THE JOY OF LEARNING

TOMBOYS, PRINCESSES, AND TOUGH GUYS
A PARENT’S PERSPECTIVE: EDUCATING GLOBAL CITIZENS
ALUMNI NEWS: STILL FRIENDS AFTER ALL THESE YEARS
WSMS MISSION STATEMENT REVISITED AND MORE!

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The Joy of Learning...

...Our young students at WSMS have helped me realize the invaluable role that joy plays in sustaining a lifelong journey of discovery and accomplishment. This potent realization, gained early in my career, continues to guide my decisions and actions on behalf of each child in our school.

The natural exuberance and endless curiosity of children are the touchstones of all we do at West Side Montessori School. It is these precious qualities that have inspired and sustained my quest to create, in collaboration with my team of dedicated and well-trained teachers, classroom learning environments that help each child experience the intense and lasting joy that comes from learning new things and developing new skills. I can think of no better illustration of this joy than the time a mom arrived at WSMS one morning with one of her two children. She told me that Mercer was staying at home because she wasn’t feeling well. Mom told me that when Devan realized Mercer was not coming to school, he exclaimed, “Too bad...you are going to miss all the fun!”

Devan and all our young students at WSMS have helped me realize the invaluable role that joy plays in sustaining a lifelong journey of discovery and accomplishment. This potent realization, gained early in my career, continues to guide my decisions and actions on behalf of each child in our school.

Joy in learning takes many forms, as this issue of Great Beginnings amply demonstrates. In “Tomboys, Princesses, and Tough Guys” (page 6), 3W head teacher Suzanne Hunton explores her fascination with language and the impact it can have on a child’s worldview, particularly when it comes to gender issues. With respect, gentleness, and a large dose of her wisecracking humor, Suzanne encourages adults and children alike to question their assumptions about gender while offering concrete ways in which to prevent gender stereotyping. Thanks to Suzanne’s research and its implementation in the classrooms at WSMS, girls and boys gain confidence as they discover and assert their identities in an environment that is as supportive as it is joyful.

In “Locavores in Training” (page 12), WSMS teacher and nature specialist Joan Shisler explains how and why she engages children in the study of nature. By treating her students as young scientists, Joan draws out their sense of wonder, taking them from shrieks of “Yuck!” to gasps of “Oh, wow!” As a result the children develop a love for, and a feeling of responsibility to, the natural environment, as well as the broader understanding that we are all part of one world.

“A Parent’s Perspective” is a new feature of Great Beginnings devoted to exploring how what we do here at WSMS is carried forward as a child matures. In “A Parent’s Perspective: Educating Global Citizens” (page 20), WSMS parent Frances Rosenfeld describes the worldview that her eight-year-old daughter, Rebecca, has constructed. Although Frances values the knowledge that her child has gained, she is most impressed by the confidence with which Rebecca places people and things in a global perspective. Frances ascribes this confidence primarily to the love of learning and the global understanding that Rebecca obtained in her three years at WSMS.

I am proud of the stories that appear in this issue of Great Beginnings, and of the successes in instilling the joy of learning they demonstrate. I hope you enjoy reading them.

MIMI BASSO
HEAD OF SCHOOL
Mission Statement Revisited

Since 1963, West Side Montessori School has provided an exceptional early childhood education within a welcoming and richly diverse community. Here, children are nurtured, families find friendship and support, faculty can flourish. We embody the best practices that have evolved in early childhood and Montessori education, and as a community of learners, we use the process of self-reflection to continually improve what we know and what we do to best support our students. We share our growing understanding of early childhood education and our findings with parents and with the broader educational community. Our mission is made feasible by our outstanding faculty and is further enhanced by our internationally recognized teacher education program.

Living our Montessori philosophy. In every aspect of our interactions with children and with adults, we emphasize respect, competency, initiative, responsibility, self-management, and the ability to view experiences from different perspectives. At WSMS, we provide children with the prepared environment, skills, and positive attitudes to become self-directed learners, flexible thinkers, creative problem solvers, resilient individuals, and empathic citizens.

