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Relationships at the Core: A Story of Jonathan Silin

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Introduction Part 2

Relationships at the Core: A Story of Jonathan Silin

Gail Boldt and Lisa Farley

Issue 45 of the Bank Street *Occasional Paper Series* was conceived to pay tribute to Jonathan Silin for his 17 years as Editor-in-Chief, for his contributions to education through his research and publications in early childhood education, curriculum, and gender/sexuality studies, and for the remarkably generous and caring mentor, teacher, and friend he has been and continues to be to so many.

Jonathan's life at Bank Street College began in the fall of 1968. That spring, he graduated from Columbia University with a bachelor's degree in history and landed a job as kindergarten teacher at the Friends Seminary in New York. He quickly discovered his love of teaching young children. Recognizing a need for teacher training, Jonathan began the Bank Street teacher preparation program. In the fall of 1970, he took a job as teacher of 4- and 5-year-olds at the Walden School, returning to the school he had attended as a child and adolescent. He taught there for four years.



Man in an Arctic Cap (Jonathan Silin). Photo by Robert Giard. Used with permission of Jonathan Silin

In 1974, Jonathan moved with his partner, the renowned portrait, landscape, and figure photographer Bob Giard, to Amagansett, New York and took a teaching position at the Hampton Day School, working with 3- to 6-year-olds. After three years there, he began a doctoral program in Curriculum and Teaching at Teachers College, Columbia University, where he was profoundly influenced by Maxine Green and Dwayne Huebner.

Jonathan completed his PhD in 1981. After a short stay at Colgate University as a visiting professor, he began 10 years of full-time work as an AIDS educator and advocate, first at the Long Island Association for AIDS Care and then as an independent consultant. During this time, he published a number of articles, including, in *Teachers College Record*, "The Language of AIDS: Public Fears, Pedagogical Responsibilities" (1987). This was an important piece, one of the first that put a conversation about AIDS into a scholarly framework, bringing to educators information about what was happening around

AIDS in schools. In the face of panicked attacks on adults and children who had contracted AIDS or who were perceived as "dangerous," Jonathan advocated that AIDS education be taught across the curriculum, starting with the youngest children.

Throughout his years in AIDS education, Jonathan kept in close contact with many faculty at Bank Street, including Harriet Cuffaro (see Occasional Paper Series #32, *Living a Philosophy of Early Childhood*

Education: A Festschrift for Harriet Cuffaro). He gave frequent talks at Bank Street and Columbia University about AIDS and education. Following the loss of funding for community AIDS work, in 1992 Jonathan returned to Bank Street as a member of the graduate faculty, supervising student teachers and creating and teaching a course called “The Social Worlds of Childhood,” which expanded understanding of childhood beyond traditional discourses of child development.

In 1995, Jonathan published *Sex, Death and the Education of Children: Our Passion for Ignorance in the Age of AIDS*. In this moving and important book, Jonathan wrote through and beyond the AIDS crisis to ask how under the guise of “protecting children,” adults cultivate a deliberate and politically charged ignorance by their avoidance of controversial or difficult topics. Bringing the then-emerging theoretical lenses of queer theory to bear on an analysis of the education of young children, Jonathan wrote boldly of working in preschools in the mornings, participating in AIDS activism in the afternoons, and attending the funerals of his friends in the evenings. His book demonstrates the political power of personal narrative for research, what happens when writers are fully present in the words they write. Always, but especially in an era of COVID-19, *Sex, Death and the Education of Children* reminds us that both childhood and education are thoroughly marked by death, illness, and loss—experiences that some might like to imagine exist outside of these domains.

Among the many who were moved and inspired by *Sex, Death, and the Education of Children* were the members of the Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Education group (RECE), in which Jonathan has been an active member since its second conference in 1992. Begun by early childhood education scholars who were critical of the normalizing and culturally obtuse discourses that then pervaded the field, Jonathan played a powerful role in wedding queer theory to early childhood research, theory, and practice. His work set an early tone for this group and established him as a mentor to new generations of early childhood scholars. It was at the 1993 RECE conference where Gail Boldt first met Jonathan, who was assigned as a discussant for the first conference paper she ever presented, a discussion of “gender-bending” children in her third-grade classroom. Jonathan’s generous response was the beginning of a mentoring relationship and a friendship that has carried on since that time. He has continued to play a key role in RECE, including chairing the 2001 New York conference that took place just three weeks after the events of 9/11, and helping to organize the 2017 conference held in Toronto. Jonathan has worked on numerous RECE program committees and, since 2017, has served on RECE’s steering committee, which is currently hard-at-work examining how the pandemic offers an opportunity to re-envision this international conference.

Jonathan’s involvement with the Bank Street *Occasional Paper Series* began in 1999. An initiative of Dean Patricia Wasley to highlight the work of Bank Street Graduate School faculty, the first issue of the series edited by Frank Pignatelli, was published in April 2000. Jonathan served on the first committee, which later became the editorial board, and was designated as Editor-in-Chief when Frank stepped down in 2001. During his tenure, the *Occasional Paper Series* expanded from a semi-annual print publication of 300 copies to an online, open-access publication attracting national and international writers and guest editors, and read by tens of thousands of readers in almost every country in the world.

