

Progressive Education Rooted in Tradition

We invite you to visit our classrooms at Bank Street’s School for Children and witness how progressive education develops thoughtful and productive citizens for tomorrow. At a time when our increasingly global society and economy require the acquisition of new knowledge and new skills at an ever-increasing pace, children need to be lifelong learners. As our world continues to shrink, it is ever more important that children have an appreciation of, and empathy for, people of different cultures, so that they can work collaboratively and effectively with them toward common goals. These qualities are essential characteristics of a progressive approach to education.

The aim of progressive education, according to the Bank Street mission statement, is to nurture the creative, independent, and problem-solving talents of all children by “applying to the educational process all available knowledge about learning and growth.” The Bank Street School for Children traces its beginning to 1916 when Lucy Sprague Mitchell—whose words these are—founded the Bureau of Educational Experiments as part of an interdisciplinary collaboration among teachers and researchers. Mitchell and her colleagues set out to discover what kinds of environments were optimal for children’s growth and development. They believed there was a close relationship between childhood development and learning, and they understood that children’s emotional lives are inseparable from their learning, interests, and motivation. Out of that small, early experimental effort, the School for Children, as it is known today, developed, and in 1954 expanded the ages it served, until, in 1967, the first class of “thirteens” graduated. In 1970, when Bank Street College moved to West 112th Street on Manhattan’s Upper West Side from Greenwich Village, the School for Children grew from 250 to 350 students. Today it enrolls approximately 430 students between the ages of three and fourteen. Many of the underlying principles that inform the School’s practice today have their origins in the progressive movement of the early twentieth century. Influenced by the ideas of educational theorist John Dewey, the founders of Bank Street wanted to study how children learn, and how to create classrooms—and a school—that would become a microcosm of the ideals and practices of a democratic community. The founders were opposed to the rote learning practices prevalent in schools at that time. Instead, they established classrooms in which children were encouraged to be active: to venture out and inquire about the world around them.

Mitchell and her colleagues saw children as unique and complex human beings, blessed at birth with an avid desire to learn, which, if nurtured, would fuel a lifetime of learning. They believed children learn best in environments suited to their specific ages and stages of development. In such school settings, children learn more naturally, happily, and well. Their study of children led to the articulation of the developmental interaction approach to learning, which stresses the different developmental stages of children’s growth; the inseparability of the social, emotional, and intellectual components of children’s minds; and the importance of children’s active, experiential engagement with society. These ideas are the basis for our thought and practice. As part of Bank Street College of Education, the nation’s leading graduate teacher’s college for progressive education, the Bank Street School for Children is continually refining and applying the highest standards in the field of progressive education.

The Bank Street approach uses every opportunity to foster intellectual mastery and promote cognitive power by creating a pervasive climate of inquiry. We nurture the intuitive process and the capacity for feeling and emotion to achieve reflective, as well as goal-directed, thinking. We build a social environment in which children are known and respected as individuals, and where interaction between adult and child is supportive of learning.

As you read through our materials and visit our classrooms, we hope that you will enjoy experiencing the vibrancy, energy, and enthusiasm that make up the Bank Street learning community. Our goal is to inform our guests as completely as possible, so that they will have a clear and comprehensive picture of our school’s community and educational program.

We thank you for your interest.