



Bank Street

Occasional Paper Series

Occasional
Paper
Series

Volume 2000
Number 4 *Kids Make Sense and They Vote?*

Article 1

April 2000

Kids Make Sense... And They Vote: The Importance of Child Study in Learning to Teach Responsively

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Recommended Citation

Erickson, F. (2000). Kids Make Sense... And They Vote: The Importance of Child Study in Learning to Teach Responsively. *Occasional Paper Series, 2000* (4). Retrieved from <https://educate.bankstreet.edu/occasional-paper-series/vol2000/iss4/1>

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BARBARA BIBER LECTURE
**KIDS MAKE SENSE . . . AND THEY VOTE:
THE IMPORTANCE OF CHILD STUDY IN LEARNING
TO TEACH RESPONSIVELY**

frederick erickson

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The annual Barbara Biber lecture, given under the auspices of the Graduate School of Education at Bank Street College, honors the contributions of Barbara Biber (1903-1993) to both Bank Street and the wider educational community. Dr. Biber was a central figure shaping the institution that evolved from the Bureau of Educational Experiments to become Bank Street College of Education. A keen observer of children and classrooms who immersed herself in the phenomena of children's and teachers' lives, her writings achieved a depth of insight and conceptual elegance. As a researcher and scholar, she continuously reexamined and refined her thinking.

This lecture memorializes her progressive legacy.

FREDERICK ERICKSON is George F. Kneller Professor of Anthropology of Education at the University of California, Los Angeles. His work focuses on issues of educational equity and reform in schools, communities, and families. Dr. Erickson's approach identifies the workings of ethnicity, race, class, gender, and language and culture within formal and informal educational processes, and he has been an innovator in video-based research on classroom discourse and social interaction.

Erickson studied composition, music history, and ethnomusicology at Northwestern University, where he received his bachelor's and master's degrees in music in 1963 and 1964. After several years of full-time employment in youth work, in literacy and employment education, and assisting in community organization and the civil rights movement, he returned to Northwestern, where he received his Ph.D. in education in 1969. He has taught at such institutions of higher learning as the University of Illinois, Harvard University, Michigan State University, and the University of Pennsylvania (where he directed the Center for Urban Ethnography and convened the annual Ethnography in Education Forum).

In 1977, Erickson was President of the Council on Anthropology and Education of the American Anthropological Association; in 1991 he received that society's George and Louise Spindler Award for outstanding scholarly contributions to educational anthropology. During 1987-88, he was the Vice President for Division G (Social Context of Education) of the American Educational Research Association, from which he received an award for Distinguished Research on Minority Issues in Education in 1984. During the academic year 1998-99, he was a Spencer Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences in Stanford, California.

Erickson's publications include two books and numerous articles, including "The Counselor as Gatekeeper: Social Interaction in Interviews, Sights and Sounds of Life in Schools," an essay on qualitative research on teaching for the third edition of the *Handbook of Research on Teaching*; and articles on ethnicity and ethnographic description in *Sociolinguistics: An International Handbook of the Science of Language and Society*. He has been a member of the editorial boards of *Discourse Processes*, the *Review of Educational Research*, and *Educational Studies* and is currently a member of the editorial boards of *Teachers College Record* and *Research on Language and Social Interaction*.

It is an honor to have been invited to speak at the Barbara Biber Lecture Series at the start of the 1999-2000 academic year at Bank Street College of Education. For me the work of Bank Street has been a beacon of orientation and hope for many years. It has influenced and inspired me for a number of reasons: because I have worked closely with one of its alumni, Courtney Cazden, a valued colleague and friend; because I am married to one of its graduates, Joanne Straceski, and through her have come to know and learn from Leah Levinger and Edna Shapiro, Jo's mentors and friends who have become my own; because my former students Zina Steinberg and Paul Sylvester are alumni of this College; because I have met and admired the work of many others presently and formerly working here, including Linda Levine, Marian Howard, Amy Lawrence, Madeleine Ray, and Suzanne Carothers whom, a few years ago, I invited to be a keynote speaker at the Ethnography in Education Forum at the University of Pennsylvania.

But Bank Street points to "educational north" for me for more basic reasons. What has been done here is fundamental for understanding the relations of mutual influence among students, teachers, and learning environments, and also for taking account of the relations between local practice within the small-scale "here and now" interactional ecosystems of immediate learning environments and the workings of culture, language, and society across more distal connections in social space and time.

One of the main lessons in the struggle for progressive education over the last century seems to be that if we want to make school learning environments better places for the daily work of students and teachers, we must take seriously the workings of culture, society, and history within which those local learning environments and those particular people's lives are embedded. Although that is by no means a new insight, working on it has become a life project for me, as it has for Bank Street as an institution.