Common wisdom tells us that even the most successful enterprise requires ongoing reevaluation and improvement. As one step of our current Strategic Planning effort, the Board asked Liz Canino, chair of the Communications Committee, to gather a group of current and alumni families, board members, faculty, and staff to review our mission statement. The discussion was uplifting. We realized that while the earlier statement defined enduring founding values and goals, this re-articulation expresses what has come to set us apart from other early childhood schools, while also refining our continuing goals for improvement.
lifetime of learning

Actively involving families in their children's educational lives. We continually provide opportunities for parents to participate, ask questions, learn, and get support. By establishing and maintaining a strong home-school connection, we help families better understand their children's unique capabilities in order to become knowledgeable and effective advocates for their children. At WSMS, we emphasize our relationship with parents as partners in the process of developing lifelong learners.

Modeling our belief in the importance of diversity. We believe that a community that is truly diverse in every sense—cultural, ethnic, economic—allows children to broaden their understanding of themselves and the world around them in an atmosphere of inclusion and respect. At WSMS, diversity is not a goal; it is the way we live.

Continually building on our knowledge of child development and Montessori education. Through holistic learning and teaching opportunities (including professional development seminars, visiting scholars, travel, reflective practices, our student teaching program, and our on-site weekend Montessori teacher education program), we enrich our faculty's development, the benefits of which are experienced firsthand by the children. At WSMS, our position as a resource for the worldwide early childhood teaching community informs our high standards and ensures the best educational beginning for children.
“WORDS can be everything. They can expand a child’s perception of what is possible. They can also limit. It all boils down to expectations.”

Suzanne Hunton is head teacher in classroom 3W at West Side Montessori School. Like many of her colleagues, she has been encouraged to bring her outside academic research into the classroom, testing the merits of the theoretical on the rigors of a routine school day.

For almost a decade, the focus of Suzanne’s exploration has been gender equity in the classroom. She has gathered significant research suggesting that a child’s comprehension of gender roles, including attitudes about gender, develops early in life. We learn what it means to be a girl or a boy from our
parents and other caregivers, from our earliest classmates, and from the books and other media in our environment.

Over a twelve-week period in 2007, Suzanne surveyed the parents of the children in her classroom. Respectful of the participants’ privacy, she collected details about each household’s composition, parents’ professions, and the toys and books available to the children. For countless hours, she documented the play and interaction of the children in her classroom. Suzanne also interviewed parents to gain a sense of where subconscious gender biases may exist. Gently, respectfully, she teased to the surface those assumptions and the consequent choices and behaviors that can lead to unwelcome, negative expectations for our children.

“Children as young as two years of age begin to construct an understanding of what constitutes a girl and a boy and what each is capable of accomplishing. By the age of seven, a child may have already completed this picture. During those critical early years, it is imperative that the adults in a child’s life be aware of how they may be affecting the formation of self-image.”

Suzanne focused her efforts on three significant areas: language, modeling, and media.

MORE THAN STICKS AND STONES

Through a concerted effort, teachers and parents can work together to become more sensitive to their choice of words, consciously trying to eliminate any biases from their vocabulary and teaching repertoire. Suzanne has found it important to continuously monitor her own language strategy for calling on children in the classroom, both individually and in groups. “I try to be keenly aware of the social relationships in the classroom and the resulting language,” Suzanne says. She does not group children into single-sex activities or lines, and she intervenes in cases of gender-based teasing and exclusion, such as games involving “boys chasing the girls” or “no boys (or girls) allowed.”

Other choices can have more subtle ramifications. Language is the one constant for children when deciphering cultural norms and beliefs. “Children are exposed to gender stereotypes and beliefs through the way we speak,” Suzanne explains. “A culture’s negative attitudes towards one sex are passed along through language, so we must be mindful of word choice and tone.” For example, when indicating an object
or an unnamed person, most people will refer to it as “he.” This can very quickly become the norm for a child, effectively negating the possibility of a female participant. One child’s adept observation skills were apparent in her response to a question about why she kept referring to a nondescript teddy bear as “he.” She said, “I’m more used to ‘he.’ I always say ‘he.’”

Ultimately, it is all about a balanced approach. Suzanne counsels nurturing sensitivity to word choice and making sure that descriptors for both genders are equally represented. For instance, she suggests purging the phrase “you guys” when speaking to a mixed-sex group, and making an effort to use gender-neutral designations, such as “firefighter” and “police officer.”

