Dear Parents, Staff and Students,

There’s quite a bit of attention to academics in many preschool programs. For some, academic knowledge and specific behavioral skills are strongly associated with readiness for kindergarten. Early reading, writing and counting impress adults, and behaviors such as being able to separate, follow adults’ instructions and sit still define a certain kind of maturity which is helpful in independent school admission play dates. Yet, kindergarten readiness is more than memorization of letters and numbers and readiness must encompass more than acquisition of these skills. From my perspective, play can get us to both places, but play and learning are sometimes falsely set in opposition. Instead, the two go hand in hand and mutually enhance each other. When children engage in play, their lived life experience demands their whole being. They move, create, think, communicate, remember, focus, and collaborate with others. They are committed participants, learning self-control, confidence and patience—and that they are part of a community with all of its responsibilities. Once they leave RGC, children draw on their experiences in our play-based community to be successful in what lies beyond. Yet, even if committed to giving children opportunities to play, school readiness can weigh on a parent’s mind.

Play provides opportunities for children to try things out and on. Piaget writes, The minute you teach a child something, you keep him from finding it out himself. We might see young children explore the properties of an object such as when they test the stability of stacked blocks over and over. They are not successful in adding the block to the top of the tower until they are. They persevere. And then there’s an a-ha moment about having achieved it. It’s not mastered quite yet—on the next attempt the tower comes down again—but perseverance and problem solving are essential dispositions that can’t always be learned in a decontextualized lesson. With this example, the child has learned to associate learning with pleasure (I did it!). The beauty of play is that it gets us to both academic and social-emotional goals.

While playing, a child can be anything and do anything. He or she can plan, organize and test the boundaries of what is possible. Vygotsky writes, At play, a child is above his average, his daily behavior. In play, it is as if he stands a head taller than himself. We might see children playing family or constructing a ramp with the large wooden blocks or playing superheroes. They are doing these things, but also negotiating multiple opinions or working through the frustrations of collaboration or strong emotions. As adults, we can be uncomfortable by what gets explored in play (fear or power), but by slaying the dragon, children may explore their ideas and overcome their personal puzzles within safe confines.

Though children learn from their own agency, curiosity and exploration, adults have a role in guiding play. Adults help model how we treat each other, and children learn routines and expectations for how individuals work together within a community. Children who thrive in preschool are prepared to become members of a classroom
WHO WE ARE

Administrative
Susan Recchia
Faculty Director
Patrice Nichols
Onsite Associate Director
Alma Otuonye
Administrative Assistant

Infant Room
Erica Russo
Head Teacher
Kara Miheretu
Head Teacher
Liana Ross
Graduate Assistant
Lorraine Gonzalez
Graduate Assistant

Toddler Room
Emmy Fincham
Head Teacher
Amanda Fellner
Head Teacher
Alejandra Chavez
Graduate Assistant
Shiarah Tejada-Ortiz
Graduate Assistant
Aura Perez
Doctoral Fellow

Preschool Room
Kuan-Hui Leu
Head Teacher
Margaret Rizon
Head Teacher
Ayesha Rabadi
Doctoral Fellow
Sam Meier
Graduate Assistant

Art & Music Program
Marta Cabral
Art Program Coordinator
Jennifer Jung
Art Teacher
Nita Baxani
Music Teacher

REFLECTIONS (continued)

community where the individuals’ needs come after the needs of the group—a tough lesson for young children. Children who do well in preschool listen to directions, pay attention, solve disputes with words and focus on tasks without constant supervision….They learn these skills through playful activities (Hiresh-Pasek). This is not to say there’s no role for structured activities and toys, and adults might assist children to build a model or play a game, count, name shapes or other objects. But, generally there’s more than one solution in play, especially when adults allow children to do the problem solving, and they’re pretty comfortable with experiences that involve improvisation and imagination.

