuts out the girls’ heads in the photos and grabs two cylindrical blocks from the shelves. Ada and Katie pause for a moment to see what Liliana is doing, but then proceed to build their hospital taller and wider. Liliana tapes Ada and Katie’s headshots to the cylindrical blocks. She then comes over to the girls and tells them that she made some blocks for them so that they can be part of the hospital too. Ada and Katie beam at their teacher as they thank her. Taking her cylinder from Liliana, Ada rests the block on a rectangular bed in the surgical room, while Katie places hers in the waiting room of the hospital.

Liliana’s participation in Ada and Katie’s engagement in block building is regarded as a necessary component of children’s play and learning in the developmental-interaction approach. Franklin (2000) explains that the founders of Bank Street College championed the view that

to maximize play as an arena for the child’s learning requires the teacher’s participation. This should not be taken to mean that the teacher *plays with* the child, as some educators would have it. Rather, the teacher...*selects and arranges* the materials for play available in the classroom and outdoor play space...[,] *plans experiences* that provide material for the children’s dramatic scenarios...[, and] helps the children to *frame* their play. (p. 51)

It is therefore important that the teacher take on an active role in supporting children's growth through play. Play in Liliana's classroom is intentional in its focus on the whole child and requires much planning, structure, and careful thought about individual students. By giving Ada and Katie cylindrical blocks with the girls' faces attached to them, Liliana arranges the materials and plans an experience for the girls to include their own personal narratives into block building.

As Liliana grabs a red Moleskine notebook and a pencil, she explains that she got the idea to place students' pictures onto blocks from the "block building" course she took at Bank Street. In that class, all of the graduate students also built large structures and included themselves in the block creation. Inserting oneself into block building helps with the development of social scripts. "The children can narrate stories with the blocks and put themselves in the scenarios," Liliana noted. "They can then revisit the structures and the stories that they're constructing." For Ada and Katie, they are able to communicate about their experiences in Methodist Hospital by inserting themselves into their block building narrative. By doing so, these young builders can process meaningful, challenging experiences in order to heal from past hurts and develop their emotional health.

Block building is an integral component of two foundational early childhood courses at Bank Street College: Curriculum in Early Childhood Education (Grades N–3) and Curriculum in Early Childhood Education: Developing Learning Environments and Experiences for Children of Diverse Backgrounds and Abilities. Additionally, the College offers several courses, such as Block Building and Dramatic Play as an Integral Part of the Early Childhood Curriculum, specifically on block building as part of their graduate school, professional development, and continuing professional studies curricula (Bank Street College of Education, 2015). Those in the early childhood program learn that block building is a space where, in the words of Bank Street founder's founder, Lucy Sprague Mitchell:

everything that comes into [children's] little hands begins to move, to toot, to chug, to bark. The images gathered in firsthand experiences are getting into action. The relationships discovered through living in a particular environment are being played back. Indeed, that is what play at this stage is—a reliving of experiences. (Mitchell, 1934/2001, p. 13)

Liliana sits down by the block area and takes notes on the girls in her Moleskine notebook. She continues to observe Ada and Katie as they build their hospital. Jermaine, a small boy in a blue collared shirt, walks over to the blocks and starts to pace nearby. He seems to be looking for a way to enter the girls' play. Liliana walks over to him and whispers in his ear. Jermaine then faces Ada and asks, "How can I help?"

Ada and Katie look around their structure. Katie passes Jermaine a rectangular block and responds, "Here, you can make a parking lot."

"Great idea!" Liliana interjects. "Jermaine, think about what blocks you'll need to make a parking lot." He pauses for a moment, staring at the shelf full of blocks. Jermaine then walks over to the shelf and starts pulling out cylindrical, triangular, and rectangular blocks to begin building.

After observing Jermaine trying to enter Ada and Katie's play, Liliana steps in to give him some guidance on how he can do so. She scaffolds for Jermaine the linguistic tools he needs to enter the play, and then helps him sustain his participation by prompting him to consider what blocks he might need to build a parking lot. Liliana supports Jermaine's development of social and problem-solving skills during this moment of play. Once she facilitates entry, however, Liliana steps back again so that the children can have the freedom to explore their worlds and their selves, building independence and interdependence with just the right level of support and intervention by their teacher to foster their growth and development.

As work time starts to come to a close, Liliana goes over to the group once more and asks the builders if they want to clean up their hospital or would rather leave it to keep working on it tomorrow.

"We want to leave it," Ada says, looking at her peers who nod at her.

"How could we tell everyone that we're coming back to this tomorrow?" Liliana asks the children.

Ada, Katie, and Jermaine look at each other with puzzled expressions. "Maybe we could make signs! And Ada could tell everyone," Katie suggests.

"Let's tell together," Ada says.

"Ok, you have one minute to make a sign that lets everyone else know that you're leaving the blocks," Liliana smiles to the group and then signals for the entire class to quiet down and look at her.

Liliana waits until everyone freezes before she explains that the block-building group has an announcement to make. Ada, Katie, and Jermaine stand up and step out of the block area. They tell the class that they are going to continue building their hospital.

Liliana scans the room and says to the children, "Should we put their blocks away?"

A chorus of students replies, "No!"

"Because they're still building it," Jessie offers as she pushes up her glasses and

squints to examine the block structure standing several feet to her right. Liliana then prompts the class to begin cleaning up their work time stations.

The block builders go over to a table with paper, pencils, and tape at hand. They begin making signs that have the word “STOP” written above a pair of eyes that seem to tell others to look before they move any farther. When they are done making their signs, Ada, Katie, and Jermaine tape them all around their block structure. The next day, they will continue to construct their elaborate hospital, which will eventually have cars in the parking lot, patients getting X-rays and casts in the X-ray room, doctors standing in the surgery room, and plastic figures sitting in the waiting rooms that have been separated by old versus young patients.

For the children in Liliana’s class, play is an opportunity for them to grow as citizens in a democratic classroom. Work time is a safe space for them to test their knowledge, develop interaction skills, express themselves, and practice independence. The block builders in Liliana’s class interact with each other to share their personal narratives, explore other possible narratives, and learn a sense of responsibility for their creation. Other activities offer similar opportunities: dramatic play, the arts, writing, and others. Moreover, Liliana is helping students create the community they wish to live in and the skills necessary to do so. Blocks are one important form of material for expression and growth for young learners, because as Mitchell (1934/2001) wrote:

Kindergarten and first graders express themselves through play. Not play which is merely a pastime, but play which is constructive and leads through progressive stages of relationship-thinking. This kind of play needs free or raw materials which can take the impress of the user. The best of all adaptable materials seems to be blocks. (p. 16)

Children’s block creations therefore have deep value, seen in the way Liliana’s students long to preserve their structure. The blocks have symbolic form, giving the students a medium for:

- “imagining what might be, as well as for organizing and consolidating knowledge”;
- relating with their environment as “active inquirer[s]” who “must be provided with materials carefully selected and arranged to encourage the exploration and discovery that lead to genuine understanding”; and
- encouraging interpersonal collaboration and negotiation, from “learning to share materials, to collaborative building and the planning and enactment of extended dramas,” so children are “encouraged to work cooperatively and to see themselves not only as individuals but as members of a group” (Franklin, 2000, p. 54).

Play, through blocks or other media, is critical to students' learning, intellectually, socially, and emotionally.

Creating space for students to play freely is not always easy in the confines of our modern-day urban schools. As Franklin (2000) put it, “[S]pace is another important component of the play medium....[T]ransformations of space are central to the play process. A corner of the room or space under a desk becomes a cave; an area of the floor becomes a river” (p. 60). While observing students and taking notes during work time, Liliana repeatedly says to herself, “It’s the space; it’s the space.” She and Yazmin move tables out of the way so that pretend play and block building can spread out more, but Liliana is still dissatisfied with the amount of physical room the children have to engage in play. “I think because of like the space limitation in the classroom,” she explained. “Work in play or playtime can’t be expanded to as much as we would want it to be...So just going back to that course of block building, I wish we had more, more space to—for block building.”

Having limited space to Liliana means children are also limited in their creativity. Liliana’s frustration with the constraints of physical space in her classroom is indicative of her belief that play is central to children’s intellectual and social growth. It is through fostering play that she feels she can reach her personal goals as a teacher:

[To] develop their social and emotional skills. To help them realize that they’re problem-solvers at this age. To help them see the importance of working with a partner, working in a small group, the collaboration, I would say...Being able to try things when you’re upset... Acquiring those techniques, those strategies when you come across a problem. I think these are skills that you won’t master in kindergarten, but you will need throughout your life...And I would say it’s so important for me as a teacher in this classroom to work on that.

Playing to Learn

“Eenie meenie sicileeny;

Oom bah thumbalini;

Achi gachi Liberache;

I love you!”

Ramya and Nina sing as they play this hand game, waiting for Liliana to join them at the round table. Liliana walks over with Jimmy by her side. As Jimmy takes his seat next to Nina, Liliana brings a stack of cards over to the table. She sits at the

round table across from the students. Ramya and Nina are still playing their game, and Jimmy is resting his head against his stretched out left arm as if it were a pillow.

“Ok, let’s hit the brakes,” Liliana whispers as she mimes pulling the hand brake on a car. Jimmy sits up in his chair, and the girls stop their game to look forward at their teacher.

“Take three deep breaths. Ten squeezes on each arm.” The students follow Liliana’s directions and actions, calming themselves down with these refocusing exercises. “Now, check your brains, that they’re on just right,” Liliana encourages. “We need our brains to think.” The students have serious expressions on their faces as they rub the sides of their heads, gathering their attention and focus.

Liliana then sits up and looks alert. The students follow her lead. Liliana moves the stack of cards to the center of the table. She then gives each child a large sheet of paper. On this sheet is a rectangular chart that has cells filled with either a letter of the alphabet or a picture of an object. The cards at the center of the table also have either a letter of the alphabet or a picture of an object on them. Students are supposed to take turns pulling a card from the stack. If they select a letter card, it should be placed on the cell with an image of an object that starts with that letter; if they select a picture card, it should be placed on a cell that has the first letter of that object in it.

“Now remember, when you take a card, take time to think, and then share the letter with us.” She nods to Ramya who leans forward to grab a card. Ramya turns the card over to reveal a picture of a stick of gum. She scrunches her forehead and bites her bottom lip, unsure of what to say.

“It’s a lighter!” Nina suggests.

“Hmm. Can I take a closer look?” Liliana asks. Ramya nods to Liliana who then picks up the card to see the picture right side up. “Ah! This reminds me of when I visit my grandpa. He always has something that I can chew and blow bubbles with.”

“Gum!” Ramya exclaims, beaming with excitement. “When I go horseback riding every Thursday, my teacher chews gum. Gum starts with ‘G.’”

Liliana then nods to Ramya, who proceeds to make a grabbing motion with her hands as she says, “guh, guh, guh.” Nina and Jimmy follow Ramya and also make the motion and sound for the letter “G.” Ramya then places the gum picture card on top of the letter “G” on the sheet in front of her. Jimmy pretends to chew gum as Ramya finishes her turn.

Liliana, Ramya, and Jimmy all shift their focus to Nina. Nina squints at the stack of cards. Nina rests her chin on her fists, which are clenched firm and look glued to the table. She then slowly leans forward to grab a card. Nina is still squinting as though trying to look through the stack to see what she will pick. She pulls the card off from the top of the stack and places it face-up on the table. "It's a lock," she says. Nina then looks at Liliana expectantly. Jimmy looks down at his own sheet, seemingly looking for the letter that corresponds to Nina's picture. Ramya squirms in her seat as though she is trying to keep herself from bursting out the answer.

"Here, let's go through the word that Nina just said together. Llll...Abhh...Ckkk..." Liliana puts out her hands and guides her students through the motions and sounds of each syllable in the word as she pronounces it slowly, exaggerating each sound. BNS has been using this system of associating phonemes with movements to help their younger students with letter-sound agreement.

"Let's do it with a really slow engine first." Liliana and the children make the motions and sounds in slow motion three times. "Ok, now a really fast engine!" The children smile and giggle as they make the motions and sounds in high speed, again three times. "Now a just-right engine." This time, the group does the same motion and sounds, but at a medium tempo.