Beyond language, tone of voice can influence how a child will view gender. Adults will often imply that boys are strong and girls are fragile by adjusting the pitch and/or volume of their voice accordingly. One parent in Suzanne’s survey said, “I think I speak more softly with girls, feeling more protective of them. In contrast, I’m more likely to get boys to ‘settle down.’” It is important to ask yourself whether you are responding to a situation or to a child’s gender.

ENRICHING THE REAL WORLD THAT IS THE CLASSROOM

Any environment—school, home, or even the mall—may communicate information to children about very narrowly defined gender roles, e.g., that women can only pursue certain professions or that men can only hope for a limited parental role. In response, a young child in the midst of forming conceptual patterns may restrict her or his involvement in behaviors perceived as “inappropriate” for her or his gender. This self-restriction effectively decreases opportunities for skill-developing interactions and learning experiences. “It is through an equality of play that children can begin to see that these roles are for everyone,” Suzanne points out. “We want children to observe, practice, and learn all the skills they will need to be successful in school and in their adult lives.”

As a result of her research, Suzanne has become methodical about monitoring her own behavior for gender stereotypes. She has also begun modeling activities traditionally gender-typed for the opposite sex. Suzanne now spends more time in the building block area, while her male assistant teacher engages in dramatic play with the children, participating in cooking and cleaning activities as well as nurturing activities, such as doll play. Suzanne routinely introduces the children to the full spectrum of social and occupational roles occupied by women and men in the United States. She invites community members who exemplify non-traditional roles, such as male nurses and female firefighters, to visit the classroom.

An educational environment can be influential in many ways, including through materials and curriculum and, significantly, through children interacting with each other. Suzanne has reorganized her classroom to facilitate girls’ and boys’ involvement in a range of activities, encouraging both active and quiet play, as well as large and small motor work. For example, she has integrated the previously segregated block area with other activities, and she has situated the dramatic play areas in places where children will be more likely to simultaneously engage in large motor activities, such as climbing, lifting, and carrying.

HARNESSING THE POWER OF CONVERSATION

“I think it is important to point out exactly how silly it is to assume that ‘just because I like this or that’ this makes me a boy or a girl,” Suzanne remarks wryly. “I like to think of regular conversations with the children as validation of ‘so what.’” (“So what if I’m a girl. I can run fast, climb high.”) And, her students do get it. Often, laughter has served as the most effective means of delivering a positive message about gender.

Literature typically serves as one of the most powerful tools in Suzanne’s overflowing kit of strategies. She uses books and the subsequent discussions about them as a means of communicating a simple message: gender does not indicate capability. She picks books that depict the achievements of characters in terms of their abilities and initiative, rather than beauty or a sweet, compliant nature. Male characters are portrayed, as often as female characters, as nurturing, caring, and sensitive.

Suzanne regards the group conversations, which are always a part of any class reading, as a critical component of her strategy to develop healthy, gender-fair attitudes. Her goal is to produce an increased sense of self-awareness and self-confidence in the children. She encourages discussions by asking divergent and open-ended questions. Such questions have no right or wrong answer. She promotes non-judgmental attitudes and empathy by asking the children if anyone “thinks differently” about what has been said by the previous speaker. She often models an alternate position and actively promotes tolerance for all viewpoints.

WHAT MESSAGE IS YOUR HOME LIBRARY SENDING?

Do the stories acknowledge and value differences and similarities among people?
Are the adventurers and explorers depicted in the stories represented by both sexes?
Can both boys and girls positively identify with the characters?
Is there a balanced representation of multiple cultures, perspectives, and experiences?

MONTESSORI PERSPECTIVE

A primary goal of Montessori education is to foster independence, respect, and critical thinking among all children, regardless of gender. Suzanne agrees that this has indeed been her objective in pursuing and implementing her research: “I decided my plan would be to get children to think critically about their roles in regard to gender.” She adds, “Our differences are what make us individuals—differences that cannot be reduced to simplistic representations of femininity
A primary goal of Montessori education is to foster independence, respect, and critical thinking among all children, regardless of gender.

or masculinity.” Suzanne emphasizes the fact that her research is not about canceling out differences. Rather, she celebrates her students’ newfound confidence and “ability to think about and voice their opinions about gender” without fear of being judged. Ah, the power of conversation and self-awareness!