The daily life of the classroom provides many opportunities to learn academic skills like language, literacy and numeracy in the classroom community. Taking the example of literacy, children learn vocabulary and language within the context of authentic interactions with people they care about, such as when they greet their friends at the classroom door or share snacks together. Language development within a social context is rich and intense. For a pretty cool visual representation of children’s explosion of vocabulary through socially embedded and meaningful situations, see the TED talk, The Birth of a Word. In addition to language and vocabulary development, children’s love of books is nurtured through interacting with peers and adults. One can pull out pre-literacy skills in the interaction such as turning pages right to left, that words are read left to right, top to bottom, and following a narrative (also reinforced through their increasingly complicated play scenarios). In writing, children make marks using crayons, brushes and their fingers. They strengthen their hand muscles and eventually develop the pincer grip that they will use to write with a pencil. Through learning their own and each other’s names, children begin to learn letters and sounds (as well as bus and subway numbers, etc.). In the preschool room, children sign their names to community-written letters, and they are encouraged to write when they want to tell others something which helps them to connect print with a purpose. Children understand more and less when counting the number of mats needed for nap time and then figure out how many more mats are needed. They vote and tally their votes to practice decision making. They play games that require counting and rule-following or negotiate other rules that bring up discussions about fairness. During the morning meeting children listen and speak and make decisions. There’s a lot to come to know. Learning within a context of relationships and shared community expectations helps children connect what they are learning to a purpose so that it makes sense and has a purpose.

RGC children move on to a variety of programs, some more structured than others. It’s certainly an adjustment for them. Many alumni parents report their child is exhausted at the end of the day. However, how children learn, engage and adapt as they encounter their new context has a great deal to do with their early experiences. In a case study of three children in their first year in kindergarten, Susan Recchia and Dana Bentley describe parents’ perspectives on how RGC facilitated their child’s navigation of kindergarten. Parents reported their children demonstrated specific habits of mind/dispositions encouraged in RGC that assisted the children to succeed in transitioning to kindergarten. These include Engagement of Self, whereby children confidently drew on their personal strengths and demonstrated awareness of self and their own voice to negotiate and engage in their new setting. Alumni also demonstrated a strong sense of themselves, Social Adeptness and Flexibility, seeing themselves as part of a larger community and being aware of and making room for others’ perspectives. Finally, alumni demonstrated the ability to Read and Navigate Environments whereby children observed and adjusted to the structure and rules of kindergarten.

There are many habits, skills, capacities and dispositions that are nurtured at RGC. Children draw on these in ways that benefit them socially and academically. Beyond academic knowledge and skills, children have a sense they are connected to their classroom community. They seem to have a sense of who they are, what it means to be a friend and to have a good friend, a belief in themselves and knowledge of their own value, and a sense that they can act on their world—all powerful readiness capacities.

Warmest regards,
Patrice
TODDLERS WHO LUNCH

DUSTIN VISERING, Logan’s dad

There was a quiet intensity during lunchtime in the Toddler Room, as chowing down quickly turned into the main event of the day. Amanda (toddler) devoured her lunch, then proudly shared her empty lunchbox with the class. Next up was Ryan, who worked his way through lunch, then developed a small case of the “nap wobbles,” then promptly fell asleep on his mat after a diaper change.

Lucas, on the other hand, insisted to his teachers that he was not tired.

Up next was Sylvie, who shared the excitement about her cheese with the whole class. While eating her cheese, Sylvie could not hide her fascination with Sabine’s lunch, and had many questions for Sabine, wanting to know what she was eating.

Meanwhile, Lucas was still not tired.

Lucy impressively devoured her cucumbers, and made a valiant effort to eat her carrots. With some encouragement from her teachers, Lucy gave the carrot eating her best effort, but alas, it was not to be.

One thing was for certain: Lucas was still not tired.

Logan started strongly with his lunch, quickly eating his apple slices and Goldfish. However, progress slowed a bit during the eating of his sandwich, and which point he put his lunchbox away and joined toddler Amanda and teacher Amanda in reading a story. (This unbiased reporter feels Logan could have given a bit more effort in finishing his sandwich.)

Sabine, who, just like Lucas, was not tired, suggested that maybe the teachers could take a nap and that she could be the teacher while they napped.

All in all, this was a solid day of lunching by the members of the Toddler Room. Sabine summed up how she felt about the lunch session quite well when she said, “The milk fell on the table. I’m taking the train.”
TEAL EICH, Kai’s mom