Nina confidently exclaims, "'L! 'L' is for lock!" Liliana winks at Nina who places her picture card over the letter "L" on her sheet.

Next up is Jimmy. Without hesitation, Jimmy leans over to grab a card. When he turns the card over he frowns as he stares at the letter "H". Jimmy looks up towards the top of a high shelf as if trying to find the answer among the supplies sitting there. He then looks around in a few more places.

"I can see Jimmy's brain is working so hard. He's really taking his time and thinking about that letter," Liliana encourages Jimmy.

After a few more moments, Jimmy turns to Nina and Ramya and says, "I need help." Nina turns to look at Ramya, who then makes the sound and motion for the letter "H". "H"! Jimmy says, smiling.

"Yeah!" Nina and Ramya both nod at Jimmy, who takes the letter card and starts hovering it over his sheet. His smile is gone as he concentrates to figure out where the card should go.

"I think our friend could use some more help!" Liliana says as she smiles at Jimmy. Liliana leans over the table and points at the pictures on Jimmy's sheet. As she points to each picture, Jimmy says what each image shows.

“Door. Ball. Food,” Jimmy says.

“Ah, yes. That is a kind of food!” Liliana exclaims. “But let’s think, what kind of food could that be? Maybe something we put in our sandwiches?”

“Ham?” Jimmy asks. Liliana’s eyes widen as she looks at Jimmy with enthusiasm. “Ham!” Jimmy says with more confidence. “‘H’ is for ham.” He then places the letter card over the picture of ham on his sheet.

The students continue playing this game until their entire sheets are full. They use the motions and sounds, as well as other clues to help one another figure out all of the letters. For the letter “B”, Jimmy pretends to hold a baseball bat as he says, “‘B’ is for bat.” For the letter “C”, Nina guides her classmates to mime opening a bag of cookies before leading them in the sound and motion for that letter.

When the game is done, Liliana leans back in her chair and looks at her three students with an expression of wonder. “Great whole body listening. I could see you working so hard!” she exclaims. Ramya, Nina, and Jimmy smile at their teacher. They then help Liliana clean up all the cards and line up to join the rest of their class for lunch.

For Liliana, play and academic learning go hand in hand, as play is deeply connected to her students’ cognitive development. Throughout the day, students in Liliana’s classroom are offered opportunities to work directly with relevant academic content—be it literacy, math, science, social studies, or the arts—in playful and engaging ways. As she explains, it is not only during work time that children engage in play in her class:

Play isn’t only happening during work time. It’s happening throughout the day, especially when children are engaged in academic tasks. I feel like during morning station time, when we have Play-Doh out and when we have Popsicle sticks, that’s play. I feel like when we have writing, that becomes play. Over at [the] “songs and poems” table, children are asked to cut and glue a new poem or song to their notebooks. That also becomes play. We use poems and songs to play with language, and we encourage children to take on detective roles as we “hunt” for familiar words and rhyming words. We’ll even give out magnifying glasses or props to help with the task or whatever it is we might be encouraging them to do. So I feel like play is ongoing.

Liliana sees play as far more than unfettered free-choice time and tries to incorporate an element of play into almost everything her students do. She believes that play is an essential vehicle for children’s growth and development that facilitates children’s academic learning, as well as their social and emotional wellbeing.

In Liliana’s view, children learn how to problem-solve through play. They can resolve social conflicts and discover academic strategies through play-based learning activities, as evident in her phonics session with Ramya, Nina, and Jimmy. Liliana creates a space with the picture and letter card game for the students to playfully explore letter–sound relationships. With a positive affect and a joyful spirit, the students interact with each other and with their teacher to develop academic skills and simultaneously learn to rely on one another to problem-solve. Jimmy, for instance, does not look to Liliana for help when he is stuck on the letter “H”. He instead turns to Nina and Ramya, who are more than eager to assist their peer. In this way, Jimmy’s development is being fostered and supported across several domains, as he playfully engages in an academic activity that helps further his cognitive thinking as well as his social and linguistic skills.

The view that play and academic learning go hand in hand is often contested in this era of high-stakes testing and the accompanying intensive focus on a narrow range of academic skills. In a *New York Times* op-ed, Bank Street College President Shael Polakow–Suransky and faculty member Nager commented on the recent push to replace play in early childhood classrooms with skill-focused academic tasks. They wrote:

Worried teachers talk about how the pressure to achieve good outcomes on the third-grade state exams has been trickling down to early childhood classrooms in the form of work sheets, skill drills and other developmentally inappropriate methods....

We do not need to pick between play and academic rigor.

While grown-ups recognize that pretending helps children find their way into the world, many adults think of play as separate from formal learning. The reality is quite different. As they play, children develop vital cognitive, linguistic, social and emotional skills. They make discoveries, build knowledge, experiment with literacy and math and learn to self-regulate and interact with others in socially appropriate ways. Play is also fun and interesting, which makes school a place where children look forward to spending their time. It is so deeply formative for children that it must be at the core of our early childhood curriculum. (Polakow–Suransky & Nager, 2014)

Because play and academic rigor are not separate in Liliana’s class, her students enjoy school and develop a love of learning. This is an important goal to Liliana, who hopes

that at the end of the day [the children are] happy and they want to come back and they’re enjoying their experience. I think that’s the

most important part, is them really having a good time and that love for school and the love for books and just that joyful learning.

Throughout the day, students move from activity to activity with genuine enthusiasm and focus. When on the rug for a mini-lesson, students seem mesmerized as they listen to their teacher speak. This hush becomes an excited buzz in the room whenever the children engage in independent or group work. In Liliana's view, her students love learning because they are "using play to work."



Learning and Teaching through Careful Observation

“What can we play?” Liliana asks a group of five students—Christy, Larry, Darla, Dennis, and Nina—while holding a small whiteboard.

As she begins to write the words “Play Plan” on the whiteboard, Christy offers, “We can have a mommy! Can I write my name for mommy?” Larry and Nina nod at Christy, who writes her name next to the word “mommy” that Liliana has written on the board in blue dry-erase marker.

Larry rests his head on his fist and says, “How about ‘D’,’ D’ for doctor?” Liliana writes “doctor” on the board.

“Yeah! And ‘D’ for daddy!” Nina says, turning to Larry with a smile.

“Or ‘D’ for Darla and ‘D’ for Dennis!” Darla joins in on the excitement of coming up with characters that could start with the letter “D”.

“You’re really thinking about that letter,” Liliana says to the children with one hand on her waist and an earnest look on her face. “How did you guys get so good at being detectives?”

Darla replies, “We took out our detective eye,” as she smiles coyly.

“I don’t like doctors,” Nina says looking warily at the stethoscope that Larry has pulled out from a plastic bin full of materials for pretend play. The students start to share reasons why they don’t like doctors, the most popular reason being that they give shots.

“Let’s build a house!” Dennis suggests.

“Let’s use the hollow blocks to build a house,” Liliana says in response to Dennis’s idea. “I see this open space here.” The children walk over to a large shelf against the wall and begin carrying the hollow blocks over to an open space between two tables.

Once the students are launched into their play, Liliana grabs her red Moleskin notebook, a pencil, and her coffee. She sits on the floor and observes the students as they engage in pretend play, taking notes about the things she observes. Every now and then, she inserts herself in the play and participates. When Larry brings a large plastic syringe over to Liliana and puts the tip against her arm, Liliana calls out, “Oh, the doctor’s looking for a patient!” Hearing this, Dennis and Nina rush over

to Larry to tell him that the dad is sick. Larry then begins examining Dennis, while Darla pulls out other materials from the shelves to use for this imaginary scenario. Liliana continues to record notes as she observes the children.

Closely observing children is an important part of Liliana’s daily practice. For her, observations during play are particularly significant because they provide a window into her students’ lives and help her see the world from their eyes. Liliana first learned to value close observation of children during her time at Bank Street. She described the in-depth observations of children she regularly made as part of her coursework at Bank Street. Liliana explained, “It really gave us a chance to really experience what some of these little ones might be going through, and also, as an observer, to just step back and have all these areas in mind and these possible things that you might want to try, and also the space to just try out, it just never ends.”

Haberman (2000) in the book chapter “Learning to Look Closely at Children: A Necessary Tool for Teachers” explains that careful observation of children was a “priority for Bank Street teachers and researchers from the start” (p. 203). She writes that “teaching requires an understanding and appreciation of a child as a unique individual,” which calls for “learning to look directly and carefully at the children in her own classroom” so as to enhance “a teacher’s ability to make appropriate curricular choices” (p. 204). Such careful observation involves detailed recording of notes full of vivid language, ongoing reflection that allows teachers to make tentative hypotheses, and grappling with assumptions as teachers interpret students’ behavior to draw conclusions about the data gathered. These are all important skills that Liliana reported having learned during her time at Bank Street, where “every single course had that [observational] component to it.”

Mitchell believed that observing students made it possible for teachers to have child-centered instruction that was guided by moves students made and interests they expressed. Mitchell (1934/2001) writes about an observer–teacher, “She gathers this information in order to place the children in strategic positions for making explorations...in order to use her environment as a laboratory” (p. 16).

Liliana’s observations help her strategically insert herself in the children’s play so as to enhance their playful experimentation in the classroom laboratory. She described the act of observing children as being one way that her students can participate in organizing their own learning, as she uses notes from her observations to make shifts in her practice. She explained:

I would say one thing I usually do during my [students’] play is I really sit and observe and take notes. During playtime I wear two hats. I take on the role of the observer and facilitator, where I’ll sit and observe

and take notes. And then I sometimes see myself as like a wandering shadow, picking and choosing when to step in and when to step out, which is not easy. When is it appropriate to jump in? And when can they be left to develop their own play? This is a skill that I continue to work on and that requires practice. But I make my decisions by observing, and if I see a pattern, we try to create space to talk about it—what worked, what didn't work.

Liliana regularly uses her observation notes and reflections to shape and sharpen her instructional plans and her interactions with students and parents. This process is an essential feature of her professional repertoire.

Gordon, who is wearing a green jersey, turns over a number card with the number 17 written on it. He sighs as he picks up his pencil. Gordon starts to draw dots on a "10 frames" worksheet but stops when he gets to seven. (A 10 frames worksheet has two grids, each with two rows of five cells.) Liliana leans over the table to meet Gordon at eye level. "Here, help me count out loud." Gordon and Liliana count to seven together with Gordon pointing to each dot, but he again freezes. Liliana leans back in her chair and observes him to see what he will do next. Gordon puts his hand on his forehead, clearly struggling.

Liliana then puts a stack of heart-shaped stickers in front of him. "Let's try counting with these." Gordon picks up the stickers and begins peeling off the small hearts one by one. He places each on a square on his 10 frame and counts to 10. He pauses, seemingly stuck about what comes next. "I see you really thinking about that number," Liliana says as she places in front of Gordon a number line made with Unifix cubes, which will allow him to count up to 20. They count to 10 together on the number line. When Gordon sees that 11 follows 10, he continues to place the heart-shaped stickers on his 10 frames worksheet until he gets to 17. Liliana gives Gordon a loud high-five and tells him, "You can move on to a book." As Gordon pushes his chair out and stands up to go pick a book from the classroom library, Liliana takes his paper and writes notes on it.

For each of the five children in her math group that day, Liliana jots down notes on what that child worked on, what was challenging, what went well, what system worked (e.g., drawing dots versus stickers), and what the child needs to keep working on. These careful observations of children guide her future planning for each student in math. She determines what types of problems and materials she needs to prepare for the next time she works with the children based on her observational notes.

Note-taking is particularly important in the observation process, as it provides time for reflection. As Liliana explains, "When you observe kids in the dramatic play or pretend, or throughout the day, and you make your observations, then you also

have to leave some time to think about what you observed.” While reflecting, teachers begin to notice patterns in their students’ behavior and can come to understand them on a deeper level. Liliana recalls a time in her preschool teaching experience when she looked over her notes from observing one young girl. She realized that the girl’s play became repetitive. She would play out the same sequence over and over again where an imaginary person would ring her doorbell holding boxes for delivery. The girl would be the only one in her playgroup who was allowed to go out to get the boxes and bring them inside. Liliana explains, “There was something about that theme that spoke to me, that it was a way of communicating with me. It was a way of communicating with the world that she was tackling and working through something.”