ABOUT SUZANNE HUNTON
As an undergraduate at Lehigh University studying Psychology, Suzanne volunteered her time and energies to a Head Start program in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. She experienced a profound sense of community among the teachers and children there. During the summers she worked at JKL Montessori School in Commack, New York, where her colleagues placed a similar emphasis on community building and collaboration. It was this very positive experience that ultimately led her to pursue her certification in Montessori education. Suzanne joined West Side Montessori School in 2001. Three years later, she returned to academia in pursuit of a Master of Early Childhood Education from City College of New York.

Language as it relates to early childhood development represents an ongoing theme in Suzanne’s work. Her initial research, as explored in her master’s thesis, focused on environmental conditions (at home and in school, suburban versus urban settings, etc.) and the resulting impact on verbal expression. These ideas continue to engage Suzanne, for she brings this expertise to her recent work with other education professionals. She is currently helping to teach the language curriculum component of the WSMS Teacher Education Program.

SUGGESTED READING WITH YOUR CHILD
Amazing Grace by Mary Hoffman
Calico and Tin Horns by Candace Christiansen
The Daddies Boat by Lucia Monfried
Mommies at Work by Eve Merriam
Sheila Rae, the Brave by Kevin Henkes
Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt by Deborah Hopkinson
White Dynamite and Curly Kidd by Bill Martin, Jr., and John Archambault
William’s Doll by Charlotte Zolotow

NOTE ABOUT WSMS’S COMMITMENT TO CONTINUING EDUCATION
Professional development for West Side Montessori School teachers is central to our mission. Bi-weekly seminars focus on ongoing concerns and developments in contemporary education. Each classroom’s teachers meet with the Head of School on a bi-weekly basis to discuss issues impacting their children and themselves. Workshops and non-matriculated graduate courses are made available throughout the year. WSMS encourages participation and pays expenses for teachers to attend and contribute to annual Montessori conferences held throughout the country. In addition, each teacher receives tuition reimbursement for graduate study and access to a cultural fund, which can be used for museum memberships/admissions and other culturally rich experiences. For teachers who have been with WSMS for three years or more, the school makes travel grants available for educational purposes and for furthering cultural knowledge. These investments in faculty development help us continually improve our program and methods. And, most importantly, our children reap the benefits.
Why Positive Discipline Matters

BY MIMI BASSO
Head of School

One of the ways in which we further the professional development of our teachers is by offering several special “scholar in residence” programs each year. At our invitation, noted experts in various areas of childhood education come to WSMS to share their insights with our teachers, both through workshops and through personal consultations. The teachers are soon able to apply their newfound knowledge and techniques to their work in the classroom, where our students reap the benefits firsthand.

One of this year’s visiting scholars is Chip DeLorenzo, Executive Director of the Damariscotta Montessori School in Nobleboro, ME, and a Montessori consultant. Prior to the start of the 2009–2010 school year at WSMS, Chip led a two-day faculty workshop focusing on how to build character in children over the long term by using discipline. Yes, you heard right: discipline. And by that I don’t mean resorting to yelling or time-outs. I’m referring to the concept of positive discipline, a field in which Chip is a longtime expert. Chip based his workshop on the book Positive Discipline by Dr. Jane Nelsen, a licensed marriage, family, and child counselor and a childhood discipline expert. In preparation for the workshop, participants were given copies of Positive Discipline and Positive Discipline for Preschoolers (also by Nelsen) to read.

Nelsen believes that truly effective discipline doesn’t involve the use of punishment or rewards, the two ends of the traditional discipline spectrum. Instead, she suggests approaching discipline as a goal shared by adult and child. Positive discipline teaches mutual respect and gives children the social and life skills to find solutions on their own. The more children are involved in identifying and resolving discipline issues, the greater their potential for long-term success and increased self-esteem.

