Experience learning is at the heart of early childhood education. Professionals in our field are deeply committed to providing children with opportunities to learn by doing, observing, and experimenting. We owe this philosophy to a number of individuals whose historical writings and work with children influenced contemporary approaches to early childhood education. This column highlights one such individual—Lucy Sprague Mitchell, founder of New York’s Bank Street College of Education. Over the course of her career, Mitchell made significant contributions to teacher education.

Who was Lucy Sprague Mitchell?
Lucy Sprague Mitchell's life spanned two centuries, 1878–1967. These years brought tremendous advances and burgeoning interest in the field of education. From 1906 to 1912 Mitchell served as the first Dean of Women at the University of California–Berkeley, where her work with university students prepared her to become a lifelong advocate for children. Through her establishment of relevant courses of study and related field trips for university students, she began to see how important learning through discovery is to people of all ages. After she and economist Wesley Clair Mitchell were married, the couple settled in New York City, where Wesley accepted a position at Columbia University in 1913. Not one to sit idly, Lucy established the Bureau of Educational Experiments (BEE) in 1916, later to become the Bank Street College of Education, and authored bestselling books for children and teachers; she also cofounded what would become the Bank Street School for Children (in 1919) and the Cooperative School for Student Teachers (in 1930).

Bank Street College of Education
Founded by Lucy Sprague Mitchell, Wesley Mitchell, and Harriet Johnson, the BEE had a staff of teachers and researchers who studied young children “to find out what kind of environment is best suited to [children’s] learning and growth, to create that environment, and to train adults to maintain it” (Bank Street College of Education 2014b). The Bureau opened a nursery school three years later, and in 1930 the BEE moved to 69 Bank Street in Greenwich Village and established the Cooperative School for Student Teachers. This school focused on preparing teachers to attend to “the development of the whole child” (Bank Street College of Education 2014b).

Mitchell’s work with student teachers and her publications earned the Cooperative School for Student Teachers a reputation for excellence, and in 1943 the New York City Board of Education asked Mitchell’s Cooperative School to provide professional development so New York City teachers could learn about the school’s teaching methods. Mitchell led dozens of professional development workshops for New York City’s teachers. In 1950 the Cooperative School was renamed Bank Street College of Education and certified by New York’s Board of Regents to confer master of science degrees (Bank Street College of Education 2014b).

Bank Street’s workshops were innovative in conception and presentation. Teachers learned to take an active approach to teaching and to develop a community-based curriculum that involved exploring local businesses, neighborhoods, and events. The curriculum emphasized spending time outside the classroom so children could learn from the environment.

Under Mitchell’s guidance, Bank Street workshop participants collaborated to develop curriculum for kindergarten through sixth grade that emphasized relationships between the school and the outside world. For example, children and their teachers were to explore the inner workings of the school and the community in which it was situated through field trips and related activities. Teachers then implemented the curriculum in their schools. When the workshops resumed after a period of implementation, working groups of teachers debriefed their experiences with each other and refined the curriculum based on its effectiveness in actual classroom practice.

Classroom observations of the children were significant aspects of this curriculum-making process. For example, workshop leaders asked participating teachers to conduct a case study of one child in their classroom each year. In preparation for this, the Bank Street psychologist, also an instructor, explained the elements of a case study to the teachers and provided them with a guide for their observations. Mitchell documented all of the components, including the teacher observations, of the first six years of Bank Street workshops. Eventually she summarized all of the professional development work, including curriculum development and implementation, in her popular book Our Children and Our Schools (1950). This publication extended her impact beyond New York.
City public school walls. Already a popular author of books for children, with this book Mitchell addressed the professionalism of teachers and provided extensive research about the professional development workshops she had conducted in New York City.

Classroom examples from the kindergarten curriculum

The Bank Street kindergarten curriculum reflected Mitchell's strong belief in the power of experiential learning. The curriculum, developed during the workshops, was a natural extension of the Bank Street College of Education credo (see Bank Street College of Education 2014a). New York City teachers who participated in the workshops developed simple experiments that were at the heart of the curriculum; themes included “Living and Working in Home, School, and Around the Block” and “From River to River.” The teachers then implemented the curriculum in their respective schools. In Mitchell's words, their children studied “home and school in relation to the immediate environment” (Mitchell 1950, 206).

The kindergarten curriculum also recommended that children have opportunities to explore earth science and manmade inventions. Children were to engage in simple earth science experiments by hypothesizing and observing “how natural things behave, which is the basis of science—and about how people use the natural world, which is the basis of work and inventions” (Mitchell 1950, 38). Investigations of manmade inventions included a study of the school's furnace and radiator and observation of nearby coal and cement-mixing trucks.

Mitchell asserted that the best way for children to learn about the world was to explore the familiar deeply.

Mitchell's Bank Street workshop curriculum also emphasized the study of relationships among people and within communities, especially through fostering children's mapmaking skills. Mitchell believed young children could learn “orientation in school (and of one's) own [class] room in relation to another on [the same] floor; to (the) principal's office; school library; lunch room; and nearby streets and neighborhood” (Mitchell 1950, 194–95). Field trips in the school and neighborhood provided opportunities to explore local geography. Mitchell asserted that the best way for children to learn about the world was to explore the familiar deeply. Thus, the observations children made on field trips around the city were instrumental for understanding geographic concepts in the classroom (Field 1999; Field & Bauml 2011).