Liliana decided to bring in the child’s mother to talk with her about the student’s play. She learned in that meeting that the student’s mother was a single parent who often ordered things online because she worked long hours and did not have much time to go shopping. Whenever a delivery arrived at the house, the mother told the child to wait upstairs, while she went down five flights of stairs to get the package. Liliana realized that for the child

there was always this kind of curiosity and anxiety about what or who was behind the door. She actually wanted to be the one that opened the door. When I shared this with her mother and heard about the child’s home life, I could understand why she was choosing to act out this scenario. It really made sense. She seemed to be wondering about, “What happens when Mommy opens the door? What do you say? What do you do? What’s inside the box?”

Liliana was then able to better understand the student’s play and could provide materials to make the child’s imaginary deliveries more like the ones her mother received at home. In this way, observing children, particularly during play, helps Liliana guide students in resolving their emotional conflicts. Like the founders of Bank Street, Liliana regards this as a crucial reason why play is so central to her classroom. As described by Franklin (2000), through careful observation and response, play can serve to provide “a prime path for working through, mastering, and potentially resolving inner conflicts” and can be as “important as the functions of learning about the world, and the self in relation to others” (p. 57).

Close observation also helps teachers work more productively and collaboratively with families, which is another important element of the developmental-interaction approach. Wasow (2000) draws connections between the family systems theory and the developmental-interaction approach to offer another lens for viewing how this approach applies to schools. The family systems perspective

sees the child moving between at least two powerful worlds: the world of home and the world of school. Each system has its own rules,

rituals, norms, language, goals, and objectives, and it is most often the child who becomes the message bearer between the two systems. A systems approach to [problem-solving] shifts the relationship between family and school from alienated or adversarial to one characterized by collaboration and cooperation (Wasow, 2000, p. 276).

Wasow goes on to explain that collaboration between these two systems is essential in supporting children's academic achievement and socio-emotional health. Home-school interactions are therefore critical for the developmental-interaction approach.

Liliana understands the importance of collaborating with families to better serve the whole child. Her close observations of children are central to this collaborative work.

In addition to her close observations of children at school, Liliana reaches out to families to hear about their observations of the child at home. This interaction between home and school deepens her understanding of who that child is and how they engage the world:

That's one of the ways in which we'll share with parents. First, we'll want to hear, "What are you seeing at home when you're sitting at the table, or when you take your child to the playground, or when your child is having playtime at home?" Or "What are you seeing when it's cleanup time at home?" So we start by asking parents to share some of their routines, which might be related to the routines we have here. And then we talk about whether they might be seeing the same things we're seeing. "What do you try at home? What are some of the things that work at home? What are some of the things that you have tried that you haven't felt successful with?"

By talking openly about observations made at home and at school, Liliana fosters partnering relationships with her students' families. To serve the whole child beyond the walls of the classroom, Liliana and the families use their combined observations to develop a deeper understanding of how to support the children both at school and at home.

Long-Term Studies: Teaching Children to Learn Through Careful Observation, Research, and Extended Exploration

While Liliana believes that she as a teacher needs to be a careful observer, she also values teaching children to develop their own observation skills. Observation and reflection are central components of the curriculum in Liliana's classroom. Throughout the year, the children practice observation skills while engaging in the Bird Study and Shore Study, two extended explorations at the core of the kindergarten curriculum. At the beginning of each study, Liliana's children leave their kindergarten classroom to go out to parks or beaches and observe the environment. They sit and sketch what they observe. They then bring those observations back to the classroom and integrate what they have seen into their play, their writing, their reading, and other curricular areas. For Liliana, these observational activities give students an opportunity to explore and make sense of the world around them, while building foundational skills to support them as life-long learners and makers of meaning.

This follows Mitchell's (1934/2001) vision for the classroom being a laboratory where children can make observations, reflect, and experiment with their learning. Mitchell saw this type of experimentation as going hand in hand with teachers' observations of students. She explains that as students interact with their environment through careful observation and experimentation,

there will be a steady growth in relationship-thinking. And this growth [the teacher] will watch with all her senses....For she will probably come to feel that the kind of things which the children observe...and the kind of use they make of their observations is the most valid indication of maturity. (p. 16)

Children demonstrate how they mature from their observations through various expressions of themselves in their studio-laboratory classroom. In this process of observing, reflecting, and creating, children come to have a deeper understanding of themselves, others, and the world.

Four students follow Liliana into the classroom and rush over to the round table by the back of the room. They have just returned from a short walk to explore some of the birdhouses on display in the kindergarten hallway. Some volunteer parents built model birdhouses for the kindergarten students to examine before they begin

creating their own birdhouses. When they reach the back of the room, two students grab some supplies from the pile of materials sitting by the sink area. Two other students, Brian and Ella, take their seats at the round table and flip through a white binder that is filled with pictures of different types of birdhouses. Liliana comes and kneels down next to them.

“What is something you noticed from all the birdhouses you saw this morning?” she asks the students.

“Umm.” Brian looks up towards the ceiling as he thinks, his blond bangs slightly parting as his head tilts back. Ella continues to look at the pictures in the binder. “They weren’t the same size,” Brian says.

“They weren’t the same shape.” Ella looks up from the binder and faces Liliana.

“They weren’t the same size. They weren’t the same shape. And Jessie noticed that they didn’t have the same size holes,” Liliana says pointing to the birdhouse in the picture in front of Ella. She seems to be referring to an earlier conversation the students had while looking at the birdhouses.

“Some of them were cardboard,” Brian adds.

“Oh!” Liliana beams at Brian. “Any other ideas for how they were different?”

“Some of them were on the floor,” says Brian.

“Any ideas why they were there?” Liliana asks. The two students pause to think for a moment.

Ella’s eyes widen as she says, “Maybe it was their choice.” Brian nods.

“Hmm.” Liliana makes a pensive expression. “Anything else we noticed about birdhouses?”

Ella looks in the direction of the classroom door, as if trying to see the birdhouses that she knows are out in the hallway. “Oh, some of them were made of wood.”

Liliana guides the students to look at a few more pictures in the binder. “Do you have any idea what this could be?” she asks the children while pointing at one of the birdhouses in the binder.

“Grass!” Ella exclaims as she places her finger on a picture of a birdhouse that seems to be covered in grass.

“Grass!” Liliana mirrors Ella’s enthusiasm. “Why do you think it could be grass?”

Brian and Ella look at each other with serious expressions as they contemplate this question. “Do they eat it? Maybe that’s why they keep it on their house?” Brian offers.

“Or maybe they, like those ones on the floor. Maybe they want to look like grass ‘cause they’re on the floor,” Ella suggests, pointing down at the floor, her long sleeve falling and covering her hand.

“It could be they want it to be soft. Sometimes I sit in the grass with my brother ‘cause it’s soft.” Brian smiles as he looks off into space seemingly picturing himself sitting in the grass with his brother.

“I see you both thinking so hard about the outside of this birdhouse!” Liliana exclaims as she grabs a wooden birdhouse sitting by the sink. “You’re now going to think about the outside of your birdhouse.” Liliana places the birdhouse down on the round table and gives Brian and Ella each a sheet of paper from the shelf behind her. She prompts them to write their names.

As they do so, Brian asks, “What is the outside?”

“The outside,” Liliana explains, “is the part of the birdhouse that you can see. Here, I want you to touch the outside of this birdhouse.” Liliana picks up the birdhouse and holds it in front of Brian. “Touch all the parts that you can see.” Brian runs his hand along the outside of the birdhouse. When he is finished, Liliana moves to the side and holds the birdhouse in front of Ella, who also touches all sides of the birdhouse’s exterior. The students then begin to draw their birdhouses on their sheets of paper.

Liliana’s class is in the early stages of the Bird Study, which is an extended integrated studies unit undertaken by the kindergarten classes at BNS. Extended integrated studies units are a hallmark of the Bank Street approach, commonly employed by Bank Street graduates, especially at Bank Street–affiliated schools such as BNS. Liliana inherited a version of this study when she began teaching at BNS, but she and her grade-level partners adapt and adjust the curriculum each year. She explained that kindergarteners start the school year with a Bird Study because it is something the students can relate and connect to, and explore in their local community: “We wanted to choose something that the kids would get a chance to see up closely; that they see that’s part of their environment outside from school.” She described the Bird Study as a prime opportunity for students to develop their observational skills:

We start off with birds generally, and then we zoom in to pigeons.
We go on nature walks. We study the different morphs of pigeons.



We tally-mark how many pigeons they're seeing outside. Then we come back and we focus on the different kinds of feet and different kinds of beaks. We ask how these might help the different birds. This is all tied in with the field trips that we go on to Prospect Park, the zoo, where we look at these birds. So we are trying to connect what was introduced in the classroom with what you're seeing outside of the classroom.

Then we talk about, "What happens to the pigeons in the winter? Do they hibernate? Do they migrate? Do they stay in Brooklyn?" Every year we try different ways to encourage our little ones to be creative and use their imaginations, but also to engage in observational drawing and sketches, which we use when we're going on field trips. This year we tried to get them to think about the outside of the house and to think about materials, and then we'll think about the inside: "What are some of the things inside you might want to include?"

The conversation that Liliana facilitates with Brian and Ella is a way to help these students begin thinking about the outside of their birdhouses based on observations they make, as well as their readings, conversations, trips, and other cross-curricular experiences from which they might draw. The students observe the model birdhouses, closely examine the pictures, and all the while consider why the birdhouses they see were made in the way they were. Through this process, they not only become careful observers, but they also deepen their thinking and their understanding of the natural world.

Learning to carefully observe, and thereby better understand the world around them, is central to the developmental-interaction approach to teaching and learning. As described by longtime Bank Street faculty members Barbara Biber: “Another kind of experience has to do with helping children to become increasingly sensitive to the world in which they live; to become keen observers of what there is around them; to have open eyes and ears to their surroundings” (1967, p. 3). Liliana said fostering such an experience is an important goal for her as she guides her children through the long-term studies:

With all of our studies, like the Bird Study and the Shore Study, I would say first we’re working in a community and we’re making observations. I think the observational piece, the observational sketching and the observational drawings that we work on, really go hand in hand with what we do here. When we sit and when we take our time and want our drawings to look real, it really correlates with our studies. I think it also...gives children the opportunity to explore their surroundings. Some of them take the bus, and they come right to school and then they head back out to [the] Queens [neighborhood] Jamaica. So the observational sketching really gives them an opportunity to learn from their surroundings and explore in a safe, secure way.

From such keen observation of their surroundings, students generate questions that guide future lessons in the Bird Study. As Liliana reflected on Brian and Ella’s thoughts about using grass for the outside of a birdhouse, she explained:

I would say students’ questions are the questions that guide our upcoming activities. We might have books specifically talking about things that the birds use to create their house and why. Those are questions guiding [us] when we go on field trips. And then the hope is that we’ll use students’ questions to guide our upcoming work time activities and mini lessons this year.

In this way, revelations that come out of student observations direct the future exploration the teachers facilitate. It is therefore essential that Liliana plan multiple

opportunities for students to actively observe and explore their surroundings in a hands-on manner. Liliana noted:

It also gives them a chance to go out. I know we plan a lot of field trips because we value the actual contact, for students to be in contact with nature. Hands-on. The student is the guide in their learning. This is a project-based way to explore birds and the shore through a multisensory approach. So it's not only listening to what the teachers might have to say about the shore, it's actually you going out and you bringing back and sharing what you noticed. And this starts to create this whole idea of: you are a scientist, you're a learner, you're an artist, you're a reader, you're a writer. It's like you can be anything you want to be.

In this classroom laboratory, students not only observe and experiment to learn more about the world around them, but they can also use their observations and explorations to learn more about themselves and the different types of identities they can take on as learners interacting with the world.



Making Process Transparent to Children to Support their Growth and Learning

“Lorien, come share your story with us.” Yazmin motions to a girl in pigtails wearing a white T-shirt with a bird on it. Lorien stands up and quickly makes her way to the storyteller chair at the front of the room. Liliana hands her a green beanbag.