Workshop participants discussed the concept of encouragement vs. praise. Nelsen sees encouragement as a means of helping a child develop courage, resilience, and a sense of self-worth. The child learns to take risks, and to approach failure as something to learn from, not something to fear. Praise, on the other hand, takes the sense of accomplishment away from the child, and leads her/him to base her/his sense of self-worth on the validation of others. The child may become hesitant to take risks because they can result in failure.

At WSMS, one of our guiding beliefs is that learning is a lifetime pursuit for everyone—not only for our students and their families, but for our faculty and staff.
While punishment or rewards can work to stop undesirable behavior in the short term, they are not effective over time. And even their short-term effect is not worth the price children have to pay. — WSMS Teacher

According to Nelsen, “Encouragement invites self-evaluation, while praise turns children into approval junkies.”

Another element of positive discipline is class meetings (or family meetings, in the case of the home environment), in which children meet individually with teachers on a regular basis to bring up issues and problems and to work through solutions and agreements together. A child who works with adults to set mutually acceptable rules and agreements is more likely to be cooperative when it comes to infractions of those rules or agreements. And the fact that adults take time out of their day to meet with and listen to the child fosters the child’s sense of self-worth.

Cooperation is also more likely when children are allowed some element of control over their environment. For example, saying to a child, “I see that there are some books scattered on the floor. I am free now to help you pick them up and put them away, or you can do it by yourself later on. Which would you like to do?” is far more empowering than, “Pick up those books.” Allowing children to have a choice and to be involved in the decision helps them to take responsibility for their actions in the future.

Positive discipline supports the practice of practical, non-punitive discipline strategies that not only encourage children to improve their behavior, but also help children develop a healthy sense of capability and self-worth, the foundations of good character and social and life skills that will serve them well through adulthood. The prepared environment in the classrooms at WSMS provides an ideal staging ground for achieving these goals in a seamless fashion.

After Chip’s workshop, I sought feedback from WSMS teachers on their experience, and was pleased to hear so many positive responses.

“I feel so grateful for the ongoing professional development I receive at WSMS. And this workshop was particularly helpful. The word discipline so often has a negative connotation, and for this reason I really liked the idea of positive discipline. Dr. Nelsen’s theories fit very nicely with the Montessori method and the work we are already doing at WSMS, and I am eager to get into the classroom and try out some of her strategies.” (WSMS Teacher)

“While punishment or rewards can work to stop undesirable behavior in the short term, they are not effective over time, and even their short-term effect is not worth the price children have to pay. For this reason we don’t use punishment or rewards at WSMS. And after Chip’s workshop, I feel that I’m armed with even more tools to help children reach their fullest potential in a positive way.” (WSMS Teacher)

For more information on positive discipline, visit www.positivediscipline.com. And stay tuned: in future issues of Great Beginnings I will continue to bring you information on current research in the field of education, topics we are discussing at WSMS, and our ongoing efforts to provide the best Montessori experience possible for our young students.
WSMS teacher and nature specialist Joan Shisler is the most in her element when she’s sitting on the classroom floor surrounded by a class of wide-eyed three- to five-year-olds. Colleagues readily describe Joan as a master teacher, a valued mentor, and a tireless cheerleader for kids and for all things Montessori. To the children gathered around her for nature class, she is their engaging guide to the natural world. Her enthusiasm is contagious; the scope of her knowledge is immense.

Throughout her childhood in rural Pennsylvania, Joan got to see firsthand how plants grow, and how living creatures such as insects and worms aid in the growing of food. Her backyard had a fruit and vegetable garden large enough to feed not just her own family, but a few neighboring families as well. The property extended past meadows and hills filled with various trees, wildflowers, and grasses where she and her siblings and friends explored and played.

While it’s clear that Joan grew up in an ideal environment in which to develop a love and understanding of nature, what about city kids? How can they learn to cherish the world in which we live? I recently had the opportunity to talk to Joan about this question and about her vision for the nature program at WSMS.

Tell us a little about the nature program.
Nature class is a fun-filled half hour filled with discussions and questions. There are lots of opportunities for everyone to see, touch, feel, smell, and occasionally hear from objects pertaining to animals and to the world we all live in.

