REFLECTIONS

Dear Families, Students and Staff,

This particular newsletter issue is devoted to some of the recent curriculum projects that have emerged this semester. As a play-based center, the children are free to ask, solve, engage, expand and enjoy being present and in the moment. Teachers expand upon what is occurring in the classroom, considering a host of factors such as children’s interests, what they know about the child, relationships and context. These blend with the interests adults bring into the classroom and together children and adults create what happens in the classroom.

In the preschool room, story and narrative have long been an interest of the children. They have been playing well-loved characters and asking others to join them. “Who wants to be in my show?” They have written books and stories and more recently a piece of this play became about song writing. Kuan has worked to capture the children's spontaneous songs, develop the lyrics with them, and record the music. Along with the liturgy of “Let It Go,” these songs are now part of the text of the classroom shared as a community (and at home via CD). This brief description just hints at the complexity of expression and the children’s exploration about what is a song? How do we write one? How does our body work to be able to produce a voice? How do we negotiate singing together?

In the toddler room, several new families joined the community this semester. As you know, transitions take time, especially when you don’t know anyone or speak the language of the classroom. Given this context, the teachers developed a book with families that the children refer to—and belong in. One afternoon, two toddlers both considered the toddler room book of families. “I am in the book,” Teodora reported. “I am in the book.” Miguel responded. After repeating their declarations, Teodora said, “We are in the book.” Miguel emphatically nodded in agreement. This particular exchange struck me. While one could take this literally—the children were, indeed, in the book—they both also share a common sense of belonging. Teodora had uttered a shared truth, confirming that indeed they both belonged.

None of this play is so clearly defined or neatly packaged. Curriculum becomes a culmination of all the interactions and experiences and routines that come together over time. The children bring their diverse experiences and skills to bear and teachers capitalize on what they know and what is happening. Tendrils of ideas and interactions spread over time and throughout activities giving life to new directions and opportunities. It’s no easy task though the teachers make it look so.

Developing emergent curriculum is also an intriguing challenge. As teachers support children and nurture the community, they consider whose interest they pursue or what gets valued (or not pursued). They may ask how much of the adult’s interest and what the adult values may overwhelm the children’s choices. By asking questions and making the curriculum about the children, it’s owned and meaningful to the children. What a strong message that the children are part of a community, and that their song or story or book or idea is worthwhile to tell.

Warm regards,

Patrice
Ji Yeoun Lee came to TC in 2005 as a master’s student in the early childhood program. Fortunately, her advisor was Dr. Recchia and since the early days as a practicum student and Emmy’s GA, she became head teacher in the infant room in 2007. As head teacher she has nurtured dozens of babies and supported many a new parent. She has an intuitive understanding and sense of infants that she has shared with her colleagues and the many graduate students now teaching children in their own classrooms. Ji Yeoun, it has been wonderful to work with you and we will all miss you. Warm wishes as you begin the next part of your journey back home in Korea.

CLASSROOM INQUIRIES

April Showers Bring May Flowers, and Worms, and Pizza Toppings

CLARE FRIEDRICH, Liam’s mom.

Preschool Room, RGC. Growing a garden in the courtyard is a spring tradition in the preschool room. Before it’s warm enough to see the fruits of their labor though, the children are busy composting and taking care of their worm friends that live at Rita Gold. They also grow seeds from scratch in the classroom using warming lights.

Kuan and the other teachers are always thinking of new ways to help the preschoolers understand the cycles of gardening, from the dirt to the basil that they pick, wash, and eat on Pizza Fridays.

After a slightly earlier start on the garden this spring, the children are growing several types of flowers including poppies, as well as edibles like peas, carrots, and basil. Although there isn’t always enough time to enjoy all of the vegetables, such as the carrots, others are used in creative ways. Last year, a crop of chocolate mint was ground into play-dough, lending a fresh scent, and basil was made into pesto after harvest time.