Preparing this lecture has given me the chance to become more deeply imbued in the work and voices of Harriet Johnson, Lucy Sprague Mitchell, and Barbara Biber, who developed and articulated with their colleagues—the teachers, researchers, and children who have worked here and in affiliated schools—the "developmental-interaction" perspective and practice that has become the hall-

mark of Bank Street. I will try to show some connections between those foundational insights and perspectives and current issues we face at the turn of a new century as we continue our quest for betterment in the educational lives and life chances of students and teachers in America's schools. One of the texts I read was Lucy Sprague Mitchell's (1950) statement of our aim in *Our Children and Our Schools*:

Today's schools are beginning to take on [a] twofold job—to give children a good life while they are children and to give each child opportunities, within his potentiality, to develop ways that will lead toward a good life as an adult. . . . Schools are beginning to feel that it is their job to see that teachers, too, have a good life, both for the sake of teachers themselves and for the children they teach. Children and teachers live side by side in one room for many hours a day. Neither children nor teachers can have a truly good life unless both have it. Indeed, the essence of a good life for either children or teachers is that they live it together. (pp. 3-4)

Another essay I read was *The Art of Block Building* by Harriet Johnson (1933). It is the first of a series of pamphlets that included Lucy Sprague Mitchell's stories about streets, boats and bridges, and trains (Mitchell, 1933a, 1933b), her *Young Geographers* (Mitchell, 1934/1991), and Barbara Biber's essay *Children's Drawings: From Lines to Pictures* (Biber, 1934/1984). Mitchell and Biber both admired Johnson, who had established a nursery school in which much use was made of the sets of blocks invented by Caroline Pratt. Any of you who has seen Johnson's essay knows that it presents, in brief compass and deceptively simple language, profound insights on children's work with blocks as evidence of their processes of thought and development.

Those insights were based on the kind of close observation of children's work that I will discuss more fully in the next section. For now, let us note what Johnson (1933) said about the conditions for providing young children a good learning experience with blocks:

The details of the teaching techniques which help develop profitable use of blocks cannot be discussed here, but the essentials are a recognition of the possibilities in block building, actual respect for and interest in the activity,

the provision of space and time for it and the protection of the children from interruption and encroachment from less interested individuals. (p. 47)

There, in a nutshell, are the conditions for providing a good learning environment. For an activity that is rich in educative possibilities, first recognize those possibilities, and respect and be interested in the organization of the activity (including the organization of the actions of those who are engaged in it). Then provide space and time for it. Finally, protect learners from distraction while involved in it. How cogent. What clarity. No wonder Mitchell and Biber admired Johnson and learned from and with her.

Johnson showed the reader that, by watching carefully what a child did with blocks, one could see important aspects of how that child was making sense. In a similar vein, the title of this lecture, *Kids Make Sense . . . and They Vote*, is a play on the words of the title of my friend Ray McDermott's (1976) doctoral dissertation, *Kids Make Sense*.

Ray is an anthropologist of education, as I am. He says that in our study of learning across the course of human evolution and through cross-cultural comparisons across all contemporary human societies, anthropologists have learned two important things: Everybody makes sense all the time (lots of sense), and everybody is busy all the time (very busy). This is to say that all human learning and activity are "constructivist" in their nature and character—we *make* sense; moreover, they are socially and culturally constructed. I add a third point: In making sense and in being busy, everybody is always someplace. In other words, all socially constructed action, including what we call thinking and feeling, is *situated*. There is no cognition, no emotion, that is not situated in an immediate scene of social relationships and in a wider sphere of history, culture, and society.

The implication of these points for educators is that we start by assuming that everybody is making sense—not just that some people are making sense and others aren't or some people are making more sense than others. Everybody's sense making is sensible in some way and is continually in the process of being made. Everybody is busy in working on daily living all the time. It is not that some are busy and others are not, or that some are busier than others.

Let me sharpen these points a little. It is not that the privileged in our

society—people who are men or boys, whose skins are pink in color tone, whose annual family incomes exceed \$100,000 a year, who have careers rather than just jobs, who have health insurance and college educations, whose mother tongue is “standard English”—make more sense and work harder at daily life than the less privileged—people who are women or girls, whose skins are various shades of olive or brown, whose annual family incomes are \$20,000 or less, who have low-prestige and low-interest jobs (including low-prestige and low-interest classroom jobs, such as being in the bottom reading group), and who speak a language other than English at home.* And it is not that the less privileged are less situated in society than are the privileged, or that “decontextualized” work is appropriate for them—drill and practice and compliance as children in preparation for an adult work life that will also be drill and practice and compliance—while “situated cognition” and intrinsically interesting work in school and society is more appropriate for those who are already privileged, in a kind of educational and occupational apartheid.