How is a typical nature class structured?
The nature program always begins by placing ourselves into nature: we are a part of nature, we are animals. We begin by exploring our own five senses, because that is what we use to learn. Then we can begin to look at animals around us and explore how they use their senses to find food, to be safe, to find shelter.

Do you have a set curriculum, or is it flexible based on children’s interests?
Well, both, but typically we begin to explore different aspects of our natural world: life cycles; habitats; hibernation; the different categories of animals such as vertebrates and invertebrates; then the different vertebrates such as mammals, birds, reptiles, fish, and amphibians. We most often have an animal to hold or simply observe. We do experiments having to do with animals and nature, such as, “How many blocks will a chicken egg hold before it smashes?” and [we] make murals of animals hibernating.

Locavores in Training:
Joan Shisler, Nature Teacher

As interviewed by:
Lorén DeNicola, WSMS Administration
Why is learning about nature important for children living in New York City?

My belief about the nature program is that the experiences of young children with nature play a critical role in shaping lifelong attitudes, values, and patterns of behavior toward natural environments, and to that end, we are helping to inspire empathic values and flexible thinking.

Your program focuses on “local nature.” Why?

One of the most important parts of the nature program is that it revolves around animals and plants that are a part of our world in and around New York City. Our natural world includes plants that provide us with food. So imparting that connection and making nature real to children and not just a trip to the zoo is something I would love to see. That is why I place an emphasis on cows rather than elephants, coyotes rather than hyenas, ants and grasshoppers rather than Komodo dragons.

What are your goals for the nature program?

To foster the children’s sense of wonder, to provide a sense of respect and caring for the natural environment, to provide positive interactions with the natural world, and to teach love and respect for both the environment and ourselves.

What advice can you give to parents so they too can inspire a love for nature?

Start very young, take children outdoors to the park in every season, observe everything that crawls or walks or flies...Take the time to allow your children to ask questions, and provide opportunities for them to figure things out. Do research online...let them discover! Join a community garden, grow one on your roof; buy from local farmers markets; and most of all, show [your children] that you care about the environment too.

Joan concluded the interview with a classroom story. She was speaking to a class about dissecting fish. The children responded with shrieks of “Yuck!” and “Ewww!” Joan explained to the children, “Today we are going to be scientists, and scientists say things like, ‘Oh, wow,’ and ‘I wonder.’” And almost as if by magic, the chorus of repulsion from the children shifted to echo those words of wonder and curiosity. From moments like these emerge the respect and caring for the environment that Joan is talking about—and, ultimately, the wider understanding of global connectedness that is what WSMS is all about.

ABOUT JOAN SHISLER

Joan’s experience as a Montessori classroom teacher spans three decades. She has taught in both New York City and Pennsylvania. Joan earned her Bachelor of Arts from Penn State University and later a Master’s Degree in Education from Hunter College in New York City.

After completing her formal training and then teaching for many years, Joan pursued her passion for nature and developed an Early Education Program for children. According to Joan, the nature program at West Side Montessori School gives children a chance to “explore the wonders and workings of animals and nature.”
...a new song that a teacher or child is teaching to everyone else...recorded music that someone has brought in to share...a melody picked out on a vibraphone...

While it’s always a pleasure to happen on these moments, there’s a lot more going on than meets the ear. Music is, quite simply, one of the most powerful tools in the early childhood curriculum. Whether it is listened to, danced to, played, or sung, music helps children explore and develop skills that will endure over time, bringing personal pleasure and an outlet for sharing oneself with others. As one Montessori music teacher put it:

“There is no such thing as a non-musical child; there are just non-musical adults who did not get this practice as children. Songs give children a way of expressing emotions, and the very act of singing is a physical release.”

To build on WSMS’s capacity to integrate music into every aspect of classroom life, I invited music specialist Kristin Reign Springer to be one of our school’s visiting scholars this year. I have found that providing faculty with an in-house resource for learning new educational techniques right in the classroom is a very powerful means of helping the entire teaching team enhance its effectiveness. Teachers learn by doing, and they share what works with their colleagues—thereby integrating new knowledge and ideas into the fabric of our program.