While the preschool waits anxiously for this year’s harvest, they stay busy collecting seeds found outside or in the lemons they recently used. Kuan remarked, “It’s not always practical to use them, but they’re excited that these seeds turn into something.”
With four new toddlers joining the classroom in January, the start of the semester was more turbulent than usual. A staff meeting gave Kara and Emmy a chance to think about what was going on in the classroom, emotionally and behaviorally, and how the curriculum could build on that. They needed a way to bring in the new toddlers and families without disrupting the flow and the established identities of the veterans.

Then the “Toddlers, Toddlers, Who Do You See” book that they had created sparked an idea. This cohort of toddlers is a particularly book-crazy group, and Kara and Emmy noticed the kids’ reactions to the new toddler faces. “It opened up some new spaces and ways for them to see their peers. We built off of that and worked on a Families book,” said Emmy. In the past, they had viewed the displaying of family photos on the wall as a sort of transition activity, one that is a promoted practice for early childhood centers. The photo boards never gave Kara nor Emmy the response they were expecting, however. They wondered what it would be like for the toddlers to have a material that they could handle themselves and explore and investigate on their own.

Reflecting on the usefulness of the new Families photo book, it’s clearly having an impact. Kara notices the younger toddlers using it just as much as the older toddlers: “Just the other day, Teodora was telling Colton, ‘hey, this is you!’ And it started a conversation about Colton’s family, without any teachers scaffolding it or putting their own ideas into that conversation.” Emmy agreed that the book has fostered more independent conversation, and that there is power in creating links between the children that actually excludes the teachers. If the teachers do not know all of the family members in a child’s photo and a toddler wants to know who someone is, the teachers can suggest that they ask that child. Similarly, if a vacation spot or an object from home, such as a doll, is featured in the photos, there are new spaces for curriculum opening right and left. New ideas enter the children’s travel play, and even become a lesson in geography.

Emmy believes that by creating this book and starting the thought process, it changed their focus around what they were looking at and what they were trying to build. The transition process has been faster, according to Kara. The book has increased their interest in each other’s lives. “It allows them get to know each other in a comfortable, less intimidating way,” she said.

Neither knows quite where the project will go, or where the connections really are happening, especially with the younger kids. They are certainly seeing changes in the room that lead them to believe that this book has played a major role.
LIZ VAN HOOSE, Clara’s mom.

*Infant Room, RGC.* If you happened to be within earshot of the infant room this past fall, you might have heard the familiar cadence of an Eric Carle classic, but with different words: “Baby, baby, what do you hear? I hear Noam singing . . . Henry squealing . . . Sahana counting . . .” The *Kids in the Classroom* book, composed by the infant room staff at the beginning of the semester, was an instant favorite. Then graduate assistant Emma Gehrman brought in a *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star* book she’d made for her integrative arts classroom course. The babies loved this one just as much, leading the teachers to realize the kids’ favorite books were turning out to be the ones that had been made by people they knew.

A book curriculum was born. This spring the practicum students made books for each of their key children. Parents were asked to share the variations on the “Mommy” and “Daddy” terms of address they used at home, as well as particular actions they wanted to encourage in their child (gentle behavior, broad food palate). Then the books were introduced gradually into the classroom. Each one was a major hit, both for the featured infant and for the classroom community as a whole. “The practicum students got to know their key child so much faster,” Erica Russo recalls. But as with many objects of infant fascination, the kids gradually lost interest in the basket where these volumes were kept. A meeting was held to discuss whether to remove the books from the classroom environment or to find new ways to have the children interact with their custom-made tomes.

That’s when things got really interesting. Erica had picked up some Command hooks at a nearby store, and after some product safety testing, they were installed on an easily accessible wall. The practicum students fitted rings to the books in a variety of ways, further enhancing their bespoke nature. Suddenly, the infants’ passion for these objects was reignited. When every book got its own hook, and the kids could see all of them displayed at once, they knew whose was whose, and they became assertive about their own books as belonging to them. The infants quickly mastered the fine motor skills required to lift the books up off of their hooks, and many adopted individual methods of carrying them around. Callie, for example, likes to sport hers dangling from her wrist.