The implication of the notion that everybody is making sense and is always

* In education, and in society more generally, language differences become politicized as grounds for invidious comparisons among people. There is a close connection between language style and power position in society, as reflected in the aphorism “a language is a dialect that has an army and police force.” In the 1960s, the language and speech style of low-income children were used as an explanation for their school failure. That “linguistic deprivation hypothesis” was strongly criticized in the early 1970s (e.g., Baratz & Baratz, 1970; Cazden, Hymes, & John, 1972; Labov 1972; and see the discussion in Erickson, 1996). In spite of that critique, the belief continues that children need to learn to speak “standard English” in order not just to “fit in,” but to be capable of rational thought in the first place. The recent furor over “Ebonics” (black English), the Proposition 227 initiative in California banning bilingual instruction, and the continuing activity of the “English Only” movement shows how persistent are these beliefs about language in relation to schooling—beliefs that have been repeatedly shown by linguists, anthropologists, psychologists, and educators to be unjustified. These are beliefs that contribute to the (sometimes well-intended) denial of educational opportunity to lower-class children overall, and especially to children from linguistically and racially stigmatized backgrounds, by providing a rationale for “remedial” educational interventions which, by forcing routine drill and practice on low-level skills, alienate students from school—all the more tragically because “remedy” of that kind was unnecessary.

being busy someplace is that cognition and emotion are just as situated and sensible for those in our world who are oppressed and despised as they are for those who are privileged and admired. What follows for the design and provision of formal education is that in schools no one's work should be alienated labor (nor need it be, for the laborer's own future good, like bad-tasting medicine), whether it be the daily work of a student or that of a teacher.

Sadly, this implication is constantly ignored by mainstream educators. Over and over again, they (and I should also say "we" because we all do some of this) create and maintain school learning environments in which learning is a burden, or a hurdle (see especially McDermott & Varenne, 1998; Mehan, Okamoto, & Adams, 1996), a sociocultural border checkpoint where learners are stopped and frisked. This not only inhibits the learner, but it makes teaching a matter of immersion in boring routine and in continual skirmishes with students over the semblance of "classroom control," in tandem with the increasing vulnerability of the teacher over the years to the corrupting influence inherent in the exercise of small, bureaucratic kinds of sadism that are allowed to run unchecked in the routine conduct of practice—a corruption akin to that of the development of cynicism and sadism that occurs so often among experienced police officers.

Learners not only make sense, but they vote. This is to say that learning involves an act of will. It is a form of political assent. Students, as the less powerful partners in educational encounters, may vote silently by voting with their feet. Or they may vote yes or no vocally. But the will of the learner cannot be totally coerced, and education that tries to force children to go against their interests and their sense of self in order to succeed in school is profoundly inefficient. It is like trying to push down the accelerator pedal and the brake pedal simultaneously while driving a car. Yet, tragically, conventional formal learning environments often present barriers to the learner's will and violate the learner's dignity. They make it hard for the learner to vote affirmatively for learning. That's what can be seen in the story of a pernicious learning environment as told autobiographically by Barbara Biber (1984):

I could not reach to the top of the librarian's desk where I stood beside my older sister in the Tompkins Square branch library in the Williamsburg

section of Brooklyn, scared and thrilled. Since I had learned to read before going to school I was ready for that passport to the delicious world of books—a public library card.

“How old are you?” “Five years old.” Fine. “Where do you live?” “302 Hart Street.” Fine. “What is your father’s first name?” “Wilhelm.” Not fine at all. “You go home and learn how to say your father’s name in English and maybe then I will give you a library card.” Bang. I was not especially subject to obvious discrimination in later years, but that moment in childhood registered. It came through to me at some inner level that I belonged to an out-group and it wasn’t a good place to be. It diminished me and never completely left me, despite my tremendous admiration for the Jewish people from whom I come and their valiant contribution to the highest dreams of man through the centuries.

I must have gotten the library card soon after that incident since I remember, in the years between five and sixteen, reading through the shelves of that small library and chafing at the restrictions, especially in the summertime, of only one fiction and one nonfiction book per day. (p. 125)

That personal story of learning had a relatively happy ending—Barbara did finally get her library card. But what destructive effects flowed from that border check! Even for a talented and emotionally resilient person such as Barbara Biber, seeds of ethnic self-doubt and shame were shown by the language police in, of all places, a library—an environment designed to enable learning. Her vignette leaves us wondering if in order to get the library card in a subsequent visit she had to suffer the indignity of revoicing her father’s name—to say “William” to the librarian instead of “Wilhelm.”

One reason I resonate so with the perspective of Biber, Mitchell, and Johnson is because my mother was a children’s librarian who would never have done to a child or parent what that Williamsburg librarian did. My mother began her professional career in the mid-1920s, that heady period of the formation of the Bureau of Educational Experiments at 69 Bank Street. She was about the same age as Biber. She worked in libraries in immigrant neighborhoods in Minneapolis and Duluth, Minnesota. She was passionately opposed to anti-Semitism and racism. I think it was no accident that she was also a socialist. And she had a wonder-

ful capacity for selling children on books—she started with each child by saying, “What do you like: Do you like horses? Baseball? Kittens? Steamshovels? Castles? A story about a girl in a house on the prairie?” In other words, in the interaction between novice and expert in what Vygotsky called the “zone of proximal development” my mother, as a children’s librarian, always looked first to where the learner was. Then she made a move on the kid. (That was practicing as a librarian responsively just as I believe teachers should teach responsively.) You can see that, although as a child I lived far away from New York City, I grew up with Bank Street, as it were. In addition, I grew up seeing that women could be smart and professionally competent and that adults who paid close attention to children’s interests were doing something very important.