“Remember, Lorien is the speaker today,” Liliana explains to the class. Then she holds up a red beanbag, “I’m going to hold the red bag to remind us that we’re the careful listeners.” Liliana kneels on the rug with the rest of her students, while Yazmin sits in the chair on the other side of the easel and takes notes on a small whiteboard.

Lorien sits up straight in the storyteller chair and shares her story: “I went to the library to get new books. Then I went to the park, and I went on the slide and swings. Then I played with a friend. Then I went home for lunch.”

Lorien sits back in the chair and stares at her classmates, who have been watching her closely.

“Who can retell her story?” Liliana asks the group, as she trades places with Lorien.

Gigi, who is wearing a pink top and purple leggings, shoots up her hand. As she retells Lorien’s story, Liliana draws pictures (e.g., book, tree, slide) on the easel to signal the different parts of Lorien’s account.

Liliana then turns to her students and asks, “How many parts are in Lorien’s story?” She prompts the students to count the images with her. They collectively determine that the story has six parts. Liliana then closes her eyes and points to her temple. “Take a moment to think about which part you think you’re going to draw or write about in your book.” She opens her eyes and looks at the children. Some have closed their eyes, and others are staring at the pictures on the easel. “When you’re ready, put your thumb up in front of your chest,” Liliana says.

Liliana looks around as the students one by one place their thumbs in front of their chests. She waits until all 26 children have their thumbs up. After a

reminder about the different ways they can add details—color, things around you, people, feelings, etc.—Liliana sends the students off to start their writing and drawing. As the students begin to work at their tables, Liliana puts picture cards of step-by-step instructions with both words and visual icons in the students’ writing books. Each card has the following instructions:

- 1) Think*
- 2) Write*
- 3) Draw*
- 4) Add Details*
- 5) Add Labels*
- 6) Add Words*

Pulling up a chair beside Lorien, Liliana asks her to find her checklist. Lorien pulls out the card that Liliana placed in her writing book and places it next to her drawing.

“Tell me about your drawing,” Liliana prompts Lorien.

Lorien points to the checklist as she explains her process for making her picture of a slide and a swing set in a field: “I thought about the park so I could remember it. Then I wrote ‘P’ for park and I drew a slide and a swing and grass. Now I have to add details.”

With an awe-struck expression, Liliana holds up Lorien’s picture as if carefully examining a masterpiece. She points out the details she already notices in Lorien’s grass. “What’s another detail you could add?”

“Coloring?” Lorien looks at Liliana expectantly.

“Coloring is one detail!” Liliana then leaves Lorien, who proceeds to grab colored pencils from the supply bin at the center of her table.

Minutes later, Liliana comes back to Lorien and gasps in amazement at the color Lorien has added to her drawing. “Lorien! I see so many details! What do you notice is different about your drawing?”

Beaming with pride, Lorien points out all of the colors she incorporated and where she added them.

Making the learning process transparent to her children is an important goal for Liliana in her teaching practice. She explains, “It’s all about hitting the brakes and slowing down. Is this something where I want to zoom in... when [the students and I] can go back and take a closer look?...Slowing down so I can show them their growth and their work.” Liliana believes this is important for students to see that their “work is serious. We value [their] work.” By zooming in on process, Liliana guides her students to be more metacognitive about their own learning. In this writing session, her students are pushed to think about the steps that go into telling a story, creating a drawing about that story, and adding details to those drawings. Liliana has her students pause to pay attention to the work that they are doing at each step in the process.

Such process-oriented teaching is at the core of personal and intellectual growth encouraged via the developmental-interaction approach. Mitchell had the following ideas about learning:

Learning was not seen as a matter of acquiring information, an orientation identified with the “traditional view” and what may be termed the “empty receptacle” theory of mind, but as a process of coming to understand the world one lives in and acquiring the range of capabilities that enables one to be an effective, productive member of society. These capabilities encompass the practical level of everyday problem solving; the ability to conceptualize; to reason in ways that are at once grounded, rigorous, and creative. (Franklin, 2000, p. 50-51)

These beliefs about learning emphasize the need to make the act of thinking, or reasoning, transparent to students so that they can come to better understand the capabilities needed to be a productive member of society.

On a frequent basis, Liliana has students pause to think about their reasoning. Throughout the day, she makes remarks and reflects on her and her students’ processes and thinking:

“I noticed Nina took her time. She took her time and remembered.”

“I see you really thinking about that.”

“Value the think time.”

“I can really see those brains working so hard this morning.”

Her room is also covered in signs and cards called “brain tools.” These include “think and show” cards, a “thinking bubble” sign, and a problem-solving sign. Having students stop to think about what they are doing as they engage

intellectually or socially helps them build strategies and skills to support academic learning, social engagement, school readiness, and other important goals. Conflict resolution strategies are another as shown by the following scenario.

A sudden crash startles the group of students reading books on the rug. Larry is standing next to a pile of blocks. Half of the hospital that Ada, Katie, and Jermaine built the day before is now sitting in a jumble on the floor. Liliana holds Larry by the sides of his shoulders and tells him to take a step back. She carefully walks over to the wall of “brain tools” and brings back the dark blue “thinking bubble” sign. “Here is what I think happened,” Liliana begins, holding the paper thinking bubble over her own head. “I think you saw your hook and you wanted to put your stuff on the hook, but you couldn’t really get to it because the block structure was in the way.”

Larry looks up at Liliana, wide-eyed. She then moves the thinking bubble so it is above Larry’s head. “What were you thinking?” she asks.

Larry responds, “I wanted to put my bag on the hook, so I stepped on the blocks but they came crashing.”

“Hmm,” Liliana continues, moving the thinking bubble back to the space above her head. “What would happen if you stepped on the blocks? How would your friends feel?”

She puts the thinking bubble over Larry’s head, as he looks down at his feet and says, “Sad.”

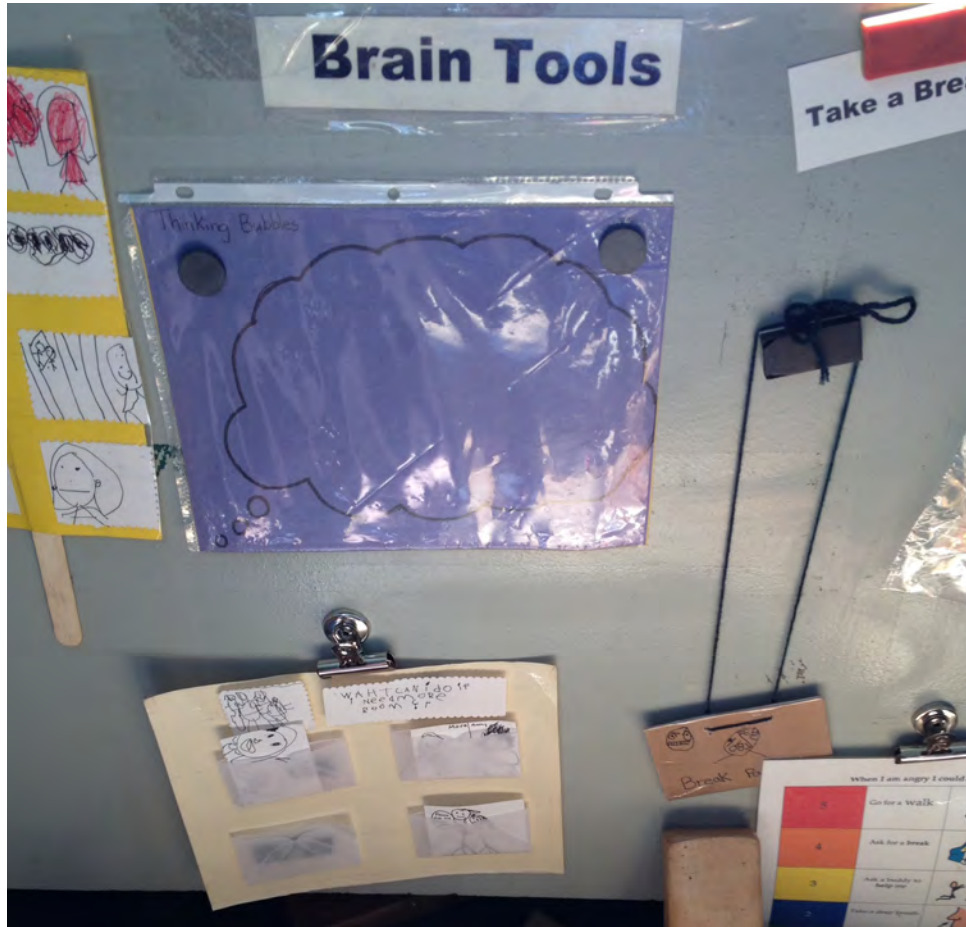
“Well, we tried stepping on the blocks. Did that work?” Liliana kneels down to meet Larry at eye-level, still holding the thinking bubble above his head.

“No,” he says, looking up at his teacher.

“What else can we try?” Liliana asks. This time she shows him the problem-solving sign that prompts him to “stop, look, and think” about his choices.

“I need to go around,” Larry responds, as he makes a swimming motion with his right hand.

Liliana stands, smiling. “You need to go around. I’m watching your hand go like this,” she says as she copies Larry’s hand motion. Liliana then tells Larry, “Watch me.” She proceeds to model releasing all of the brakes on the wheels of the easel, which is in front of Larry’s hook. She then pushes the easel out of the way and walks straight over to the hook. “Oh, that’s how you do it!” Larry exclaims, standing on his tiptoes with excitement.



“I bet you’re strong enough to move the easel, too, if you needed to,” Liliana says to Larry. “Now you try.”

Larry practices moving the easel out of the way and walking over to his hook.

In this interaction between Liliana and Larry, Liliana gently models the thinking and problem-solving process. She puts herself in Larry’s shoes so she can make his decision-making process more transparent to him. Never once in this exchange does Liliana tell Larry that what he did was wrong; she instead tries to understand his thinking and thereby helps him to see a different solution that would address his problem of getting to his hook without crashing down his classmates’ block structure. By doing this, Liliana helps Larry gain a sense of his own capacity to come up with solutions for the problems he faces. She “hits the brakes” and “zooms in” on the thinking process with Larry, breaking down each step of decision-making. Once they come up with a solution, Liliana guides Larry in practicing it. Liliana maintains a warm and caring tone so that Larry feels safe to take risks as he practices reflecting on his actions and considering different solutions to the problem he faced in trying to get to his hook.

During the past seven years, Liliana has refined what it means for her and Yazmin to meet the individual needs of students, to let learning happen at a student's own pace, and to guide children's interactions with each other and with the world so that they can continue to foster curiosity and growth. Liliana's students are astonishingly independent, as they easily transition to and from various learning activities needing, for the most part, only gentle guidance and support from their teachers. Liliana explained that this is a product of much modeling the teachers do early on in the school year:

[W]e do a lot of modeling. So we'll stop and say, Yazmin and I will role-play. We will pinpoint what we saw—"I notice that so-and-so did this while we were moving on from snack time to book time." Again there's a lot of visual...these are the steps. Breaking it down...So there's a lot of modeling, a lot. Now, at this point this is fading out... But in the beginning, there's a lot of stopping and taking some time [to focus on process], immediately.

This immediate modeling, intervention, and transparency of process have helped both the teachers and students create a classroom that "focuses on human development, interaction with the world of people and materials, building democratic community, and humanist values" (Nager & Shapiro, 2000, p. 1). By responding to the individuality of children and their interactions with each other, with adults, and with the world, Liliana and Yazmin take on a developmental-interaction approach that values the whole child and ultimately makes it possible for them to create a safe space where students have the skills to shape and control their own learning.

Biber (1973) in a lecture titled, "What is Bank Street?" explained that the faculty at Bank Street College "aim for actively involved children acquiring competence and a sense of their own competence....The teacher uses every opportunity to foster intellectual mastery, to promote cognitive power by creating a pervasive climate of why and wherefore and wherefrom kind of thinking." In this process-oriented approach, children are able to gain a better understanding of themselves and how they interact with the world. They can more clearly see their decision-making processes, empowering them to be productive members of a democratic classroom.

