

LINDA – Fieldnotes – Thursday, June 28, 2007

Subject: Interview with Tom Goodridge

Location: My office, Teachers College

Time: 4:30-5:30

Negotiation that I will read his writing in exchange for interviews. He hands me three stapled documents.

Talk about digital recorder

Linda: And so I'd like to start by asking a little bit about your background. I know you were a teacher, special education teacher, that you started a garden in Harlem.

Goodridge: Well I, uh, began as a teacher, say, mid-life starting at 40, I went back to Bank Street, and got my degree, in special education. And that same year landed a job, actually the first day of school.

- lowest reading scores in the city
- 5 to 8 year olds, and I stayed with them for 11 years, that class and at that school
- Found myself, in terms of, my contribution, was to help to start this garden
- I'm a nature boy, and that's my thing
- The garden became the heart of my, pedagogy
- Stood in rather stark contrast to the increasingly standardized, test-driven, narrowly intellectual style of schooling that is now gaining ascendancy

Linda: When were you teaching?

Goodridge: Well in special education, that's everything

Linda: what year?

Goodridge: I've been out 3 years,

Goodridge: Hoping the schools will take it on

Linda: It's tough, it's so much work

Goodridge: I know. And it's so identified with me

Linda: testing, especially in the past few years

Goodridge: it's, my teaching style is very much to, well, my preferred way in the classroom was really play. Because the children were still developing language skills. To make a classroom where children could go to their own um, learning edge, and show you what they were interested in. I was so impressed by [] able to collaborate with each other. And imaginatively. Make worlds, you could say. And the outside [] deeply enriched this, by bringing in this diversity, this diverse community, of bugs and weeds and plants. And it was a place of integration, or much greater integration between the children and their neighborhood. Their community. As opposed to an institution. [] Most of my children were African

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American, or Latino. More recently African immigrants. [] This was not a culturally relevant place, with standardized tests.

Linda: you're gonna have to teach me about special education, is there a lot of pressure on special education kids,

Goodridge: there hadn't been. That was one of the reasons why I could [ ] I had more elbow room. They were test exempt.

Linda: At the time you had support from your principal

Goodridge: I wouldn't say support, I would say benign neglect. [] a school that had went through a lot of crisis and change.

Linda: So talk to me a little about what you are writing about. What kinds of benefits you saw with the children? [] not necessarily bound to a standard curriculum

Goodridge: Yes. and I shouldn't present it as *too* easy. When you go out of a school in an inner-city environemtn, there are risks involved. [] Why would you bring in these unknown factors? [] cats, drunks, [] kids want to climb up on the rocks. It was a place for city children to be in the arms of nature. It was not a **place of production**. [] read in the article [] bulldozing. It certainly was a shaping. Demanded a deeper response. It was harder for me to identify with schooling. Children may be the crucial, because it's their, it's their inheritance. By allowing children to have a bonding experience. [] most of these children had never climbed a tree. Never gone barefoot in the mud. [] Compost became one of the hottest spots in the garden. [] larger world, crucial to, to the garden learning. Partially because, [] you could say inquiry-based learning

Linda: I used to teach science [] I was laughing when you wrote this about counting the legs of the spider [] my kids had the same reactions as yours, [talk for too long] And yeah. {mm hm) Yeah. Pause.

Goodridge: Any other,

Linda: Yeah, I'm interested in some of your findings about how, [] is that what your dissertation is on?

Goodridge: although I'm not an anthropologist, anthropology seems best [] what I'm trying to affirm. I'm asking, what is the influence of the natural world? What is children's experience of the garden? And this sort of phenomenological, I'm asking the particular, group of children, are city children, some of whom, don't get out of Harlem very much. And, yeah, what, what happens? When children meet other forms of life, biodiversity, plants, that I. So I. To be descriptive. Three years of fieldnotes, and I don't know that those fieldnotes have all the information that fieldnotes should have.

Linda: Alright. [] much of this is new for a lot of your students. Can you give me some specific exmples of what that looked like?

Goodridge: in meeting a bug, my preference in the garden was to be as passive as possible. [] do what they wanted to do. I tried to be as pure, in that way more of an observer. But if they picked up a hoe and went after (yeah Yeah) then I became

a participant (smile voice). [] so it was very exploratory kinds of learning. And discovering other creatures. what's this? Does it bite? Almost a universal question of children. (Right right, Is it safe.) []

I was not interested in naming it so much as what is this? What have we met here? And *how* do these children *meet* this? Like, it was, it was this *other*. And how do they respond, to it. And, I *trusted*, that *somehow* education, to me, that is fresh, and real, and strikes deep, is learning when you, or education, when you don't really know what is going to happen, nobody's got the answer, it's not the teacher's answer book, and *that's* what they sensed in these, that something, and—yeah.