Another reason I resonate with Biber and Bank Street is because of my own experience of being stopped and frisked in a pedagogically traditional first grade in the small town where we had moved (Lake Wobegon, Minnesota, for those of you who know Garrison Keillor’s “Prairie Home Companion” radio show). During all of first grade, I was in the bottom reading group. We had a reading group called Baltimore Orioles, one called Bluebirds, one called Cardinals, and I forget the name of the one I was in. Maybe it was Sparrows. I know what the bottom reading group feels like, and I will never forget the fear, the sick feeling in the pit of the stomach that comes with being confronted with a flash card as a border check-point moment (see Figures 1 and 2).

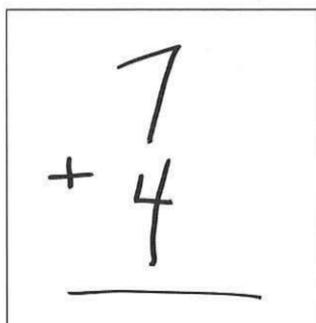


Figure 1
Math flash card, 1947, first grade

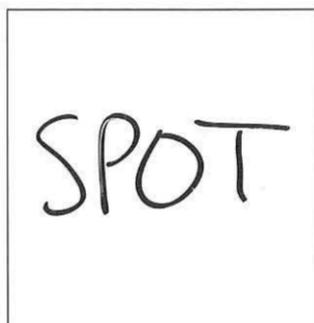


Figure 2
Reading flash card, 1947, first grade

Later, I will point out that any moment of subject matter engagement with some particular subject matter structure is always accompanied by a particular arrangement of social participation structure—in this case, all the other children and the teacher watching the child given the flash card and waiting for that child to say the right answer. It is important that we learn to pay close attention to the particulars of social participation arrangement as well as those of subject matter in any classroom task.

As did Biber's, my personal story has a happy ending. Although I failed first grade in my small-town school, my mother taught me to read at home. (Had I not by accident of birth belonged to a family with that kind of cultural capital, I would not be standing here now giving this speech.) I was allowed to go on to second grade the next fall after a meeting in the school superintendent's office in late August, during which I read fluently from the last primer in the first-grade *Dick and Jane* series. Like Biber, I was left throughout my adult life with anger at what children are subjected to needlessly in school as they experience the mundane workings of social distancing and oppression that are embedded in the conventional "default mode" of educational practice. Biber had a passion for social justice that found expression in her work at Bank Street, and that points to the fact that the developmental-interaction perspective she articulated with her colleagues focuses not only on the actions and lives of individual children, but on the social and cultural circumstances of the communities and the society in which they live. Fostering individual growth and social transformation are linked aims in the work she was engaged in with Mitchell and others in the late 20s and early 30s, and they remain linked aims for many of us today, as evidenced by the title of a recent book on learning to teach, *Teaching to Change the World* (Oakes & Lipton, 1999).

The approach to pedagogy developed here turns on taking an interest in and having respect for the sense making that is revealed in children's practice of engaging in activities because they are intrinsically interesting or satisfying. This is to take an attitude of research toward the student, in the most basic sense of that term. "Research" means paying more than usual attention to a phenomenon of interest; to "search" and then search again is to *re-search*. Coming to know a child by paying close attention to that child's actions and sustaining that attention over

time as the child's capacities develop may seem so obviously sensible to you that you may take for granted the profound nature of this way of knowing in the world—taking it seriously by paying attention, through firsthand observation, to the order that is apparent in the mundane conduct of daily life.

Let me illustrate with the first two examples of a child's practice in block building that were presented in Harriet Johnson's (1933, p. 10) pamphlet on that subject (see Figure 3). Notice the stack of five blocks on the upper right (2), with the second from the top slightly out of alignment, and on the lower left (3) another stack of five blocks, placed on top of an already constructed box, with the edges of the blocks perfectly aligned.

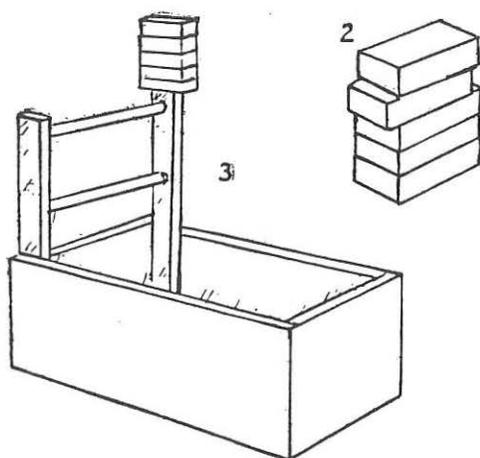


Figure 3
Two constructions with blocks (Johnson, 1933, p. 10)

Here is what Johnson wrote in commenting on these two figures:

At two years and three months Edith, who had discovered that blocks were not just luggage but building material, achieved this tower. First one block and then another, laid as nearly as possible in the same place [2]. . . each form evolves into more and more detailed constructions which are more and

more difficult of execution, as skill of hand and an understanding of the possibilities within the material develop. . . . Edith, two years, four months, chose the corner of the “push box” on which to build her tower. Evening of the edges became an essential technique [3]. (pp. 8-9)

Thus, to Johnson’s experienced mind and eye, the difference in alignment between the two instances of piled blocks was seen not as a randomly occurring difference, but one that pointed to ordering, making sense, to tactic and strategy in the practice of block building. This is to focus on what Bateson (1972) called the *difference that makes a difference*—a distinctive feature that differentiates two contrasting patterns or modes of order.