Making learning transparent to children is also an important component to ensuring that the classroom serves as a laboratory, which was Mitchell's original vision for schooling. She writes, "The modern school...asserts that children grow in mental maturity from the very beginning by the active process of discovering relationships and regards the school essentially as a laboratory where such discoveries may be made" (Mitchell, 1934/2001, p. 5). Liliana transforms her classroom into such a space through the various activities and projects that she plans, along with the intentional focus on process and process mastery. The hands-on projects that students engage in are particularly useful in helping students understand the learning process.

As she described:

We were exploring the concept of sink and float, and we were using recycled items to test what sinks and what floats. Why did it sink? Why did it float? Let's create the definition together of what makes a sinker a sinker and what makes a floater a floater. Using recycled materials to create sailboats and paddleboats, and figure out, How does it work? What makes it work? What makes it go fast? What makes it go slow? It's an ongoing cycle of test, explore, come back, discuss, reflect, go out again, try something new, come back again... What might you try differently? What can you add? ...Maybe there's something you want to do, maybe there's something you want to do differently this time. It's an ongoing process.

In Liliana's class, learning and experimenting are made transparent to her students. As a result, they become more independent with their learning, excited to explore and discover on their own, as they all the while ask "why and wherefore and wherefrom."

A Day in the Life: The Developmental-Interaction Approach in Action

From her early morning preparations before students arrive, to connecting with students and families at the start and end of the school day, to her afternoon reflections and revisions in support of future instruction, Liliana’s practice embodies the core principles of the Bank Street developmental-interaction approach.

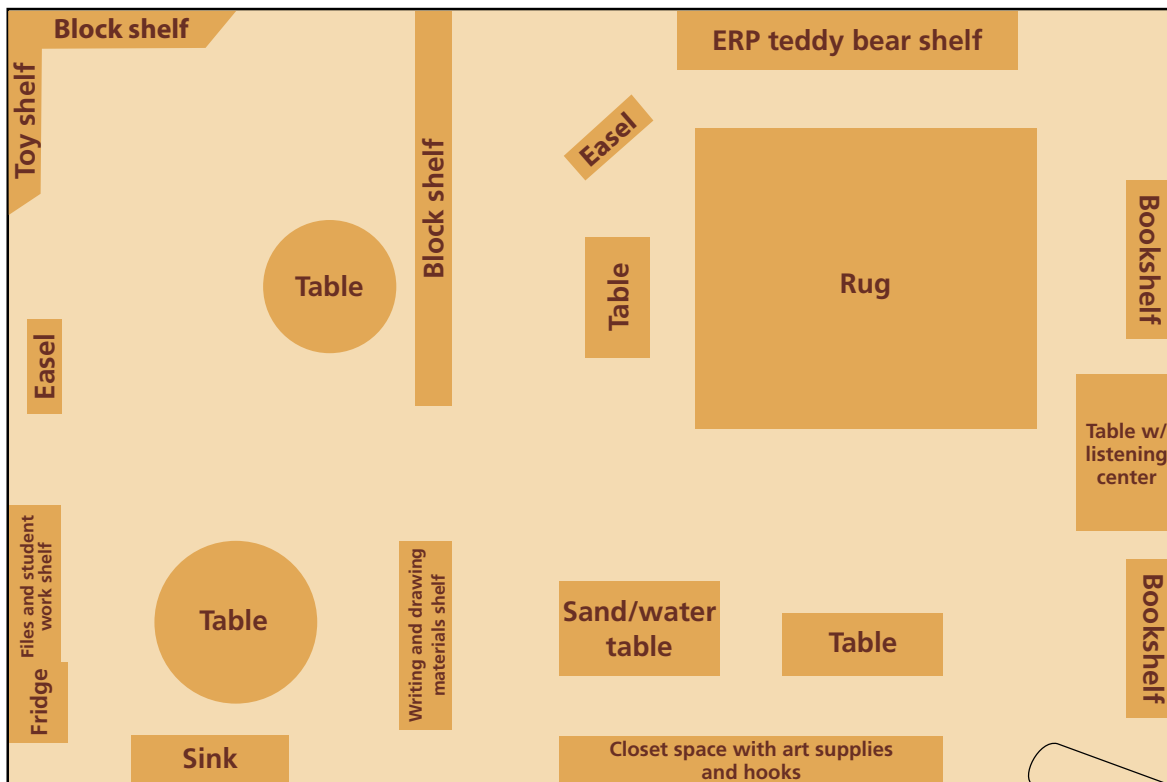
Organizing for Engagement

Early morning sunlight streams through the tall windows of Liliana’s classroom, illuminating an array of student work hanging on the walls. Liliana lays out strips of paper on a round table towards the back of the room. Picking up a few strips, she turns around to face a gray–green bulletin board. Rows of student names are pinned above sealed sandwich bags hanging on the board. Inside the bags are pieces of hardened clay. Some look like seashells, others like three-dimensional fish, and a few like fossils carved into the clay. Liliana takes two pushpins, one yellow and one green, and posts a white strip of paper onto the bottom left corner of the bulletin board. The strip reads, “We made sea creature models with clay.”

The class’s current long-term Shore Study is the focus of many projects on display. By the door hangs a sign that leads with the question: “What do you want to know about the shore?” Students’ questions fill the poster, including “What zone do dolphins live in? Where do sharks live? How do the flying fish fly if they are fish? How do animals eat in the water?” Painted cutouts of sea creatures seem to swim along a backsplash of blue Kraft paper that covers the door to the class. Stuffed fish made of construction paper decorated with marker, cotton, and thread hang on the bulletin boards in the hallway. Several of them are pinned to the wall inside the classroom by the doorway.

In between displays of student work are various signs posted to help students with self-monitoring. One sign shows a girl sitting upright at a desk with the words “Whole-Body Listening” written above her head. Thick, labeled arrows point to different parts of the girl’s body: brain, eyes, ears, mouth, hands, back, and feet. Another sign tells students to check their “4 Bs”: brakes, breath, brain, and body. Sketches of individual students’ acts of kindness hang on a closet door next to rows of coat hooks. Just below the ceiling, high above all of the student work are colorful self-portraits of the 26 kindergarten children in Liliana’s class painted on large sheets of white paper.

Figure 1: Liliana’s classroom



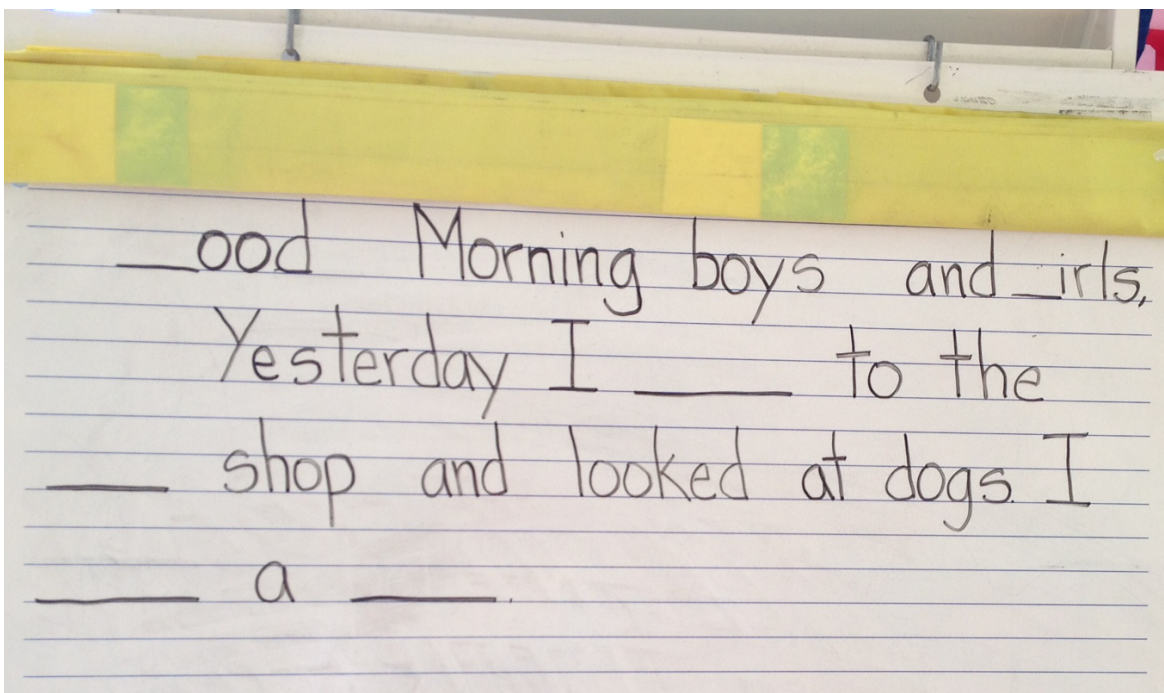
Liliana’s classroom is spacious relative to many New York City school classrooms and has high ceilings and several light-filled windows. There are multiple tables, easels, a large rug area, and numerous shelves that house a wide array of materials—providing students with opportunity and space to explore and utilize their environment throughout the day. Figure 1 displays a map of the classroom.

A little after 8 a.m. Liliana’s co-teacher, Yazmin, and one of the paraprofessionals, Hector, enter the room. Yazmin and Liliana immediately begin to discuss the centers that each will monitor during morning work. They then start to put out materials for the five different learning stations, which the students will rotate through during the week. The stations include: a literacy center exploring songs and poems, a Play-Doh station, a listening center, a math table, and a drawing table. Liliana places five composition notebooks on a round table by the sink in the corner of the room. The notebooks are labeled “Songs and Poems.” Each has a typed poem about fish placed alongside it. Yazmin puts containers of Play-Doh on top of the covered sand box. In the center of a smaller table beneath the blackboard is a tape player connected to four headphones. Books, each labeled “My Drawing and Writing Book,” surround the tape player on three sides. Another table is covered with “10 frames” worksheets for counting and has a plastic tub in the middle filled with number cards, direction

cards (turn, think, count, show, record), and a number line made with Unifix cubes. She then places crayons and drawing paper on a rectangular table by the door.

Yazmin begins to write a morning message on the easel by the rug area. The morning message is a greeting that the teachers write to their students and the class reads together during circle time at the start of the day. The morning message helps students transition to the school day by engaging them in an academic task while simultaneously welcoming them into the classroom. On this day, Yazmin writes the following:

___ood Morning boys and ___irls.
Yesterday I ___ to the ___ shop and looked at dogs. I ___ a ___.



Here, the blanks indicate letters that the students will have to fill in as they review the morning message as a class. The complete message that the students later figure out collectively is:

Good Morning boys and girls.
Yesterday I went to the pet shop and looked at dogs. I want a dog.

While Yazmin writes the message, Liliana sets up a blue pocket chart hanging on the wall in preparation for the morning work her students will do as soon as they enter the class. She puts wallet-size headshots of the students beside icons of the various

morning stations in the clear pockets. This chart tells students what station they are assigned to for their morning work, so that they can independently go to the appropriate centers and begin their tasks. Liliana and Yazmin assign the students a different station every day so that each child gets to complete all of the morning centers by the week's end.

“So, I’ll stay back today and work with Rose and a few other students during library. I talked with Barbara about maybe making a book for Rose of all the things that she loves to do,” Liliana says to Yazmin, referring to individualized plans for one of her special needs students, as she places glue sticks and scissors on the round table at the “Songs and Poems” station.

“That sounds like a great idea,” Yazmin responds, organizing folders with students’ names on them. As they hastily work to make sure all of the centers are in order before the students arrive, the two teachers continue to talk about individual students and the various strategies they will use to meet each child’s needs throughout the day.

When describing the importance of the developmental-interaction approach, Biber (1967) explains:

It is not inevitable that this remarkable transformation in the ways of knowing [from sensory knowledge to more advanced, complex knowledge] will take place for every growing child or that his curiosity will remain active and exciting to him and to the people who live with him. It depends upon the experience provided in these formative years. (p. 2)

According to Biber, teachers must provide children with experiences that enable them to explore the physical and material world in ways that support both their cognitive and emotional development. Further, these experiences should be sensitive to one’s surroundings, provide opportunities for action and inquiry, allow children to reproduce and symbolize their own life experiences through play, and support the development of language and concepts. Providing such experiences in the classroom requires thoughtful planning and preparation on the part of the teacher.