[16:25]

How they met up with it, how they responded to each other  
 I saw patterns in there, gender patterns, the themes that emerged,  
 Oh! And then for one year one teacher really bought into it  
 This was this past year the year before that the fourth grade class did a study  
 A year long study called Plants and People  
 Growing a culture garden

And first the teacher asked them to, um, research plants that were important to them and their families. Could be food, could be medicines, you know, culturally significant plants

Not much happened frankly, cause these kids were not used to interviewing their families.(smile voice)

Then over the course of a year we interviewed over 10 community gardeners and **greening activists**

And the children were able to go and meet these folks  
 And tour their gardens or wherever their place is, place was (mm hm)  
 And they asked these, well, adults and elders, their own questions  
 So that was as important to me as what we were doing is honoring their own questions  
 And some beautiful things happened  
 As much in terms of the gardeners themselves were most often,  
 Um, folks who did *not* identify with formal schooling *at all*  
 Some were like, weren't even comfortable coming to *school* so much  
 And yet and yet the, ah,  
 To see this next generation *coming* to them  
 And being interested in this natural learning  
 That many of them, um, had acquired, you know, totally outside of agriculture  
 Just learn from the earth itself  
 Some beautiful things went on  
 And the children were exposed to models they wouldn't've been  
 In the typical, um, school curriculum

And they were, and they were, *floored* to find out that two blocks from the school  
 Willy Morgan was growing collards  
 And earning money from selling them  
 Or, and he was growing, telling us that he has diabetes

So he was raising a plant named stevia,  
 And he gave them all a leaf to try  
 And sure enough it was sweeter than sugar  
 So really, they really uh,  
 And, I'm particularly interested and maybe this is why I told you anthropology  
 How does culture factor in here? Um,  
 And I *think* part of the reason that Plants and People project was so *successful* was that  
 children found culturally relevant models, talking about, *real*, I don't want to say  
*indigenous*, but you know, but *real learning* from the natural world that meant  
 food, and that meant, well, joy, and, well, meant, um, *well*, this *exciting*, outdoor  
 space that some city kids are just *deprived* of. To go to **Hadja Worley**, who had  
 been a, a greening activist, and uh, pretty radical, um, um, uh, civil rights person,  
 his garden was very different. The di- diversity of the gardens was as interesting  
 as the diversity of the folks. His was mostly a sanctuary of nature. The trees  
 prevailed, there were very few vegetables growing and in the back he had  
 developed a pond, and there was a frog there. (mm hm) And uh, for a child who  
 hasn't, uh. I mean, I don't understand all how it did figure in a child's mind, but I  
 know what a frog meant to *me* as a child. And so to be in this place in *their* own  
 neighborhood where this man had been motivated to create a, a habitat that  
 allowed this creature to be in my neighborhood that otherwise never woulda been  
 there. Seemed like pretty powerful. (right)

And then others who were growing, cooking, Classy Parker? Uh uh, one of them was this  
 important African American, um, Puerto Rican? Um, um, mostly African  
 American, cause we *are* in uh, West Harlem? [!] Um, um, Classy Parker who  
 cooks and, um, puts up preserves from her garden, and um, is continuing a  
 tradition that started with her father, um, uh, Mem—Mims Walker, who was a  
 sharecropper who had, um, finished school at, at, third grade, so he could help his  
 parents on the land prepare for his *eight* younger brothers and sisters. And, um, I  
 guess I had built it up too, so it wasn't like a neutral encounter, but I, I just felt  
 such, almost *reverence* for this *ancient* farmer, who clearly would never come to  
 the school for other reasons and um, his speech was not *that* clear, but, and, he  
 showed us, with his, with his cane (laughing) I forgot what he was planting but he  
 showed how to plant. [] and some of these things those kids said afterwards, they  
 knew, they knew that they had met, a *treasure*, a *cultural* treasure, it confirmed  
 some values and things that I don't see school, um, attempting to do or certainly  
 succeeding at doing.

Linda: some of them must have roots in the South and just hear these stories about  
 sharecropping, and you know these plants, where people must have had some  
 knowledge, medicinal plants, and to have it validated in school and not just in the  
 family

Goodridge: Right, right. And their own questions, and how they were interested. I guess  
 there's something in it, almost ethnobotany, how is culture shaped by the plants  
 that are important to them and the use of it. (few seconds pause which he fills in  
 with a hm)

[23:37]

So then we interviewed gardeners. And we continued to research plants of their own choosing. Could be groups or individual A lot of it, well, I guess I believe in collaborative learning. Anyway, but, it seemed to lend itself to that. A garden seems to be a place where biodiversity works together. (Smile voice) And, you need each other! And, so some of the children got a chance to plant there. And research there. And use the Internet and stuff. [] Cowpeas. Najii, and. Some of them got pretty intent. [] how do you grow a cowpea. And the planting helped to, plant a garden that spring. And in June we had a celebration day, and the children invited the neighbors, and the school, and all the gardeners back. And the students who participated in that gave tours. And we attempted to transform the adjacent playground into a marketplace. We had gotten donated fabric, African fabric that went all the way up to the windows so it was *very* dramatic.