To see the order, the sense, in mundane activity whose orderliness and sense making—whose artistry—can be easily overlooked by the unpracticed and disrespectful eye and mind and heart, that is the essential quality of the approach to social research called “ethnography.” Anthropologists and qualitative sociologists have been using this approach for almost a century to show how overlooked people in traditional societies and in communities of mostly poor people around the world make sense, just as much sense as those who live in privileged positions in what we dare to call “civilized” societies. It is that same kind of imagination—that same generosity in paying attention to what is easily overlooked and undervalued—that animated the work of Johnson, Mitchell, and Biber.

Let us now consider the first three drawings (see Figure 4) that are discussed in Biber’s classic paper “Children’s Drawings: From Lines to Pictures” (1934/1984, p 159). In the first drawing, curved and straight lines and dots alternate rather freely from the upper lefthand corner of the page. In the second drawing, a slightly curved line is repeated more consistently from the left of page to the right, with slight embellishment in the lower righthand corner of the picture. In the third drawing, circles are repeated and dots appear prominently at the top and slightly to the right, while on the lower left is a set of almost parallel straight lines crosscutting the beginnings of lines from which circles have been generated in a counterclockwise motion.

Here is what Biber said about these products of children’s beginning artistic practice:

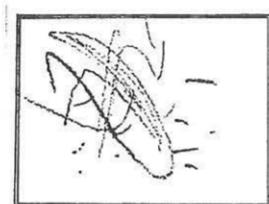


Fig. 1

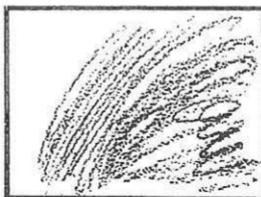


Fig. 2

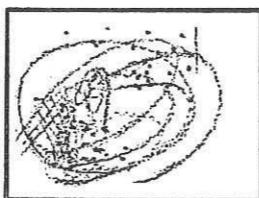


Fig. 3

Figure 4

Drawings by children, 22 months (Biber, 1934; reprinted in Biber, 1984, p. 159)

The illustrations . . . show that before the age of two years children can grasp a crayon with sufficient firmness to make marks on a paper. A well sustained oscillating line, often drawn as an arc, appears in a variety of colors. . . . Dots and a repetitive circling are occasional. The paper is not entirely covered and, more often than not, the markings cluster toward one of the corners. Observations as they draw bear out deductions which can be made from these drawings as to what constitutes drawing activity at this stage. (p. 158)

In the next paragraph of her essay, Biber described the character of a child's practice—the process of production by which these drawings, as products, were accomplished:

The muscular action involved is a large arm action evidenced in the arc form of the oscillating lines. The child's arm acts as a whole, usually from the shoulder, occasionally from the elbow. The child clutches his crayon firmly with four fingers and thumb opposed. . . . The action in his arm reverberates, to some extent, throughout his whole body. His head may bob vigorously or his legs wag synchronously under the table. If this drawing is especially vigorous, his whole upper body may reinforce his arm action, and it is not uncommon to hear a rhythmic vocal accompaniment.

It has become fashionable to speak of action and thought as “embodied” (see Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Merleau-Ponty, 1947) and here that embodiment is to be seen in the working of a child at drawing, as described in 1934.

The all-encompassing activity of the child—visual, kinesthetic, vocal—in the accomplishment of the work we call play points as well to another insight of Biber's—that thought and emotion are always joined in the process we call learning. Contemporary neuroscience now shows us, at the level of the biochemistry of the neuron and neural networks, how all cognition touches on emotions—all cognition is “hot cognition.” This insight, too, was prefigured in the work of Biber and her colleagues, who over and over again bridge easy binary—thought and feeling, individual and environment, self and society. The combination of thought with feeling was seen as occurring within practice as the worker engaged the social environment. Biber and Franklin (1967) wrote in their paper on the developmental-interaction approach:

Growth and maturing involve conflict. The inner life of the growing child is a play of forces between urgent drives and impulses, contradictory impulses within the self and demanding reality outside the self. The resolution of these conflicts bears the imprint of the interaction with the salient life figures and the demands of the culture. (p. 19; cited in Biber & Shapiro, 1972, p. 67)

In this framework conflict is seen as an inevitable part of growth, and the child's emotional and impulse life as inextricably part of his growth and development. Thus, by this view, both affective and cognitive development are shaped by the nature of the individual's encounters with the environment. (Biber & Shapiro 1972, p. 67)