This is precisely what Liliana does as soon as she enters her classroom early each morning. Well before the students arrive, she is hard at work, utilizing her professional knowledge and skills to organize the classroom for student learning and growth. She and Yazmin organize the materials students will need to engage in productive, developmentally appropriate tasks that foster exploration, play, and learning. They also support each other professionally by identifying tasks and roles for each other that support their goals for their students. By providing enough structure for students to participate in morning work independently, the teachers can focus

their attention on a few specific centers to give students more individualized support by design. As Liliana puts it, she and Yazmin can “zoom in on specific students” when they spend the time to plan their class’s morning work in this way. This aligns with the developmental-interaction approach, as children begin the day with a variety of joyful cognitive tasks, and teachers support the individual strengths and needs of specific students.

Liliana is also continuously thinking about each individual child and the strategies she and Yazmin can use to meet every student’s strengths, interests, and needs. At the beginning of each day, Liliana reviews the notes she recorded as she carefully observed children in previous days. These notes guide the strategies she uses with her students:

If you go back into the groups, the kids that I needed [to work with], you will always see notes on things that really stood out. Maybe they need more scaffolding, maybe they needed redirection... it’s just to document the amount of support that’s needed for where they are individually. And, I think I usually focus on their work habits, and the things that might be a pattern across the board that maybe I could think more about; support systems to put in place to help them.

Morning prep time for Liliana is about making sure that her students have just the right set of opportunities to engage in learning that facilitates their social, emotional, and cognitive growth. Liliana accomplishes this based on her commitment to the student growth across developmental domains; her wide array of pedagogical approaches, activities, and materials; her extensive subject-matter knowledge; and to the depth of her knowledge about each student, supported in part by her careful observations and recordings.

Student-Centered Early Morning Connections and Transitions

When the clock hits 8:20 a.m., Liliana and Yazmin rush out of the classroom and head down the stairs leading to the back of the school building. They exit out to a giant blacktop, where parents and school buses drop off students who wait to be greeted by their teachers. When Liliana and Yazmin’s children see their teachers, they come running over to them with ear-to-ear grins on their faces.

“Liliana, Liliana, I didn’t get to eat breakfast.” Liliana kneels down to meet Jade at eye-level. Jade, who is wearing a hot pink jacket suitable for the early morning breeze of the spring day, looks Liliana straight in the eye and says, “I think I need time to finish breakfast.”

“Oh yes. Our engines need breakfast!” Liliana winks at Jade as she assures her that she will have time to eat breakfast before going to her morning center.

Liliana stands up and faces the group of children surrounding her. “Are you ready to go upstairs?” she asks in a cheerful tone. The little faces smile and nod. “Travel with a partner and follow Yazmin,” she instructs as she watches the students grab a friend’s hand and walk straight behind Yazmin. Liliana hangs in the back, holding the hand of Elijah, who chats with her about his weekend. “You had a special dinner out!” Liliana exclaims with eyes lit up as Elijah describes the family meal he had at a local restaurant.

When the two enter the classroom, the rest of the class has already begun hanging up their bags and coats on the hooks lining the walls. Children independently walk over to the pocket chart Liliana set up earlier. They scan the rows of the pocket chart and find their picture. To the left of their faces, they see an icon indicating what activity they are assigned to do this morning. The students then begin to spread out to their assigned stations. Without waiting for directions from their teachers, the students get straight to work cutting out poems and gluing them into their notebooks; uncapping markers and drawing pictures on white paper; taking out Play-Doh and sculpting model houses and animals. A few children walk directly to an assigned “breakfast table” in the back of the room, as Liliana and Yazmin recognize that some students aren’t fully nourished when they arrive at school, but need to be in order to have a successful day. Students can help themselves to fruit, cereal, milk, and juice sitting at the center of the table. After these students finish eating their breakfast, they transition to their assigned center.

“You’re with me at this station,” Jessie says to Amanda as she takes her by the hand and walks her over to the listening center. The two students open up their books and place headphones over their ears.

Another student wearing a long pink cardigan rushes over to Yazmin. She is holding scraps of cardboard and an old tissue box she collected from the pile of supplies by the sink. “Yazmin, Yazmin! I want to take this home with me so I can make a bed for Susie,” the child’s ERP teddy bear.

“I love that idea!” Yazmin responds. “Maybe a good spot for these would be in your bag. Tell me if that will work.” The child nods and carries the supplies over to her hook.

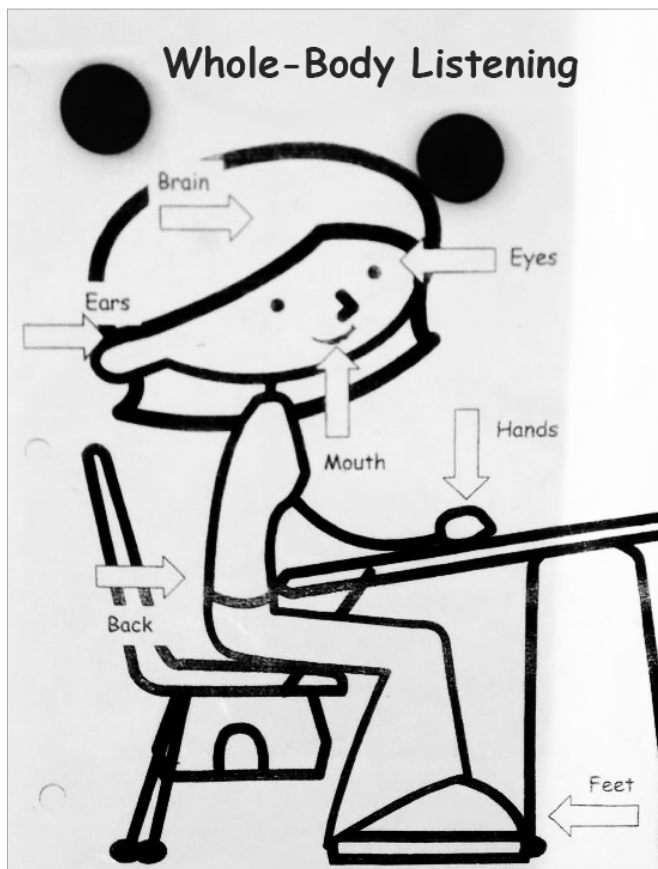
From the moment the teachers greet their students through the end of the children’s morning stations, Liliana and Yazmin focus on developing the whole child. They want to ensure that their students’ creativity, cognitive development, physical health, and emotional comfort are all nurtured from the very start of the day. The transitions also demonstrate how the teachers have helped students develop and sustain well-established routines. Liliana explains that building independence in her students involved a great deal of modeling and practice at the beginning of the year, something she and Yazmin are deeply committed to. She notes, “Sometimes that meant

like pushing something—shrinking the next work time or shrinking whatever was next, because this is something that we are working on, and this is important for us.” Liliana and Yazmin prioritized setting routines for their students to ensure that they could become increasingly independent in their work over the course of the year. The students seem to embrace this independence, feeling a sense of ownership as they enthusiastically walk hand in hand to complete their assigned tasks.

Launching the Work Day Through a Participatory Morning Meeting

*“A sailor went to sea, sea, sea,
to see what he could see, see, see.”*

Liliana and Yazmin’s class gradually gather on the rug, sitting with their legs crossed in a giant circle. They mime looking out in the distance while they sing this well-known nursery rhyme. The song is used to transition the students out of the morning learning stations and into the morning meeting. It also reminds the children of their current academic focus: the Shore Study. Liliana sits on the rug at the same level as the children and plays a set of bongos in her lap to go along with the singing. By the time the song is done, the students have all peacefully gathered around the rug and look at Liliana, eagerly awaiting the start of the morning meeting.



“Good morning, problem-solvers,” Liliana begins.

“Good morning, Liliana!” the class responds.

“Let’s check in with our engines,” Liliana continues as she shifts her body to sit upright. The students follow her lead. “Tug in your seat. Take a deep breath.” The children inhale and exhale with a sigh. “Check in with your bodies.” Liliana crosses her arms over her chest and rubs her arms. The students mimic her motions. “Check in with your brain.” Liliana’s hands have now moved up to her head; the students also tap their heads. “Let’s make sure we have ‘whole-body listening.’” Liliana takes out the “whole-body listening” sign from behind her back

and shows it to the class. “Let’s check our eyes, our ears, our feet...” Liliana names each body part labeled on the sign, while the students touch each part with their hands. By the time the whole body check is done, students are attentively focused on Liliana, mesmerized by all that she does.

Liliana reads the morning message written on the easel aloud to the students, leaving out all of the missing letters and words:

___ood Morning boys and ___irls.
Yesterday I ___ to the ___ shop and looked at dogs. I ___ a ___.

She then says, “Get ready, I’m gonna read it a second time. Pull out your detective eye!” The children pretend to hold a magnifying glass up to their eyes. Jessie, who is wearing glasses, leans towards her friend and pretends to look closely into her peer’s eyes with the magnifying glass in hand. As Liliana reads the message this time, she stops for the blanks and asks the children, “Am I missing the letter or the word?”

Dennis’s hand shoots up for the first blank. “The letter!” he exclaims with a grin when Liliana calls on him. Liliana gasps and, with a smile running ear-to-ear, leans towards Dennis and asks him which letter. Dennis then stands up, rolls up the sleeves of his gray shirt, and goes, “guh, guh, guh” as he puts out his hand and makes a grasping motion.

“Can we all follow what Dennis is doing?” Liliana turns to the class, as the students also put out their hands and get ready to follow Dennis’s movement. Following Liliana’s lead, the circle of children make the grasping motion as they say, “guh, guh, guh” for the missing “G” in the word “good.”

“Yes!” Liliana smiles to the class. “We’re making a motion like ‘give me’ for the letter G.”

Dennis is then sent to the alphabet wall posted on the blackboard beside the meeting area. He gets the magnetic “G” off of the board and brings it back to the easel. After Dennis sticks the “G” magnet on the top right corner of the easel, he takes a dry-erase marker and writes the letter “G” into the appropriate blank space.

“I think Dennis deserves a heart clap!” Liliana exclaims as she gets her hands ready. The children also put their hands up to their chests and together make a heart shape in the air. When their hands reach the bottom tip of the invisible heart, the students clap their hands together, the loud clapping noise reverberating in the air.

The next blank in the message is for the word “went.” This time, Julian raises his hand to spell out the word. Liliana sees Julian and tells the students to listen care-

fully, as she is going to make the sounds for the next word before Julian comes up to spell it for the whole class. Liliana very slowly breaks up the phonemes for the word “went,” saying each sound while the children watch and listen carefully. She then motions for Julian to come up and stand beside her. Julian thinks carefully about each letter as he makes the sound and corresponding hand motions to spell out the word. Liliana does the motions with him so that he can be successful in front of the group. She then prompts the entire class to repeat the spelling and movements.

“Ok everyone. Get your bodies ready for a high engine!” The children eagerly squirm in their seats as they await their teacher’s cue. When Liliana begins to move her arms, the children follow her as they sound out “went” rapidly and with excited voices three times. “Alright, now let’s try with a low engine.” The class spells out the word again with phonemes and gestures, only this time very slowly. “Now a just-right engine.” This time, the students spell the word and do the motions at a regular pace, also three times. Julian then walks over to the blackboard to look for the magnet of the word “went” on the alphabetic word wall. Several children sit on their hands and rock back and forth, seemingly to stop themselves from blurting out where the word is.

“You know, when we’re watching other boys and girls, we’re learning about their strategies” Liliana says to the wiggly children on the rug. “We’re learning about how they think about things. Watch Julian. Watch him.” The students’ bodies begin to still as they lean back into their crisscrossed positions. Julian then walks towards the row of words under the letter “W”.

“You know what I learned from Julian,” Liliana says, her gaze fixed on Julian, “He was thinking about the beginning part of that word.”