Even with the remarkable growth of the *Occasional Paper Series*, Jonathan maintained a clear vision of research as human storytelling. He encouraged authors to take full advantage of the affordances of an online publication to contain graphic images, including photography, comic essays, and paintings, as well as audio and video pieces. Jonathan was always forward-looking, always excited about the possibilities of non-traditional and creative forms of research. Jonathan retired from the role of Editor-

in-Chief in 2018, after spending a year mentoring Gail into the role, and he continues to serve on the editorial board as a trusted advisor.

Throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, Jonathan worked in Newark, New Jersey with Carol Lippman at Project New Beginnings. The project was Bank Street's response to an invitation to participate in early childhood public school renewal in Newark, following a court takeover of the district. Their work together resulted in the 2003 publication of *Putting the Children First: The Changing Face of Newark's Public Schools*. Typical of Jonathan's commitments, the book keeps a tight focus on the voices of the teachers, staff developers, and administrators, all working on the front lines to reform a distressed school system suffering decades of political upheaval and economic neglect.

In 2002, Jonathan created the **Robert Giard Foundation** to preserve and promote the legacy of his partner Bob, who died suddenly that year, and to provide fellowships for emerging LGBTQ+ photographers. He continued to write and publish. His 2006 book, *My Father's Keeper: The Story of a Gay Son and His Aging Parents*, again brought to the fore the importance of first-person narrative, the grounding of teaching and learning in complex entanglements of love and loss, the critical learning that occurs in intergenerational relationships, and the potential of queering up overly instrumental versions of teaching and caretaking. In the book, Jonathan considered how his experiences of caring for young children and dying friends aided him in caring for his parents in their final years, and how being with them provided experiences that continued to expand his own perspectives and beliefs.

In 2007, Jonathan moved to join his new partner David Townsend, and became a fellow at the University of Toronto's Mark S. Bonham Centre for Sexual Diversity Studies. It was after his move to Toronto that Lisa first met Jonathan at a party hosted by shared friends. This was far from her first encounter with him, however—she became acquainted with Jonathan as a graduate student in and through the prose of his first two books. Jonathan's work was paramount to her thinking about how history lives inside children and how narrative can symbolize and transform its impacts. Having met Jonathan through his published words, Lisa was thrilled to be introduced in person. In a room packed with seasoned academics, Jonathan asked questions prompted by his curiosity to learn what it felt like for Lisa to be new to the academy and to struggle to feel connected within an institution that ranks and often divides people at its very core. Afterwards, they worked together closely on the host committee for the 2017 RECE conference held at Ryerson University. They continue to ask each other big questions about the meaning of education and childhood not only at conferences, but over many coffees and much fine cheese.

In Toronto, Jonathan has been a consultant on staff development, training teachers as classroom researchers, and education program evaluation. He has continued to write. In his latest book, *Early Childhood, Aging, and the Life Cycle* (2018) Jonathan builds insights that draw from the continuities and themes that have framed his life to consider the generative acts and thoughts that can accompany him, struggling and thriving, as he enters what he playfully calls "young old age." As always, Jonathan's work surfaces feelings of fear, loss, hope, and optimism to provide us all with insight and grace for reflecting upon living artfully as adults and as educators of young children.

Finally, it is through Jonathan that we, as co-editors of this special issue, were brought together. We first met in the context of another special issue of the *Occasional Paper Series*, "Classroom Life in the Age of Accountability," which was guest-edited in 2009 by Boldt, Paula Salvio, and Peter Taubman

under Jonathan's general editorship. Lisa published an article in that issue that brought together psychoanalysis and childhood memory to raise questions about the role of the unremembered past in teachers' contemporary and future aspirations, wishes, and worries about their work with children. This started an enduring connection between Lisa and Gail as colleagues and friends. Now, as co-editors of Issue 45, we have come full circle to honor Jonathan. The pieces in this issue embody the spirit of his lifetime of work; they feature relationships as the core of existence; they use personal narrative to raise questions about the social, political, and emotional situations of both education and childhood; and they put inside the walls of the school urgent topics, conflicts, and complexities that are marginalized within models of education oriented towards rationality, efficiency, and the measurement of pre-set outcomes.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Gail Boldt is a professor in the College of Education at the Pennsylvania State University in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction. She is on the undergraduate reading and elementary education faculty and is the professor in charge of the PhD emphasis in Language, Culture, and Society. Gail is also a clinical psychotherapist and a fellow in the College of Research Fellows of the American Psychoanalytic Association. Her research focuses on how studies of affect drawn from both Deleuzo-Guattarian and relational psychoanalytic sources can inform the creation of classrooms in which students and teachers experience vitality.



Lisa Farley is an associate professor in the Faculty of Education at York University in Toronto, Canada. Her research considers how psychoanalytic theories of childhood can help us think about the conflicted qualities of growth, belonging, and education. She is the author of *Childhood Beyond Pathology: A Psychoanalytic Study of Development and Diagnosis* (SUNY Press, 2018) and a collaborator on a recent project that examines how teachers' childhood memories inform their understandings of both teaching and children.