I will say a bit more on the social and cultural environment, but for now let me recall something another student of child development, Beatrice Whiting, said in a faculty meeting in the early 1970s. She was commenting on the antiseptically cognitive focus of the Piagetians, whose heyday it was then: “[From them] you get the sense that people are only alive from the neck up!” Learning involves the whole organism—passions, joys, fears, movements in physical and social space as well as thoughts. That is the sense we get in another autobiographical passage from Biber (1984) as she told of her childhood thrill of viewing from a skyscraper the buildings of Manhattan and the inscription of human practices within it as an image of social process and relationship

To mark my graduation from elementary school, my father took me to the top of the Woolworth Building (the highest New York City skyscraper at the time) and pointed out the wondrous crisscross of streets below, of bridges carrying cars and streetcars and ferries riding back and forth from the marvelous isle. Could I have guessed that here were the seeds for falling in love with Lucy Mitchell’s brand of human geography and the community patterns the students created under her guidance. (p. 126)

In addition to falling in love with Mitchell’s human geography, Biber was so aware of the sensory qualities in learning’s passions, as indicated by a throw-away parenthesis in her 1984 discussion of young children’s writing: “the misplaced priority of the mechanical over the conceptual, and the accent on the mechanics (when children are just tasting the world of writing)” (p. 265). To taste the world of writing, to smell it, to move in it kinesthetically. Mitchell shared this sensibility, this keen apprehension of the palpability and the personal quality of inquiry, the totalizing of involvement that characterizes children’s sense making in play, and the way in which a moment in play invokes and utters through enacted symbols a whole social world. Here is what she said in an essay titled “Imagination and Realism”:

A group of five-year-olds are on the floor with piles of different sized pieces of wood variously arranged. . . . Here comes one block of wood with two smaller cubes on top of it. The small girl who is pushing calls, “Ding-ding, sh-sh-sh-toot-toot.” There is no bell; there is no whistle; only pieces of wood. Or is there an engine in the room? Are there engineers and tracks

and tunnels and switches and stations and baggage and passengers? Surely the five-year-olds would say “yes” unhesitatingly. (Mitchell, 1931, p. 129)

There is a revolutionary aspect to this kind of play, which reminds me of another of my mother’s insights. She was aware of the liberating potential in children’s freely chosen reading, as well as in what parents read to children. She prepared a book list on exemplary children’s books in the late 1940s that was nationally and internationally circulated by the national P.T.A. Its title, taking words from Keats, was “Through Magic Casements.” My mother saw that those books that are read to us and those we choose to read ourselves are windows that open on vistas of human experience beyond the immediate compass of our present lives. She understood that the wings of imagination are strong and that on them we can fly far through the windows that books provide. Here is what Biber (1951/1984) said in a similar vein in her essay “Play as a Growth Process”:

[An] important by-product of play is the feeling of strength it yields to the child, a relief from the powerlessness and helplessness that many children feel keenly as junior members of our well-ordered adult world. In play we give them an opportunity to counteract this powerlessness to a degree. It is the child’s chance to lay the plans, to judge what is best, to create the sequence of events. Dramatic play is one of the basic ways in which children can try out their talents for structuring life. The fact that they deal with symbols rather than realities does not detract from the sense of mastery. (p. 189)

In the promethean potential of young children’s freely chosen work, which is play—including playful reading and writing—we see the roots of possibility for social transformation. That is why what has been done here at Bank Street is so dangerous, and so important.

SOME CURRENT ISSUES

Over the last thirty years, there has been a “cognitive revolution” in psychology, anthropology, sociology, and linguistics. Within psychology this started with an individualist emphasis, with a formalist conception of rationality. The computer was taken for a time as a metaphor for how the brain worked, and purported thought processes were sketched using the same kinds of tree diagrams and flow charts that

were employed by computer systems designers. A field developed called “artificial intelligence.” Now things are much messier and more expansive as our conceptions of human intelligence become less artificial. We are developing ways of seeing more deeply into the workings of social interaction as a learning environment.

As I noted earlier, contemporary perspectives see cognition as situated, and as involving emotion as well as thought (see Greeno, 1991). The influence of Soviet psychology has been profound—the work of Vygotsky (a contemporary of Mitchell) and his students being translated by Michael Cole and others, and the implications of this “activity theory” extended by Cole (1996; see also Newman, Griffin, & Cole, 1988), Barbara Rogoff (1990), Luis Moll (1990), James Wertsch (1990, 1998), Roland Tharp and Ron Gallimore (1991), James Greeno (1991; Greeno & Goldman, 1998), and many others. Moll and his colleagues (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) have been exploring the “funds of knowledge” that working-class Mexican-American families possess and communicate to young children, thus challenging the fallacy that is still so widely believed that poor children whose mother tongue is something other than English, or so-called “standard English,” come to school as empty vessels, which must first be filled by the school before the children can learn. (Who could read Harriet Johnson or Barbara Biber on young children’s play and think that “readiness” was a problem for America’s schools? Of course children come to school ready to learn—all children. The goal of the Education 2000 report, that by next year all children will come to school “ready to learn,” is a ludicrous misrepresentation. The problem is that the classrooms poor children attend and their teachers are usually not ready to treat them as already knowledgeable and capable. We have a massive *school* readiness problem in the United States, but it is not one of *student* readiness.)