Kristin has spent the year teaching name games, chants, and nursery rhymes to the children and the teachers, often accompanied by small and large movement or percussive instrument play (rhythm sticks, jingle bells, drums). She has also been providing teachers with strategies for increasing children’s awareness of, and receptivity to, musical concepts, such as: playing an upbeat tune to signal children to clean up their work; beginning circle time with copycat activities (to promote listening); encouraging children to sit up and to stand tall (to improve breathing for singing and speaking).

To the teachers, the study of music introduces concepts of pitch, dynamics, duration, timbre, and form, as well as skills in moving, playing, listening, singing, improvising, and organizing sound. To the children, the study of
music is just plain fun. So engaged are they in singing songs with their classmates that they may not be aware of the musical ear training they are receiving, not to mention other skill building: learning the days of the week to the tune of “The Addams Family”; strengthening memory skills and learning subtraction by singing “Five Green Speckled Frogs”; learning other languages by singing “Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes” in Japanese (“Atama, kata, hiza, ashi”) or Korean (“Muhr, ukke, muryup, bal”).

While the benefits of music in the early childhood curriculum are evident, what is perhaps most striking about the music instruction at WSMS is the laughter you hear as children learn a new song, and the joy and excitement you see in their faces as they memorize that song and master its accompanying gestures or movements. The children take great delight not only in their accomplishments but in the music itself, and this in turn lends them to appreciate the sounds all around them, in the classroom and beyond.

“After doing lots of singing, playing percussion instruments, and listening to music in class, I’ve observed that children are more aware of everyday musical sounds that may have gone unnoticed before,” one WSMS teacher recently said. “One four-year-old student turned to me and said, ‘Listen to that bird outside. It’s singing a beautiful song.’”

It is this ability to connect what is learned in the classroom with the outside world—this active engagement of children in the world around them—that we at WSMS are committed to nurturing. And it is our belief that music has a unique way of kindling that joy of learning that leads directly to our students becoming lifelong learners.

The annual WSMS End-of-Year Picnic is around the corner. I hope you will join us so that you can witness the glorious sight and sound of our more than 200 children singing some of their favorite school songs joyfully in unison. Whatever it is they’re singing, it is, truly, a beautiful song.

• Basic Music Competency
  Between the ages of three and six, children are best able to develop basic music competency, i.e., the ability to replicate songs with accurate melody, rhythm, and physical coordination—what we often refer to as someone’s “inner musical ear.”

• Physical/Neurological Development
  The musical integration of small movement (such as finger play and playing instruments) and large muscle movement (such as dance) builds whole body balance and coordination. Musical participation expands the brain’s capability for social interaction.

• Vocabulary
  Group singing expands and reinforces vocabulary, enhances speech technique, and builds memory skills.

• Social Development
  Repeatedly playing musical instruments and singing songs with adults and peers builds self-confidence and expands interactive communication skills.

• Critical Thinking
  As musical patterns are established and then varied, children learn to compare and contrast verses, instruments, movements, and their independent actions. When teachers ask for ideas for variations, or adapt a child’s ideas to the song, children develop their creativity and problem-solving skills.
The Music-Math Connection

The positive effects of music on general learning have been touted for years, but only fairly recently has research focused specifically on the correlation between the study of music in early childhood and subsequent strong performance in mathematics. In a study published by the *Journal for Learning through the Arts*, Maureen Ann Harris observed two groups of Montessori students ranging in age from three to five: one group given three half-hour music sessions a week for six months, the other given no music instruction during that period. At the end of the six months, all of the students took a mathematical achievement test. Those who had received music instruction scored significantly higher on the test than those who hadn’t. Citing other studies, Harris suggests that teaching music to very young children—i.e., children of the age at which they are most able to absorb, retain, and apply what they have learned—gives them the reasoning skills they need to grasp abstract mathematical concepts.

