REFLECTIONS

Dear Parents, Staff and Students,

As many of you know, the preschoolers adapted, created, and performed My Neighbor Totoro for an audience of families and friends last month. I can’t help writing about this experience though it is surely covered more eloquently by Teal’s and Jamie’s (Jackson and Kai’s parents) theatre review. As movies go, this one shines and I’m not surprised it mesmerized the children for much of the spring and early summer. To be sure, it was important to the preschoolers to share Totoro with their moms and dads, and having an audience matters. However, the performance was only a part of a long and meaningful journey for the children which required much hard work on their part. The children’s commitment to the production, devotion to the story, and caring for its magical animals and human characters has stayed with me even as the children have moved on to other interests such as setting up the new TC Community Garden.

Over these many weeks, the children led with their passion and stayed with their interest. They watched and re-watched the video, read and re-read the graphic novel, and digested storyline and characters for consideration by the group. Together and with their teachers, they discussed the finer points of the story, coming to agreement about what was happening or not happening. They negotiated what were necessary props, how the puppeteers should bend their bodies to convey a feeling, who should and wanted to be what character and why. At meetings, they decided on key features such as the catbus and captured its essential features in cardboard and paint and sure enough, come performance day, the catbus moved like it did in the movie when it was performed. In short, the experience filled them up.

Across classrooms children experience the value of emergent curriculum. One morning, three toddlers copy each other’s movements and sounds. They very closely watch each other and are truly interested because they are friends and they have found this way to be together. They repeatedly take turns making robotic movements and sounds and then follow each other by taking turns making the sound and movement and then jumping into a pillow from a riser. What joy in their new found courage! They are also fond of copying their loud sounds and tell each other “too loud!” even though the child with the complaint is often the loudest. It is a shared tradition understood by the group.

In the infant room, the children continue to discover their bodies and what they can do. The changes in mobility and range of motion are astounding. In all the classrooms, you will see children caring for a baby, especially swaddling and helping a baby nap. “Shhh!” And, children are transitioning into each of the classrooms to become infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, which creates new opportunities for teachers to welcome new interests into the classroom.

Kudos to the teachers for nurturing the children’s interests and passions, and for staying alongside them to fully explore and take advantage of the time it takes for children to process what’s before them, to think, review, reflect, negotiate, design, collaborate, and shine. The children, every day, show what they can do. Totoro and other examples of emergent curriculum are a powerful reminder of how important it is to have and create opportunities owned by the children, which capture what is relevant and meaningful to who they are at this moment in time.

As we approach summer and many of you leave for summer plans, we look forward to seeing you in the fall. For children and families who are moving on, we miss you already. Having come to know who they are, being part of a community, and knowing what it means to be and to have a friend, trust that they take with them what they need to adapt to whatever environment you have chosen for them.

Many thanks to Liz, Clara’s mom, and Clare, Liam’s mom, for their continued work on the newsletter.

Warmest regards,

Patrice
LIZ VAN HOOSE, Clara’s mom

Gross motor skills were in high gear in the infant room this spring, as was a sophisticated social dynamic that grew out of climbing, rough-and-tumble play, and gesture. To rise to the scaling ambitions of the older kids (led by the indomitable Sydney), the teachers strove to create areas where young mountaineers could challenge themselves while remaining safe. The infant room’s smallest citizens, Sean, Roha and Marco, were given comparable age-appropriate challenges, playing together in a safe space where a healthy balance of toys, peer-to-peer interaction, and tummy time fostered participation in the classroom community.

In the process, the teachers found that physical play was nourishing peer relationships in surprising ways, as infants learned how to respond to each others’ nonverbal sound cues and how to differentiate play activities based on size (don’t lie down on Aranya; it’s okay to roll around with Sam). The ability to respond to emotional cues typically kicks in between 18 and 24 months, but these kids are under 18 months and it’s clear their precocious attunement grows out of genuine love for each other.

Hearing their teachers narrate the nonverbal cues they make and understand, the infants are beginning to learn the language of their signals: mine, want, give. At the heart of these interactions was the classroom tent—a great forum for play of all sorts, from tumbling to chasing to communicating through windows and doors.

With Sean and Aranya newly crawling, and Kalama taking her first steps by mid-spring, there’s no stopping these kids when they hit the great outdoors after the long winter.
CLARE FRIEDRICH, Liam’s mom

The spring semester began with even more transition than usual with Kara back at the helm of the toddler room with Emmy. The toddlers welcomed her back as she took on the dual role of teacher and RGC parent. A younger batch of toddlers also reshaped the social dynamic in the room and framed the curriculum in new ways. Most visibly, the room took on a new look and feel when teachers moved the sofa to the center of the room in order to open up more of the windowed wall. Everyone noted how this change made the room seem entirely new. The sofa has also become more of a gross motor play space, with younger children riding it like a horse, older toddlers hanging from it, rolling or jumping off of it, and testing their balance skills.