What do Pepito (a.k.a. the “Bad Hat” from Ludwig Bemelmans’ Madeline and the Bad Hat), Darth Vader (from, errr, George Lucas’ Star Wars Trilogy), and Elsa (from the Disney movie Frozen) have in common? Turns out, it’s butterflies. What do I mean? To understand, we must go back to the beginning of the Fall semester at the Rita Gold Early Childhood Center at Teachers College. Upon entering the preschool class one morning at drop-off, my three-year old son Kai eagerly dragged me over to show me the class’s newly acquired caterpillars, which were being kept by the window in a tall, cylindrical netted habitat. Sam Maier, a graduate assistant in the classroom, explained: “The central tenant of our classroom is emergent curriculum; the idea that the projects that we do, not only in the minute-to-minute play that makes up our day, but also in the projects that we do that have a longer duration, come out of the children’s interests. And so we are very strategic about what we think about to have in the classroom, as well as what we think to talk about with the children, to build upon those experiences and interests that they have. So things in our art, for example, will often relate to our time outside, and to what we see, and to what they have expressed interests in on our walks. [The Butterfly Project] came out of two things. The first was that last summer on our nature walks we noticed a lot of insects. Quite a few of the returning preschools were particularly interested in them and talked a lot about them, and so Kuan and Margaret and I discussed that we might want to do that as a project this year. Then, by chance, before we even got it off the ground, Kuan found a bunch of swallowtail butterfly caterpillars in our community garden. They were eating all our vegetables that we use for our Friday cooking. So he took them off, and we weren’t really sure what to do with them, and so we decided to bring them into the classroom and just go from there.”

Kai already knew a bit about caterpillars and their semi-miraculous life-cycle from his frequent visits to his five-year-old brother Jack’s classroom at Bank Street. Jack’s kindergarten class was a week or two into their month-long study of the Monarch butterfly metamorphosis, and Kai had witnessed the milkweed-eating caterpillars both grow, and then become chrysalises hanging from the roof of their enclosure. “What’s going to happen to them?” I asked Kai as we peered down at the Rita Gold caterpillars. “They’ll turn into butterflies,” he said matter-of-factly. I pushed back: “What do you mean? They are caterpillars! How will they grow wings and become something different?” This puzzled him. He didn’t respond. I chalked it up to him failing to appreciate the philosophical-depth of my comment.

Over the next several weeks, the Butterfly Project took on a life of its own in the preschool classroom, prompting curiosity amongst all its members: parents, teachers and students alike. “They were really intrigued by it. There were a lot of questions: Was it ok to touch them? What do they eat? Could we hold them? What would happen to them eventually? Would they become butterflies?” Sam explained. “So a lot of the time was spent doing our own research—because we had not planned to do this as an activity—and so for some of the questions they had, like what do these types of caterpillars eat, we collectively had to figure it out.” How did they figure it out? “We googled it! We found out that it was easily accessible things, like carrot greens and parsley. They were very much involved in it. I’d go over to feed them, and let everyone know that that was going to happen, and then we’d distribute the food and the children would

(continued on p. 5)
The Butterfly Project (continued)

There was some talk about it being real, even though it didn’t move.”

The preschoolers use scarves to morph into chrysalises.

Despite setbacks, and true to the progressive philosophy, the Butterfly Project rubbed off on the play behavior of the preschoolers. “It showed up quite a bit in their art,” Sam said. “Many children would paint or draw caterpillars or butterflies. Sofie Y. was curious about whether the chrysalises that never became butterflies looked like the dead butterfly inside. We never did it, but we talked quite a bit about what it would look like if we cut one open. She made pretend chrysalises out of play dough, and then cut them open to see what they looked like inside. As a way to experiment with that idea, that there was something happening inside those chrysalises. They had a good grasp of the process, despite the fact that it didn’t really come to fruition.”

Back at home, along with Pepito, Kai had become obsessed with Darth Vader after watching the original Star Wars movie. I consoled my husband, Jamie, who was wrestling with how he was going father a son who liked a character from the dark side. “Kai’s favorite color is red, and Darth’s light saber is red,” I tried to convince him, unconvincingly. We humored Kai’s requests to dress—at all times, day and night, for months on end—in Darth Vader garb. He would talk with his three middle fingers up, spread out in front of his mouth, to imitate the breathy-voice of his bad guy-hero.
Then, one night, long after the Butterfly Project had come to a close and the preschool room had moved onto other adventures, we were at home watching—for the 10 millionth time—the movie *Frozen*. Kai was cradling his Elsa music box. Then he declared: “Elsa was purple, and now she’s blue, she changed.” All of a sudden, it clicked. What Kai had learned from the Butterfly Project extended beyond butterflies—way beyond butterflies. He started seeing metamorphosis all around him. Pepito was a “Bad Hat”, but then changed his behavior and was no longer a bad hat, with Madeline even telling him at the end of the book: “You are our pride and Joy. You are the world’s most wonderful boy.” Darth (spoiler alert for anyone who’s lived under a rock for the last 30+ years) transforms, choosing good over bad at the end of *Return of the Jedi*. And Elsa also morphs, from the frightened girl who must hide her secret to a strong Queen who embraces her unique powers.