Julian stares at the row of words, his head tilted slightly and his right foot rolled over on its edge. “Is it a short word, a medium-sized word, or a long word?” Liliana asks, as Julian turns to face her. Liliana makes dramatic motions with her arms to help Julian see the distinction in length between short, medium, and long. Julian’s peers watch him with captivated gazes.

He says, “short,” and then looks back at the blackboard. Seeing the word “went,” he smiles, pulls it from the board, and walks back over to the easel to write out the word in the blank. A buzz of satisfaction fills the room, followed by three heart-shaped claps.

When all of the blanks are filled, Liliana tells the children, “We’re gonna get our voices ready. This is one of my favorite parts. It almost feels like story time where I’m just listening. Wake up your ears if they fell asleep!” The entire class then collectively reads the message out loud.

“Yazmin!” Liliana exclaims, “I want to wake up every morning to this group of readers. I think everyone deserves a heart clap.” The students smile as they clap for themselves in the shape of a heart three times.

Liliana’s morning meeting is about more than just greeting students at the start of the day. It establishes an emotional tone and sets the stage for a day that will be full of playful learning, deep thinking, and communal caring. She uses meeting time to create a space where students feel comfortable to take risks with their learning because they trust their teachers and the other students to help and support them if they make mistakes. The positive affect in her class is clear and pervasive, as children are often seen smiling, hugging one another and their teachers, and humming to songs that appear to be playing on repeat in their heads. Children have space to participate, work, and learn at their own pace with the individualized supports they each need. In these ways and others, Liliana simultaneously addresses students’ cognitive and emotional development, seeing these as necessarily intertwined for children to learn. Liliana’s own focus, as she puts it, is on

the social and emotional piece, social and emotional development of little ones, which is so important. We see it as the foundation of everything else that happens later on in your lives. So really taking the time, hitting the brakes literally, and just stopping and using every single minute of your day to really talk about problems that we might encounter, talk about possible solutions, talk about how you could self-regulate, talk about your engine, talk about your body.

This understanding that how students feel emotionally and physically interacts with their learning of academic content is why Liliana spends so much time helping students learn to self-regulate so they can best take advantage of the learning opportunities before them. That’s why she begins the morning meeting with a “whole body check.” She is transparent with her students about how they can all slow down to “think, watch, and listen.” Liliana wants to ensure that students have “just-right engines,” so they feel comfortable with the risks they take and can openly communicate with their teachers and peers. It also helps ensure their minds are alert so that they can do the challenging work of meaning-making that is emphasized throughout the day in Liliana’s class.

The children are encouraged to spend time thinking before responding to the prompts. No amount of thinking time is considered too much. Rather, Liliana celebrates “think time” as an opportunity to bring to mind strategies “little ones” can use to help them with their academic work. The hard work of thinking, finding letters, remembering letter–sound agreement, and writing are all done in a playful manner that makes learning joyful for the children.

Snack Time, Reading Time, and Spanish Lessons: Attentiveness to the Whole Child

Once the morning meeting ends, the students have their morning snack. Jessie stands by the easel holding a bottle of hand sanitizer. She squirts a little into each child's hand as they form a line in front of her. The students get their hand sanitizer and go to the tables where snack is waiting for them. Yazmin has put out bowls of cheddar goldfish-shaped crackers and small cups of milk for the students. Jordan takes his time making his way to a snack table. He lingers by the easel and rereads the morning message a couple of times. When he feels ready, he sits next to Elijah and begins munching on his snack.

*As students finish their snack, they independently throw out their empty cups and walk over to the bookshelves. After selecting a book, students lay or sit on the rug and read independently or in pairs. One pair is lying on their bellies as they take turns reading pages of Ian Falconer's *Olivia*. Other students have selected books related to the show. As more students finish their snack, the rug fills with eager "readers," whether decoding text, discussing stories, or looking at pictures. As she describes them, Lilitiana's class is filled with young "readers," and they take on this role with seriousness and confidence.*

A sudden drumming sound rolls into the classroom from the hallway. The students on the rug jolt upward and smile as they look towards the doorway. Two teachers come into the classroom, one playing a djembe and the other shaking a maraca. With little prompting, the children quickly put their books away and form a large circle on the rug. Yazmin and Lilitiana wave to the two teachers who have just entered the room as they gather some paperwork and leave the classroom. Their students are about to start Spanish time.

The Spanish lesson is filled with joyful music, humor, and unbridled enthusiasm from the children. They take turns dancing to a song about chickens, as they shout "más rápido!" after each round. They beat on the djembe while participating in a call-and-response chant, and look in wonder as their two teachers do a ventriloquism act in Spanish at the front of the room. When Yazmin and Lilitiana return, the students are energized and ready for their next learning task.

Over the course of roughly 45 minutes in the middle of their morning, Lilitiana's students are engaged in an array of activities that exemplify the whole-child approach. First, snack time: this is not just a time when students' physical bodies are cared for, though feeding hungry bodies to spur physical and mental health is certainly an important goal. In addition, Lilitiana and Yazmin have established routines to foster a growing sense of independence and self-care among their students. The students are responsible for keeping each other and their classroom space safe, healthy, and clean. They make independent choices about how much snack they

need and when they are ready to move on to the reading rug. They select their own books, where to read them, and with whom.

During Spanish, the children joyfully learn music and rhythms of Hispanic origin, making cultural connections relevant to the diverse community at the school and in the neighboring community. Throughout, academic learning is infused with play, as the students use their vocal chords and move their bodies while internalizing Spanish terminology. After such playful learning, the students are ready to engage in more work. This fosters both an enthusiasm and stamina for learning. Just as Polakow–Suransky and Nager (2014) assert in their argument for more play in early childhood classrooms, when children have playful interactions “there are significant benefits for children’s capacity to think, to plan and to sustain their attention on difficult tasks.”

Star Child: Everyone Counts!

It’s late morning, just before lunch. The students gather on the rug, their eyes fixed on a closed box that Liliana has brought over to the group. “I cannot wait to pull out the name of the next child who will be the ‘star child.’” Kneeling, Liliana looks up at the pillar behind her. There is a list of students’ names under a sign that reads “star child.” These are all children who have already had the opportunity to be interviewed and written about by their peers. The students’ eyes follow Liliana’s gaze. “You know what I’m noticing?” Liliana says. “There’s only a small group of students who haven’t been star children yet. This tells me...” Liliana taps her chin with her forefinger, as she seems to think about possible names for today’s star child.

The children call out as many names as they can think of for who the star child might be. “Who will get a chance to be a star child today?” Liliana asks as she reaches her hand into the box of names. She pulls out a card, covering it with both palms so the students cannot see. Liliana peers at the name, raises her shoulders, and makes an excited expression. Hands shoot up in the air as students are given a chance to ask questions to gather clues about who the star child is.

Liliana calls on a few students, who ask questions like, “Does the name have six letters or seven letters?” and “What letter does it end with?” When one child asks, “What letter does it start with?” Liliana replies in a low voice, “I’m going to do the motion [for the letter]. Watch me.” Just as she’s about to make the motion, she looks out at the group and stops herself. Putting her fists on her hips, Liliana leans forward and says, “I want to see if you’re really watching me.”

Liliana stands up and tiptoes behind the students. She stops in one spot and looks at the children, checking their gazes. The students follow her with their eyes like little hawks. She then quickly shuffles over to another place in the room and pauses again. Once more, she looks at her students, monitoring whether they are watch-

ing her. This time, the children have turned their bodies around to see their teacher. With a big smile, Liliana saunters over to a third point of the room.

Stopping there, she faces her students and asks, “You know how I could tell that you’re watching me?” Leaning over and covering the sides of her mouth with her hands, Liliana whispers, “Your eyes were following me.”

Liliana then does the motion for the letter “N” after which the students shout “N!” and then cheer, “Nina! Nina! Nina!”

The star child activity gives the children an opportunity to celebrate each student in their class. In this way Liliana and Yazmin create a classroom with “a social environment in which children are known and responded to as individuals” by the entire community (Biber, 1973). When the students have figured out that the star child of the day is Nina, they are given several minutes to think about their friend and write or draw something for her that takes into account her particular likes and interests—building and deepening connections among the students and honoring the individual within the collective. Over the course of the week the students will jointly produce a booklet of notes and pictures to share with the star child, who can then bring this special gift from her classmates home to enjoy with her family and further cement the close connections among her schoolmates with her family as well.

During this activity, Liliana also has another opportunity to teach students how to be careful observers of their surroundings. She does this in a playful manner that truly mesmerizes the students. In so doing, she engages the children in challenging thinking and observational work while maintaining a joyful affect among her students. Her children can “become detectives” as they playfully practice the skills of observation that will help them in their life-long pursuit of learning.

Work Time: Play and Choice as Vehicles for Growth and Learning

“We have a lot of jobs today that we need to get finished,” Liliana tells the class as she walks over to the easel. The students have returned from lunch and a bit of afternoon lethargy is beginning to settle in. Liliana’s prompt to think about what centers they will go to during work time has given the students a jolt, and they shift their slumped bodies to sit upright and attentive on the rug.

“Some children wanted to finish their drawings for Nina. Some of us were working on blocks. Others were working on making an engine meter just like our voice-level meter.” There is a quiet buzz on the rug as the children talk about what they want to work on this afternoon.

“I know Zion is waiting to pass out the pictures, but I want to bring up something that happened this morning.” Liliana motions to Larry who stands up and walks

over to stand beside Liliana. “What happened Larry? I think we can all learn from Larry and what he learned.” The children look up at Larry expectantly.

“Well, I was going to go to my morning station, and I was trying to get to my hook. But I didn’t know how. So I stepped on the blocks and they fell.” Larry speaks to the class candidly and without any sense of embarrassment or shame.

“Right, the block structure fell,” Liliana says, looking at the previous day’s block builders. Ada looks at Katie who shrugs. They then both turn back to Liliana and Larry, seemingly unfazed by the loss of yesterday’s hard work.

“So what did you learn, Larry?” Liliana asks.

“What you gotta do with the easel, you gotta move it over,” Larry replies.

“Oh! You have to move it over,” Liliana says grinning at Larry. “And what’s a brain tool we could use to figure out what to do?”

“The problem-solving chart!” another student calls out from the rug.

“Yes! Definitely!” Liliana says to the child. “So, it seems we have a problem. The block structure is too close to the easel and too close to the hooks. What can we do?” Liliana looks out at the group of children in genuine wonder.

“The blocks are too close to the easel and hook? It’s gotta be away from it,” Catie responds.

“Hmm.” Liliana thinks aloud to the students. “Maybe we can put some tape on the ground to remind us, ‘Oh, when we get there, we can’t go past because we’re too close to the hooks and easel, and we don’t want our block structure to get knocked down.’” The students on the rug nod their heads in agreement. Liliana then prompts Zion to begin passing out the picture cards, while she goes to the supply shelf to get some masking tape.

Zion sits on the chair beside the easel and pulls students’ picture cards from the basket he holds. The children go up to Zion one by one to take their pictures from him. They independently select which center they would like to go to by placing their pictures next to the appropriate icon on the pocket chart hanging over the easel. As usual, there are limits to the number of students who can be at each station. The block builders from the day before go over to their collapsed blocks and begin rebuilding their hospital. Some students are at the water table, exploring measurements using the tools in the table. A larger group of students are working on some artwork at the longer tables in the classroom. These include the drawings for Nina and the engine meter that Liliana mentioned at the beginning of the session.

Four students are over in the pretend play area, which is surrounded by large hollow blocks. Rose is feeding a baby doll, while Dennis cooks food in a plastic bin. “Everything is ready to eat!” Dennis calls out. Elijah then ties a bandana around his neck as if getting ready for a feast. Christy starts to set the round table with some plastic plates and forks.

Another group of students is painting sea creatures at the long rectangular table by the door. Jimmy runs over to show Liliana his painting of an aquarium he had visited with his father.