Contemporary work with video recordings of classroom interaction gives us close access to the details and nuances of the conduct of talk and nonverbal activity among students and teachers as a learning environment. Recent sociolinguistically oriented studies by Sarah Michaels (1981), Mary Catherine O’Connor (1996; see also O’Connor & Michaels 1993), James Collins (1986, 1995), Ann Rosebery and Beth Warren (1998), Barry Osborne (1996), Kris Gutierrez (1995, 1999; Gutierrez, Rymes, & Larson 1995), among many others (see the review article by Mehan,

1998), are helping us see fresh aspects of the organization of real-time conduct of interaction within which learning takes place.

These analyses show how inextricable are the relations between the organization of social participation and the organization of subject matter in instruction. Studying a classroom to see what social interactional ways there are to get to which aspects of subject matter is a continually fruitful exercise. Let us return for a moment to Figure 1 as a simple example. Contemporary research shows that this sum ($7+4 = ?$) is a fundamentally differing task depending on its situation in social relationships—when and how one can ask for help, who sees if the answer is right or wrong, how much emphasis there is on figuring out an answer relative to the rightness or wrongness of the answer itself. If you can get help on the task, it's practice. If you can't get help, it's a test. Thus, the nature of an academic task is determined by the surround of social relations within which the task is engaged by the learner (cf. Erickson, 1996; Erickson & Shultz, 1991).

Much of this new discourse analysis is influenced by translation of the work of another Russian who flourished in the 1920s, the literary theorist Bakhtin (1981; Morson & Emerson, 1990). The essays on discourse analysis in science education and in literacy education by Jay Lemke (1990) and James Gee (1990), following on Bakhtin and the French post-structuralists Bourdieu (1977; see also Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Foucault, 1979), show how local interaction in the classroom relates to issues of power, privilege, and alienation in society more generally. Writers in critical pedagogy and curriculum—Michael Apple (1993) and his students (Apple & Weis, 1983), Henry Giroux (1991), Peter McClaren, feminists such as Valerie Walkerdine (1988, 1998) and Sandra Harding (1998), and critical race theorists such as Cameron McCarthy (McCarthy & Crichtlow, 1993) and Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994)—show how issues of power in relation to knowledge work to silence students from oppressed backgrounds and alienate them from school knowledge, pointing to fundamental issues of trust and risk in the everyday relations between teachers, students, and subject matter.

Current studies of local learning environments, in other words, break through the walls of the classroom or home and show how the wider society's influences are

present in the form of social gravity on playing fields that are not level; some children in school are always having to work uphill.

Even though the language and the disciplinary sources of this contemporary work may not at first glance seem consonant with that of Bank Street, we need to remember that teacher education here always has looked beyond the individual child and the classroom wall. In the early 1930s, Lucy Sprague Mitchell assigned beginning students a “five-finger exercise”: Stand on a street corner for fifteen minutes and pay close attention to and take note of everything you see happening as people and vehicles flow past you. Spend five of the fifteen minutes with your eyes closed (Antler, 1987, p. 312). Later, it was a requirement for graduation that one not only have a year’s internship in a classroom, but that one write a community study based on a year’s observational research that reviewed the geography, the occupations, and the home lives of the children who attended the classroom (Antler, 1987, p. 312). Students also took a “long trip” each spring break to Appalachian communities in West Virginia for a kind of cross-cultural immersion experience (Antler, 1987, pp. 317-318; Vascellero, 1999). From the beginning, there was a sense that a teacher’s knowledge of children’s lives needed to extend beyond what could be learned simply by watching children in the classroom. In other words, the foundation for learning to teach was in the general ethnography of community and society, as well as in the micro-ethnography of the classroom.

A related current emphasis is on learning as apprenticeship in a community of practice. Here, significant authors are Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991; Lave 1988; Wenger, 1998) and Barbara Rogoff (1990). This view sees interaction as a learning environment involving multiple teachers who engage in real work with learners who, depending on their skills, can participate more peripherally or more centrally in the work in complex relations of mutual influence between experts and novices. A related body of research is on the socially distributed character of knowledge—knowing and learning as residing in a group rather than in an individual (e.g., Hutchins, 1991, 1995). This, too, was refigured in earlier work at Bank Street. Here is a passage from Biber (1951/1984) that points to the communal character of conceptions of things and of their representation symbolically:

When a two- or three-year-old plays train, he does so simply. The train goes. It makes sounds. Just a block and a child saying “Choo” may be Johnny’s idea of a train, but very soon he meets up with Mary, who has been very much impressed with the odd way people sit in trains, looking at one another’s backs. To another child in the group, a train is not a train unless it whistles. Soon, a composite train emerges: It goes, it says “Choo,” it whistles intermittently, people sit in it one behind the other. Children at all levels pool their ideas in free dramatic play, expose one another to new impressions, stimulate one another to new wondering and questioning. Can we fail to recognize this process as learning? (p. 189)

