Pioneers In Our Field: Lucy Sprague-Mitchell- Teaching the Whole Child

Founder of Bank Street College

***"We hope to imbue students with an experimental, critical, ardent approach to their work and to the social problems of the world. If we can do this, we are ready to leave the future to them."* - Lucy Sprague (1878 - 1967)**

Children should be seen and not heard. This was a common belief of her time, but one strongly rejected by Lucy Sprague Mitchell. Growing up in a well-to-do family, where children's days were rigidly "scheduled" and expectations of her were high, young Lucy came to feel that she was incapable of pleasing her parents, that she was an in-adequate person. Yet these feelings gave her the impetus to seek new ideas about child rearing and education. Ultimately, she founded a college on those ideas.

Although higher education was still uncommon for young women, Mitchell entered Radcliffe College in 1896. Studying John Dewey's theories, she was especially impressed with his idea of education as a "social function," connecting the child to the experiences of others.

After graduation, and a series of jobs, Mitchell became the first Dean of Women at the University of California at Berkeley. This was at a time when women were beginning to organize at the university, preparing to acquire rights and privileges denied them simply because of their gender.

With some clear goals in mind, Mitchell left California for New York in 1913 and started the Bureau of Educational Experiences, which coordinated and sponsored experimental schools around the country and maintained its own nursery school. She promoted the development of healthy, emotionally secure children, "whole children" as she called them, as a way of building toward a "progressive, humanistic society."

Many curriculum ideas came from Caroline Pratt, whose "Play School" was sponsored by the Bureau. The curriculum was child-centered, promoting the growth of the whole child by focusing on each child's mental, physical, emotional, and social needs. In addition to the school, the community was also seen as the children's learning ground.

In October of 1930, Mitchell expanded the Bureau of Educational Experiences to include a teacher training school. The idea for the school was to educate the "whole teacher" in keeping with the philosophy of developing the "whole child." It was vital for the adult to nurture her own growth in order to nurture the growth of a child. When the Bureau relocated to 69 Bank Street, the school became Bank Street College.

Mitchell's early conflicts, which centered on how to grow and change as a female living at the turn of the century, set the stage for the Bank Street model of education. The school became known not only for its contribution to the early education of young children, but for enhancing the development of its faculty, including helping them recognize social problems and their responsibilities to the world at large.

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