“I see...” Liliana begins. She then guides Jimmy back over to the table. The two sit down next to each other. Liliana lists all of the things she sees in Jimmy’s painting. She then gasps, “Oh! I see Jimmy added feelings.” Jimmy looks at Liliana with an expression of wonder. “You know how I know?” Liliana continues. Jimmy stares at his teacher, unsure of how to respond. “I see there’s a smiling face on the fish,” Liliana whispers as she leans closer to Jimmy. Jimmy smiles at Liliana. He then decides to move to another center.

“Liliana, I don’t know what to do.” Nina walks over to her teacher with a puzzled and pouty face.

Liliana walks over to the wall of brain tools. “Here, let’s try using this to help us.” Liliana passes Nina the problem-solving sign. Nina uses the sign to “stop, look, and think” about her choices. She looks around the room, considers a couple of options, and then decides to finish her drawing from the star child session earlier in the day. She joins a group of her peers sitting at the small table by the wall. The children laugh and chat away as they discuss the drawings they are working on for their friend Nina. As usual, there is an enthusiastic buzz in the room as the students work at the centers and move between stations at their own pace. A joyful energy fills the air as the students engage in their play-centered work time.

The playful learning that students partake in during work time is central to Liliana’s practice. It speaks to one of the main aspects of the developmental-interaction approach that Biber (1967) identifies in her early works—opportunity for action response. She writes:

*A third kind of experience we want to provide for children is full opportunity for doing and making, for acquiring a large repertoire of what we might call *action responses*. Much of life in school for the very young child consists of this kind of experience. With blocks he builds—high, wide, low structures. Very often, before his buildings really represent anything in the real world, he is using blocks for the plain skill and pleasure of constructing and designing in space. To be able to use crayons—not just for scribbling but to enclose spaces,*

make parallel lines or trail very neatly and exactly just within the edges of the paper—is a kind of skill the child develops and elaborates and enjoys. He is learning how to make objects follow his intention, and this is accomplishment even before he begins to be able to make a picture of a house, a girl or a tree. It is accomplishment to be able to enclose spaces, round or square ones, or circles that cross each other. It is accomplishment to be able to use a hammer and make the nail go straight into the wood. Certainly when you can make two pieces of wood stay together with the nail that you hammered in, there is a sense of mastery and skill. So is starting with an empty page, with great concentration, covering it all over with red paint.

In general, what is important is to give the child the opportunity to develop manipulative, constructive skills and, with these skills, to have the experience of changing the things in his world. (Biber, 1967, p. 4–5)

Liliana gives her students these opportunities for action response through the learning centers that are set up for the students during work time. The students can explore their worlds through whatever media best speak to them in any given moment and on any given day. She also ensures that the environment is fully conducive for such exploration by engaging the children in some problem-solving, such as around the issue of space that Larry came across earlier in the day. After Larry shares his problem with the class, Catie indicates that the blocks and the hooks need to be separated



somehow. Liliana then guides the students toward a productive resolution, engaging them in the process of coming up with a solution that works for the class.

With the appropriate opportunities, structures, and routines in place, Liliana's kindergarten class joyfully participates in action response learning during work time. In this way, work time is a setting that reflects Bank Street's credo by encouraging a "zest for living that comes from taking in the world with all five senses alert," and "lively intellectual curiosities that turn the world into an exciting laboratory and keep one ever a learner" (Bank Street College of Education, 2014c).

Wrapping Up and Beginning Anew

When work time comes to a close, the students engage in a few more activities to wrap up the day, initiated via a set of movement exercises Yazmin leads. She begins with a "rollercoaster stretch," where the children pretend their bodies are moving along the tracks of a rollercoaster. They reach their arms up high to the sky, standing on their tippy-toes, and pretend that their hands are at the top of a tall incline on the rollercoaster. Then they move their arms downward in a swan-dive motion, imitating a car going down on the rollercoaster tracks. Yazmin then moves on to another stretching routine related to the Shore Study. "Now, reach down to the bottom of the ocean," Yazmin says, bending over and mimicking her own directions, which the students mirror. She then stands up tall and the students do the same. "Ok, now shake off the water and the sand." Yazmin shakes each hand and then each foot. The children also shake the water and sand off their hands and their feet. After this stretch, the students form a clump on the rug and listen to a story about coral reefs.

Afterwards, an occupational therapist comes into the room and guides the students in a lesson on writing numbers, their last academic activity of the day. The children each have a piece of chalk and a small chalkboard to practice writing numbers 0–9. When they are done writing all of the numbers, they move on to letters until it is time for recess.

The class walks down the stairs towards the back of the building, side by side or hand in hand with their assigned classroom buddies. Yazmin leads the way, while Liliana walks with Ramya in the back of the line. Once outside, the students have to exit from the blacktop area and cross the street to get to the playground. The other kindergarten classes are already out there playing. Liliana and Yazmin's students rush off to the swings and monkey bars, as their teachers walk around and monitor their play. Liliana keeps a close eye on Rose, one of the students with special needs in her class. She follows Rose around the playground at a distance so that Rose can freely play with her peers, but steps in to help Rose as needed, such as when Rose has trouble climbing certain structures independently.

When recess comes to a close, Yazmin calls out, “Yazmin and Liliana’s class, please come line up!” She stands by a small cottage-like structure where the bathrooms are. The students find their buddies and line up in front of Yazmin. Liliana walks over slowly with Rose, who is skipping with the lingering excitement of recess. Yazmin looks out over the line to make sure that all of her students are present. Before she is about to cross the street, Yazmin turns around to check on her students once more. She notices that some children are not in line. “Where are your friends?” Yazmin asks the class.

One student says meekly, “Some of them are behind the bathroom.”

Yazmin makes a stern face as she turns towards the bathroom. Calling through the fence Yazmin says, “You need to come out from there and come line up. It’s not safe.”

Liliana watches as four students emerge from behind the brick wall of the bathroom building. With their heads down, they walk around the steel fence and join their classmates in line. Each child walks past Liliana, but does not make eye contact with her. Liliana then walks to the front of the line where Yazmin is standing. “We talked about this many times, Liliana,” Yazmin says to her colleague.

“We need to see that you know how to be safe before and after recess,” Liliana affirms in a steady voice as she looks out at all of the children. “When you do this, you are making a choice. You are making a choice to keep playing when we ask you to line up. Am I going to follow others hiding behind the bathroom? Am I going to keep playing? Or am I going to find my partner?”

“Find my partner,” the children say in unison.

“Remember, you are the ones making the choice to be safe or not safe.” Liliana turns to face Yazmin who nods at her. Yazmin continues to lead the students back to the classroom.

When the students return to their class, the children are prompted to gather things for dismissal. After they get their backpacks and lunch bags from their hooks, the students bring their things to the rug. They sit and chat, read, or play games with each other as they wait for their names to be called. Parents show up at the doorway to pick the children up from their classroom. Liliana and Yazmin make a point to warmly greet each parent, pulling a few aside to have more extended conversations with them about their specific child.

After parent pick-up, Liliana and Yazmin walk the remaining students down to the school cafeteria for bus pick-up. Echoes of children talking, laughing, and shouting reverberate against the cafeteria walls as students wait for their buses to be called. The teachers wait with their students until all of the children are out of the school

building. As they leave, the students wave to their teachers, who call out, “We’ll see you tomorrow!” After the last child has left, Liliana and Yazmin walk back up the stairs to their classroom, talking about individual children, and their plans for them tomorrow, along the way.

To the very end of the day, Liliana aims to make process transparent to her students. When children make choices with which she feels uncomfortable, she does not simply scold them or try to make them feel guilty. Rather, Liliana explicates how the students go through a thinking process that involves a choice—either to keep playing by unsafely hiding behind the bathroom or to find their partners and line up with the rest of the class. Students have responsibility over their decisions and the consequences that unfold from their choices. Liliana works with her students to help them understand processes that can help them make productive choices, skills that will be important well beyond the kindergarten year.

This challenging moment for the class does not get in the way of the children leaving Liliana and Yazmin’s class in good spirits. In fact, the students take their roles as learners who have autonomy to explore and make choices seriously, as is evident in their eagerness to return to school the next day. The end of the day is an opportunity for the students to soak in the emotional ties they have with their teachers and appreciate the caring they feel. Teachers can also touch base with individual students’ families in order to keep lines of communication open and to ensure that everyone is on the same page about how the different systems can work together to support each child.

Immediately after dismissal, Liliana activates her own reflection and planning process, in concert with her teaching partner. They continue to think about their students, their successes and challenges through the day, and how they can best meet the individual strengths, interests, and needs of each child. The conversations about children range from academic to social to emotional means of support, emblematic of how their practice is deeply infused with the principals of the developmental-interaction approach.

The Bank Street Impact

When asked what her closing thoughts are on the Bank Street approach and how it has impacted her practice, Liliana explains:

I feel like my experience at Bank Street has allowed me to understand children more. Has allowed me to learn about them through their play. I feel like it’s also made me more of a reflective teacher and helped me come to the realization that this kind of work doesn’t end with a master’s degree. The work is an ongoing process. It’s ongoing growth just like what happens to the little ones. For them it’s an

ongoing learning process, developmentally in so many areas, and it's the same for adults. It's the same for teachers....At Bank Street, I feel like we did a lot of work around informal and formal observations, fall visits to work with families, and student teaching in several sites. Reflecting on our experiences is part of our ongoing work. I mean the whole purpose of making so many observations is to take the time to think about what you're observing and to try to think about how that is guiding your teaching practices and your approach to teaching.

As evidenced through her words and her practice, Liliana is a teacher who truly values the whole child and designs her practice to spur growth and development for her students across the broad spectrum of developmental domains. Toward this end, she organizes a wide array of experiences to help her students become confident, independent makers of meaning, deeply engaged with self-regulatory processes and social-emotional learning. Liliana uses the extensive subject-matter knowledge that she developed at Bank Street to create opportunities for her students to engage with academic content and make meaningful connections with others and the world around them.

Play is an essential tool for growth in Liliana's practice. For her, play is not just something that is fun for children; it is central to their social, emotional, and intellectual development. Further, Liliana is a careful observer of children, and she adjusts her practice in response to the themes and notes she records throughout the day. To her, children learn best when they are aware of their thinking and decision-making processes; the same is true for teachers. Her ultimate goal is to prepare her students to be engaged and productive citizens of the world, well beyond their kindergarten days. Liliana is a teacher who practices the developmental-interaction approach daily. Through her time at Bank Street and her various experiences as an early childhood educator, Liliana has become a teacher who has learned "to foster children's curiosity, love of learning, tolerance of human difference, supportive sense of community, and engagement with the world around them" (Bank Street College of Education, 2014a).

Afterword

Our aim in this case study of Liliana’s classroom was to share vivid descriptions of the practices of a Bank Street graduate in her classroom 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 City 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 a school 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 Brooklyn New School (BNS) for a full week over the course of two visits 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."

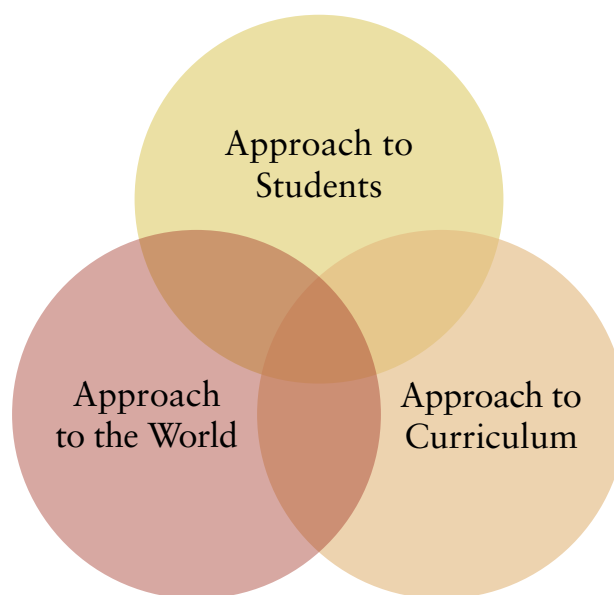
1. Education is a vehicle for creating and promoting social justice and encouraging participation in democratic processes.
2. The teacher has a deep knowledge of subject matter areas and is actively engaged in learning through formal study, direct observation, and participation.
3. Understanding children's 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, 1972, p. 61).

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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