Finally, there is a lot of talk today about practitioner inquiry—inquiry in and through educational practice as a site for generating new knowledge of practice. One manifestation of this is in collaborative action research undertaken between academic researchers and classroom teachers (see Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 1994; Atweh, Kemmis, & Weeks 1998; Brown & Dowling, 1998; Erickson & Christman, 1996). Another manifestation is in the research into the conduct of their practice that teachers undertake by and for themselves, often in study groups. I had the privilege of acquaintance with one such group of teachers in Philadelphia, the Teachers’ Learning Collaborative. This group of public and private school teachers has met every Thursday after school during the school year since 1978. On research by individual teachers, the writing of Nancie Atwell (1991), Vivian Paley (1979, 1997), and Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle (1993) comes instantly to mind.

Again, both collaborative action research and teacher research were pioneered here at Bank Street. When Barbara Biber joined the Bureau of Educational Experiments in 1929, other academics had worked there, including her teacher at Barnard and Columbia, Franz Boas (the founder of American anthropology), consulting on physical measurements of children—a line of research they fortunately gave up! Academically trained researchers like Biber worked closely with classroom teachers and with innovators like Johnson and Mitchell. It was through their collaboration that the “developmental-interaction approach” grew at Bank Street. And teachers in the Bureau’s nursery school did research in the most basic sense of paying closer than usual atten-

tion to the children they taught. Here is what Biber (1984) said on this point:

There was always evaluation, self-examination by the educator, in one form or another. When educators like Harriet Johnson and Susan Isaacs in the 1920s established the importance of carefully planned record-taking as the basic material for studying developmental change and pursuing theoretical inquiry, they were clearly on an evaluation course. Now so many years and so many standardized tests later, there is revived confidence in documented classroom observation as essential data for the analysis of educational input. It is interesting to have Harriet Johnson's work and method (1928) esteemed by a contemporary Bank Street colleague who has had experience with current evaluation techniques and is discouraged with contradictory outcomes. Referring to the need to return to direct study of the classroom, [Edna] Shapiro writes: "Such suggestions are, of course, a sad reflection of the state of the art of evaluation today. It may seem like advocating hand tools in a machine age, and perhaps their renaissance is akin to that of home-baked bread and quilting. Indeed, the teachers in at least some of the nursery schools of the twenties always carried a notebook and a pencil to set down a telling observation." (pp. 138-139)

CONCLUSION

If we are to teach responsively, with an awareness of and respect for what students already know and can do, then our teaching must begin by coming to know our students by paying closer than usual attention to them as they busy themselves in sense making. That makes it possible for us to learn to teach them in a way to which they can respond by voting "yes." There is no shortcut for this, no end run around the labor-intensive process of becoming acquainted with the student, the student's lifeworld, and the community and societal circumstances of the student's life. Similarly, there is no shortcut around curriculum based on students' genuine research into the particulars of their own world.

Bank Street has been a pioneer in this combination of teacher research and student research as a means of education for both. I want to end by saying that the present moment is no time for Bank Street to rest on those laurels. It is still appropriate, still necessary for Bank Street faculty and graduate students and teachers in

the school, working together, to share the knowledge that has been and is being generated here. Sal Vascellaro has done this in his doctoral thesis on Mrs. Mitchell's Long Trips, which is being prepared for publication. Joan Cenedella's (1996) doctoral thesis examined the origin and development of the Bureau of Educational Experiments. Edna Shapiro and Nancy Nager (2000) present their reflections on the current state of the developmental-interaction approach, together with chapters on related topics by various authors who have been associated with the work of Bank Street (Nager & Shapiro, 2000)..

In this time of general curricular standards and a push for accountability based on narrow outcome measures, and as the educational and religious right again clamor for "back to basics" curricula, Bank Street educators must continue to articulate what the real basics are. Just because there is nothing new under the sun does not mean that fundamentals are irrelevant in the present time nor is it foolish to expect that the wheel rediscovered might still be useful.

There is no better way to make this point than by ending this paper with the words of John Dewey (1928):

The method of the teacher . . . becomes a matter of finding out conditions which call out self-educative activity, or learning, and of cooperating with the activities of the pupils so that they have learning as their consequence.

A series of constantly multiplying careful reports on conditions which experience has shown in actual cases to be favorable and unfavorable to learning would revolutionize the whole subject of method. . . . It requires candor and sincerity to keep track of failures as well as successes. . . . It requires trained and acute observation to note the indications of progress in learning, and even more to detect their causes—a much more highly skilled kind of observation than is needed to note the results of mechanically applied tests. Yet the progress of a science of education depends upon the systematic accumulation of just this sort of material. . . . Is not the time here, when the progressive movement is sufficiently established so that it may now consider the intellectual contribution which it may make to the art of education, to the art which is the most difficult and the most important of all human arts? (p. 204)

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