While some of the previous semester’s play carried over and continued to evolve, Emmy noticed an interesting infiltration of the Totoro movie due to some of the siblings in the room (Kai and Tulasi). “This shared knowledge became sort of toddler-appropriated.” They would correct one another about the movie’s characters or the color of the protagonists’ dresses.

Other major themes in the toddlers’ play included “sister play”, construction, superheroes, dinosaurs, and curiously “cat play”. The latter seemingly came out of nowhere but all toddlers enjoy taking part. Cat play is often prompted when one child gets down on all fours and encourages seven or eight more children to follow suit, purring and prancing sleekly around the room. Others prefer caring for the cats, tenderly feeding the toddler cats or offering an enticing mouse treat.
CLARE FRIEDRICH, Liam’s mom

As it often does, spring saw numerous endings. The preschoolers wrapped up music, ballet, and soccer, and these endings found their way into a curricular focus on closure. Whether the preschoolers were writing thank-you cards or recalling teachers and peers they no longer saw, Kuan and Margaret noted many of the spring memories that took on a great deal of significance for the class. Amelia’s last day, or the day they made Chinese New Year envelopes, for example.

The preschool rooms’ pièce de résistance was the theatrical performance *My Neighbor Totoro* in June. (See page 6.) The magic all began with a viewing of *Jungle Book* for a preschool pajama party. Uma was deeply concerned by the misrepresentations of certain animals and expressed some fear about the snake and how he was characterized. Margaret suggested that they try watching *Totoro.* “The movie defies a lot of stereotypes, it’s very realistic. You know, no frilly clothes and super powers,” she says of Hayao Miyazaki’s 1988 animation.

Each day small groups of children watched snippets of the film, initiating conversations about stereotypes. Carter and Uma had strong opinions about whether the wrinkly grandma was scary or not. “No,” concluded Uma, “she’s just old.” The conversations evolved and grew in sophistication, and after a full screening of the film, the preschoolers elected to perform their own version of *My Neighbor Totoro*. They watched the movie so many times, Kuan noticed at one point that the full movie was not available on YouTube as it once was: “Maybe our IP address was recognized and they took the movie down!”

Each child had a role in the play, and there was a noticeable respect for one another. The children noted the details of the props and costumes with a level of professionalism fit for Broadway. “It took a lot of work to plan with them. They would keep track of their to-do list and even tell each other when they weren’t living up to their commitment!” said Kuan.

Margaret does not believe that the *Totoro* production would have been possible earlier in the year. The preschoolers have been acting out plays throughout the winter and spring, acquiring new skills and appreciation for theater minutiae as stagehands, playwrights and actors.
A MULTIMEDIA EXTRAORDINAIRE

LIZ VAN HOOSE, Clara's mom

Guided by the limitless vision of art director Marta Cabral, this year’s art explorations at Rita Gold extended far beyond the Teachers College walls and into new modes of expression and media. The preschoolers’ trek to Brooklyn’s UrbanGlass studios in the fall—as the youngest-ever group to visit the center—spawned not only a kaleidoscope of brilliant glass creations, but a wealth of conversation about melting sand and the way glass pieces of different colors adhere to each other in the Vulcanian heat of the kiln, yielding smooth surfaces and jagged edges, translucent bubbles and transparent windows.

In the toddler room, the creative spirit was more Banksy-oriented, as the fall semester’s interest in hanging fabrics and using spray bottles full of watercolors expanded into large-scale canvas renderings that served as a continual source of graffiti inspiration. Luka’s interest in stencils grew into insightful discoveries about positive and negative space, while Davis’s active role in setting up the annual RGC art show’s “Graffiti Wall”—from planning to delivery to installation—proved instrumental.

Meanwhile, the infants turned their fascination with the tactile qualities of watercolors to the tacky qualities of “glue” (flour and water). Discovering that this substance can make things stick, Sam and Sydney frequented the same paper to test their hunches and hypotheses, while Aranya and Kalama homed in on the glue itself, delighting in its texture and adhesion.