More bookmaking projects ensued. For *Wheels on the Bus*, Ji Yeoun Lee hand-drew pictures of each child: “And Noam on the bus says . . .” The new infant room *ABC Book* features an alphabetized photo directory: Callie, Emma, Erica, Henry, Ji Yeoun, Katelyn, Kristen, Megan, Noam, Odin, Phoebe, Sahana, Sarah, Seungha, Taryn, and Tulasi. Fittingly, a year-end field trip to the Bank Street Bookstore is in the works. We know what these babies will be singing on the bus to 112th Street.
PRESCHOOL ALBUM TOPS THE CHARTS

CLARE FRIEDRICH, Liam’s mom.

Perhaps Disney’s “Frozen” had something to do with it, but the preschool kids this year are a musical bunch. While some have been singing “Let It Go”, others make up songs and pretend to be in bands, but it was really Carter who kick started the room’s music project. He came up with a little ditty that goes by two names, according to Kuan: “He called the song ‘Pancakes’, or you can call it ‘Bellies’”. They figured out what chords went with the song and performed it at their class meeting. Carter wanted to be able to listen to his song in the car, and the idea to produce a CD was born.

The class had questions about the CD, such as how the music ended up on it, or what the difference was between a DVD and CD. Sofia brought in a record player and together the class discovered the mechanics. Next Monica brought in a tape recorder so the musicians could record more independently.

Eventually the class progressed to CDs, beginning to understand the connections between light and sound. The preschoolers enjoyed turning off all the lights, shining a flashlight under a CD and naming the shapes they saw as the CD turned. Even after these demonstrations, they had questions about how the computer helped burn a CD. “Does the computer have arms?” one asked.

Kuan recalls trying to make connections beyond the classroom. He invited a former preschool room parent and professor of Music Education, Jeanne Goff-Fynn, to come and sing (you guessed it, “Let It Go”) and teach the children a bit about the anatomy of the throat. The children loved singing along to the piano, but Jeanne noticed how some were screaming and overpowering the other vocalists. She showed them how to breathe in order to change the volume or expression of the notes. It made sense to her that for a song like “Let It Go”, kids this age with smaller vocal chords would need to really force the notes out. Jeanne demonstrated varying sizes of a person’s voice box with a dime, a nickel and a quarter, and introduced the kids to characters like Larry the Larynx so they could see how the larynx opens and closes. Making owl noises helped them learn how to breathe from the diaphragm.

The class chose which songs they would record for the album. Some paired off and sang familiar soundtracks, while others preferred to sing solos, and still some yet chose not to sing at all. Leah, who tends to prefer visual art, was asked to produce cover art for the debut album (though she later recorded a beloved Laurie Berkner hit).

Over the course of about two months, a compilation of karaoke, guitar accompaniments, and acapella was recorded. This spring, Superhero, Maybe was released. For anyone who ever doubted the preschoolers’ energy, their sophomore album is already in the works.
LIZ VAN HOOSE, Clara’s mom.

“Everything I own has clay or paint on it,” says research fellow Marta Cabral, who is pursuing an interdisciplinary doctorate in art education and early childhood education. For the past five years she has also been working with Rita Gold director Susan Recchia, doing research and developing a formal art program for the school. Typically Marta spends one morning a week and some time in the afternoons with each age group, arranging her visits so that they flow naturally into the shifting routines of the day. Whether she is working in the classroom with all the children, or taking the students two at a time into the studio for individualized work with materials, or embarking on regular group outings to Macy Gallery and to other artist studios on campus, Marta is always on the lookout for opportunities to help children take charge of their own art experiences in ways that make them theirs. “I know never to underestimate what a toddler can do with art materials,” she says.

Each spring, it all comes together with the annual show at Macy Gallery, a month-long exhibit of the children’s artwork that doubles as an occasion for the kids to serve as curators, installers, and docents under Marta’s guidance. This year’s exhibit, Broken Things Can Be Beautiful Things, ran February 24–March 21 and featured a wealth of paintings, collages, sculptures, and mobiles. At the March 7 opening celebration, the 3-D themes running through the exhibit were carried out in the evening’s activities. Under the soft-box lights of Jono’s photo booth, dozens of boxes wrapped in black craft paper tumbled onto the scene, soon to be tossed and rolled about, sat on, piled up, and lifted high into the air by infants, toddlers, and preschoolers wielding nubs of pastel chalk. Even the babies were confident in their resolve, uncannily familiar with the dazzling spectacle. In no time, it seemed, the photo booth rivaled the carefully curated gallery walls as a work of art unto itself, while on the other side of the room the kids built a collective box sculpture that would make Damián Ortega swoon.