When I brought up the Butterfly Project to the preschoolers the other day in researching this article, a child ran over to the shelf to retrieve the magnifying container in which the remains are kept. Seeing it stirred up old memories. The preschoolers started telling Margaret and me what had happened, and speculating about what had caused the butterfly to die (“it got sick”; “it got hit”; “it broke its wings”). Alas, it was not a great year for butterflies... But they sure did inspire some pretty interesting discussions and ideas! And, in case you’re wondering, the Bank Street Monarchs met a similar fate. Only one chrysalis made it and broke free of her cocoon. “Emily” was released in Riverside Park, to begin her migration to Mexico and start the whole life-cycle anew.
BABY MASHUP: DYNAMISM IN THE INFANT ROOM

LIZ VAN HOOSE, Lucinda’s mom

Their ages range from two to thirteen months. One of them rolls. Some crawl. Some walk and then climb up the furniture to astonishing heights. Some sleep at 10 o’clock, others at 1, and others still at 11 and 3. Their preferences and needs run the gamut from diaper changes before every nap to milk before everything, well, everything. Most have a propensity for hiding things, including themselves.

As she rolls across the blanket in her safe corner by the window, Danann observes Felix and Lulu climbing in and out of a riser while Milo crawls tenaciously toward a shaker. In his path are baby dolls and trains enshrouded with blankets and translucent scarves. Over by the kitchen, where Casey and Brendan have been pretending to feed each other, Brendan is delighted to find his water bottle in the oven, seemingly unaware that he placed it there an hour ago. Sated, he meanders over to a teacher’s lap for a book, taking special interest in Eric Carle’s animals and the sounds they make. Additional babies gather, testing the limits of a lap, until Ainsley loses interest and crawls over to the plush blocks with a photo of each baby on every side of the cube.

For many of us, these forces of entropy would be daunting. For head teachers Kara and Erica and their associates, they are learning opportunities that build a sense of community as babies encounter each other’s vastly different needs. In the world of the infant room, pragmatism and play are constantly merging, and the loving cultivation of each child’s development in tandem with his or her peers is a marvel to watch.

"Pragmatism and play are constantly merging."
PHOTO ID: PRESCHOOLERS AND THE VIEWFINDER

PATRICE NICHOLS, onsite associate director

Doctoral candidate Tran Templeton, a former RGC teacher and Doctoral Fellow, has been working with the preschoolers as part of her dissertation study entitled "I Know How to Take a Picture: Young Children's Photographic Practices and the Construction of Identity." As a response to adult conceptions of children in photographs, Tran's study focuses on children's own use of the camera and the perspectives they convey in their pictures. All of the children decided to use the camera, to engage in one-on-one interviews with Tran, and to present their preferred images to their peers during the daily meeting time. The children have taken significant ownership of the camera, capturing their own images of teachers—at times unflattering!—and instructing adults that it's "for preschoolers only." The photographs have also become recognizable to the preschoolers as they identify particular photographic signatures and refer to peers' photographs when they see them. In fact, they see their images as being "readable." During transition times they frequently take out the photo books that contain their images. Sammie even said, "This is a book I can read!"

Preschoolers share and discuss their photos.

ACCOLADES

PATRICE NICHOLS, onsite associate director

Congratulations to Susan Recchia for being honored at the National Association of Early Childhood Teacher Educators 2016 Annual Conference this fall. At the NAECTE conference, she was awarded the Outstanding Early Childhood Teacher Educator Award and also won the 2015 Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education Distinguished Article Award for a study based on her work with two former doctoral students who did their dissertations at RGC, Seung Yeon Lee and Minsun Shin. The article, entitled Preparing Early Childhood Professionals for Relationship-Based Work with Infants, draws on multiple data sources to describe the ways that practicum students discover the power and value of relationships as an essential context for transforming their understandings of infant development and their practices of infant care. Susan was a moderator for the keynote panel presentation on Preparing Early Childhood Educators for a Complex World: Embracing Challenges to Transform Research and Practice. She also presented a paper on Infant Care as a Framework for Authentic Teaching for Immigrant Preservice Teachers with Sunny McDevitt, a Doctoral Student in C&T. Congratulations on these many honors!