These wide-ranging efforts on the part of the Rita Gold students were matched in ingenuity by Marta herself, who brought a number of new developments to this year’s Macy Gallery exhibit, Art Makes Us Happy. Using the Augmented Reality smartphone app, viewers could tune in to video commentary by the artists. During filming, the infants and toddlers were quite candid, while the preschoolers were very much aware of the staged nature of film recording, demanding new takes until they were satisfied with how they were talking about themselves and their work on camera. The RGC alumni exhibit further enhanced this year’s show, with contributions from graduates who had worked both individually and jointly. Attesting to the power of collaboration across age groups was the mixed-media trio Penguins, three linked, identically named pieces produced by all three Cormier-Marri sisters, Tulas (2), Uma (5), and Neela (6).
JAMIE BILLETT AND TEAL EICH, Jackson and Kai’s Parents

NEW YORK -- The nominations for the 2015 Tony Awards are in, and topping the list is the Rita Gold Early Childhood Center Preschoolers’ 2014-2015 original rendition of Hayao Miyazaki’s My Neighbor Totoro, showcased on June 3, 2015 to a packed enthusiastic audience. Box office officials reported being barely able to keep up with demand for tickets to the performance, which sold out almost instantaneously. Production officials had to scramble to control fans that clamored into the theater to get the best seats.

Perfectly cast and directed by the teachers, Kuan proves a natural narrator of this brilliant story of Satsuki Kusakabe’s (Uma Cormier-Marri) and her younger sister Mei’s (Sofia Verhoogen-Guzzini) trials and tribulations after moving to the Japanese country side with their father, Tatsuo (Miguel Gomez-Villalva). The action packed story begins with Mei and Satsuki’s discovery of little black sprites that “look like flying ants” in their house. Grampy (Solon Wen) informs the sisters, along with his grandson Kanta (Dylan Cooney), that the creatures are Susuwatari, or soot-sprites. Ever the brave pair, the sisters call out loudly for the Susuwatari to “come out come out wherever you are, come out come out wherever you are” as Tran’s ingenious use of the classroom lamp’s spotlight helps bring to life the construction-paper illustrations (a collaborative effort on the part of the production crew including Liam Friedrich) dotting the walls of the Kusakabe home (loft).

The sisters soon discover that their new abode is home to even more amazing creatures, when they meet the --perhaps mythical-- O (big grey, Carter Watson), Chu (medium, Zaria Minhas), Blue (Jackson Billett, understudy, filling in for a sick Clara Briggs) and Chibi (small white, Leah Ready) Totoros. When Mei becomes lost, the entire neighborhood pitches in to search for her while Satsuki, in a convincing performance by Cormier-Marri, runs everywhere and finally begs the help of O Totoro by jumping on his belly.

O Totoro summons the Catbus (tactfully operated by Paco Gomez-Villalva in the front and Constantin des Georges in the back) to help in the search of the lost little sister. Happy to be of assistance, Catbus takes her straight to Mei, who is sitting alone by the side of the road with tears in her eyes (exemplifying the innovative and unique makeup effects of the preschoolers and teachers). Catbus then flies the girls to Shichikokuyama Byouin (Shichikokuyama Hospital), where their mom, Yasuko (Teodora Vatulescu-Eleches), is being treated (for tuberculosis, according to the graphic novel version of the story). They leave a piece of corn on the windowsill with a get-well message (“mom”) written on the husk. In a tour de force of post-modern interpretation, everyone, including Yasuko, now better, goes to a hotel for some well-deserved R & R.

The music by Paco Gomez-Villalva sets the tone from the beginning and provides the perfect emotional foundation to the piece. The attention to detail in all aspects of the production only adds to the mastery. The hospital sign, small puppets (constructed with the help of Amelia Almond) and 3D corn were particularly well crafted and visually enchanting, and illustrated the pathos of the mother’s plight, enhancing the fine performance of Vatulescu-Eleches.

The cast and crew graciously remained to sign autographs and take pictures with a few lucky fans.
KINDERGARTEN ADMISSION PROCESS

PATRICE NICHOLS, Onsite Associate Director

This year, the admission process has been drawn out with some families happily finding they had a new option to consider later in the season. At this point, several children have been accepted to more than one school, public and/or private. And the final list seems to be: Ethical Culture, Fieldston, Cathedral, PS 166 G&T, Anderson and Mandell. Congrats to all!

For families of children born in 2011, some of you have already begun exploring options for 2016 by touring or attending an open house. If you have not already begun, you can start creating a list of independent and public schools you’d like to learn more about. Meet with me and/or the new director of CU’s School & Childcare Search Office, Marcia Roesch. If considering independent schools, you’ll attend fall tours and open hours. Usually public schools offer tours after winter break. In either case, look directly on the school’s website to RSVP. It will be a busy schedule to attend these events, but the admission process is extremely helpful to you as you consider who your child is and what you want for your child and for your family in an ongoing school. When it comes time to make a choice, having engaged in this process, you’ll better be able to weigh the options (independent and private, traditional and progressive, geographic location, coed versus single sex, religious, etc.)