Mitchell knew that meaningful field trips require preparation. Therefore, Bank Street workshop teachers prepared specific activities in advance, which included the kinds of things children would look for during their field trips. Following these excursions, teachers held discussion sessions with the children and led them through dramatic reenactments of what they had experienced.

Workshop participants recommended field trips for kindergartners; several of these are listed below (Mitchell 1950).
1. Classrooms where children had friends, brothers, and sisters
2. Outside the building to locate the windows of their own classroom
3. The nurse's office
4. The school library to borrow a storybook
5. A dairy store as a first experience outside the school building
6. The coal truck to observe delivery of coal to houses and school
7. Around the block to point out children's homes
8. The postman's route from the post office across from the school to nearby houses
9. Different areas of the school to observe windows being repaired
10. The subway station to watch the trains and people

Mitchell provided a list of suggested stories, songs, poems, and science experiences teachers could use to
enhance the trips. By implementing these activities, teachers could integrate field trip topics and experiences into the regular school day in an interdisciplinary approach. This was important to Mitchell, who believed that field trips should not be isolated events that were simply carried out and then forgotten.

**Mitchell’s literary contributions**

Mitchell wrote dozens of books for adults and for children. Mitchell’s *Here and Now* *Story Book* (1921) was extremely successful as one of the first children’s books for 2- to 7-year-olds that focused on the everyday lives of children rather than on fables or heroes. Another *Here and Now Story Book*, which Mitchell edited, was published in 1937. She authored two Little Golden Books for preschoolers—*The New House in the Forest* (1946; illustrated by Eloise Wilkin) and *The Taxi That Hurried* (1946; coauthored with Irma Simonton Black and Jessie Stanton and illustrated by Tibor Gergely)—as well as other popular stories for young audiences.

Mitchell’s *Here and Now* books are lauded for their vibrant use of language and incorporation of topics familiar to children (Wellhousen 1994). *Young Geographers: How They Explore the World and How They Map the World* (Mitchell 1934) provided a powerful tool for teachers to use when planning geography lessons for students ages 5 to 12. The book includes illustrations of student work and numerous photographs of children exploring New York City with their teachers and recreating the landscapes and buildings in the classroom with papier-mâché maps and blocks.

**Bringing Mitchell forward**

Over the past three decades, researchers have revisited Lucy Sprague Mitchell’s educational philosophies, teaching strategies, and pedagogy. For example, early childhood education touchstone *Good Schools for Young Children* (Leeper, Witherspoon, & Day 1984) echoes Mitchell’s belief in the importance of experiential learning: “Children need opportunities for experiences that will help them learn. . . . A good program utilizes the experiences of children [and] . . . in the early years, all learning should be a hands-on, doing activity” (91). Polly Greenberg (1987) called Mitchell a “missing link” between the early childhood field and the progressive education movement, and more recently Jeff Frank (2012) drew attention to Mitchell’s writings on children’s use of and experimentation with language.

Mitchell reminds us that opportunities for children to learn outside the classroom are abundant and important. Her list of field trips, presented previously, can be modified for today’s classrooms, and Russell’s *Ten-Minute Field Trips* (2001) provides additional, updated ideas for in- and near-school field trips that are primarily science related.

We suggest practicing a dry run of a field trip on your own before taking children along. Even if the site is a familiar one, surprises such as road construction can derail an otherwise potentially wonderful learning opportunity. Keep in mind that for children, the travel to and from a destination may itself be adventurous and intriguing; learning en route is often an important part of the field trip experience.

We also recommend discussing field trips with supervisors, parents, and when applicable, adults at your destination site to ensure that you have permission, necessary funds, and accurate contact information. The number of learning activities you plan and implement outside the classroom each month will depend on the time and resources you have. These activities might include exploring an area of the playground, the community around the school, or neighboring businesses.

**Conclusion**

The credo Mitchell wrote nearly a century ago continues to guide the work of Bank Street College today. It communicates her desire to foster children’s flexibility, courage, gentleness, and sensitivity as well as to instill in them a “zest for living,” “lively intellectual curiosities,” and “a striving to live democratically” (Bank Street College of Education 2014a). Mitchell’s legacy is pertinent to children today because the fundamental principles of working with children have not changed: regardless of the generation, children learn best when they are interested in a topic, remain engaged, and are appropriately challenged.

Mitchell’s work celebrated children’s powers to observe, question, and think. She believed that the “primary aim of education is further growth toward social maturity within the school and in the larger outside community, that a good life for an individual . . . rests primarily upon the quality of his human relations, both [the] practical ability to work with others and [the] emotional ability to care about the welfare of others” (Mitchell 1950, 432). When early childhood teachers provide children with experiential learning opportunities through field trips, experiments, and environmental explorations, Mitchell’s legacy lives on.

**References**


Resources