Therein lies the genius of Marta’s approach—which she points out is very much rooted in the Rita Gold Center philosophy. It turns out the theme of boxes had been percolating throughout the school all year long. “When I think about the activity that I want to have in the reception, I try to think about something representative of what is going on in general.” The kids across the classrooms had been working with boxes of different sorts in many different ways. The preschoolers were making toys, houses, and sculptures out of wire and cardboard, expanding on a communal narrative that grew out of a 3-D printing project from the previous year. Over in the art studio, Hari’s box sculpture inspired several other toddlers to explore ways to connect objects, while Lillian’s interest in the tactile experiences of glue proved a perfect entrée into papier-mâché. The infants, meanwhile, had been painting a lot with watercolors, and Marta wanted to give them the experience of painting on something different from a flat surface. So she covered boxes and paper towel rolls with watercolor paper and introduced them to the classroom as objects of play. The infants grew familiar with the boxes—their shape and texture and color—knowing them as toys first. Then the babies gathered at the table to paint the boxes, enlisting other toys like plastic dinosaurs as tools. “So these boxes were something that were very present in their day-to-day experiences, as toys, as art materials, since there’s really no point in distinguishing between the two,” Marta explains.
COMMUNITY ART ARCHIVE

MARIA GONZALEZ PENDAS, Paco’s and Miguel’s mom.

The corridor of RGC houses the archive of the community art projects developed over the years during our annual art show reception. From the quilt we collaged and sewed in the Spring of 2011 to the city-like wooden sculpture we built in 2012 to the tactile paper curtain of 2013 to this year’s box collage….these are not only beautiful art objects, but they also hold the memory of the children, families, students and teachers that have made up our community over the years, while reminding us of the unexpected, colorful, inspiring and vibrant results we might just achieve when working and playing together.

At the art opening, she hoped the photo-booth boxes would resonate with RGC’s youngest contingent, so it was especially thrilling when several infants headed straight for the boxes, saying, “Me!” At that age there’s no difference between me and my work. Very young kids often point at their work and say their names. “It’s a magical thing when a child recognizes they created something where there was nothing,” Marta says. “When I put this mark here, I’m changing the world. There’s a gradual understanding that these marks are not random, so every time I hold my paintbrush, my crayon, this kind of mark happens. Every time I swing my arm this way, that kind of mark happens. Actions have consequences.”

Infant-informed installation art wasn’t the only novel item at the show. This year’s exhibit also introduced a new curatorial tool to Macy Gallery: QR codes. As Marta was collecting artist statements and audio clips from the children, she realized the codes would be an effective solution to a problem aptly posed by preschooler Haram: “We don’t have much time!” Kids are busy people, after all. There are naps to be had, walks to the park, lunch. How, Marta wondered, could she make the children’s statements about each piece available while keeping the exhibition clean and uncluttered? The QR codes enabled the children to guide the visitors remotely.

Macy Gallery is the center of Art and Art Education, a program mostly focused on grades K-12. A lot of people walk through there who are not necessary involved with very young children, and the RGC exhibit serves as a vibrant reminder that even babies think and have ideas and are people in their own right. “Way before kindergarten there’s a lot happening that I think we need to call attention to,” Marta says. Judith Burton, the Art and Art in Education Program director, has been instrumental with her support, bringing her program together with Early Childhood Education in a formal arena. With Susan and Judith’s support, Marta has developed a cross-disciplinary course on nurturing creative experiences with very young children—a course that did not previously exist.

“Judy really appreciates early childhood. The art program, under her direction, has already given us the gallery dates for next year’s RGC exhibition, even reserving time before and after the show so the children can be part of the process of putting up the work and taking it down.”

Mark your calendars for February 23–March 19th, 2015. The 2015 reception will take place March 6.