Further reading:

http://escholarship.org/uc/item/07h5f866
Music Resources

BOOKS

Meet the Orchestra – Ann Hayes
Mole Music – David M. McPhail
Mozart Finds a Melody – Stephen Costanza
The Jazz Fly – Matthew Gollub
The Philharmonic Gets Dressed – Karla Kuskin
Zin! Zin! Zin! A Violin – Lloyd Moss

BOOK/CD

Story of the Orchestra: Listen While You Learn About the Instruments, the Music and the Composers Who Wrote the Music! – Robert Levine

CDS

Circlesongs – Bobby McFerrin
Beauty and the Beat! Favorite Disney Tunes in Steelband Style – The Trinidad and Tobago Showboat Orchestra
Grimm’s & Hans Christian Andersen’s Fairy Tales – Danny Kaye
Jazz for Kids: Sing, Clap, Wiggle and Shake – Various Artists
Jazz and Swing for Kids – Various Artists
Putumayo Presents: Dreamland: World Lullabies and Soothing Songs – Various Artists

SOFTWARE

Superstart: Mozart’s Musical Adventure – SelectSoft Publishing
Superstart: Tchaikovsky’s Musical Adventure – SelectSoft Publishing
West Side Montessori School has been a “great beginning” for literally thousands of children in its almost 50 years as a school. After several years at WSMS, children move to a myriad of ongoing schools, families depart for the suburbs or farther destinations across the country and the world...

Alumni News: Still Friends After All These Years
Four Guys from the Class of ’88

Unsurprisingly, many of those first friendships formed at WSMS are relegated to fond memories, evoked by flipping through a childhood picture album or a school yearbook.

We are delighted to report that sometimes those friendships are sustained over the years, or revived by chance or common goals. This is the tale of some of the boys who left WSMS in 1988, have kept in touch, and are presently well established in 21st-century careers. Every one of them credits his early education with fostering his creativity and independence.

Today Billy Parish lives in Flagstaff, Arizona, with his wife and small daughter (who attends a Montessori early childhood program!). A high school semester at the Mountain School in Vermont immersed Billy in environmental awareness and changed his life. He left Yale in 2002 to cofound the Energy Action Coalition and has since become nationally recognized for his success in innovative and energetic efforts involving kids, community activists, governmental initiatives, and “green” employment. Billy says he now realizes that his years at WSMS, where independent thinking was fostered in a way he did not experience later in life, may have formed the basis for his ability and desire to work outside traditional structures. According to his dad, Michael Parish, even at age five Billy was clear-minded and focused: Given the option of staying at WSMS for an extra year, which would allow him to start first grade as one of the oldest in his class, he weighed the facts quickly but meticulously and replied succinctly: “Stay.”

In 2007 Billy reconnected with Ben Bronfman, who has also made the environment his life’s work. After studying politics and law at Emerson College, Ben pursued a career in music, playing guitar and singing with a band called Exit. But climate change haunted him, and he co-founded Green Owl Records, which is changing the environmental face of the recording industry by using CD trays made of recycled plastic bottles, paper products made exclusively of recycled materials, and environmentally conscious touring vehicles for its artists. Today his energies are focused on Global Thermostat, a carbon capture firm founded by Graciela Chichilnisky (professor of Economics and Mathematical Statistics at Columbia University and author of the Kyoto Protocol) and Peter Eisenberger (physicist and founder of the Earth Institute at Columbia University and the Princeton Materials Institute at Princeton University). Global Thermostat was recently presented at Time Magazine’s World Energy Technologies Summit as one of the leading technologies to “change the world.” The first pilot
The plant is set to debut in May at the Stanford Research Institute in California. Now shuttling between homes in Los Angeles and Brooklyn, Ben is the proud father of a new son with his fiancée, singer and visual artist M.I.A.

Like Ben Bronfman, Ben Lyons left college (in his case, the University of Michigan) for the music world. Ben worked at hip-hop music labels Def Jam and Roc-A-Fella, was an associate producer at ESPN, and produced music videos. But the showman evident in 4E was destined to emerge, and the journalistic path of his father (film and theater critic Jeffrey Lyons) and grandfather (newspaper columnist Leonard Lyons) beckoned. Now you can find Ben every weekday critiquing films on The Daily Ten (aka The D10), an entertainment news show on the cable channel E! You can also catch him in venues as varied as online blogs, Good Morning America, ESPN, Nickelodeon, and the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino in Las Vegas.

Ben has fond memories of Barry Owens, the school chef and a teacher in the All Day Program (the precursor to today’s LAP) during Ben’s years at WSMS. Apart from his culinary talents, Barry was instrumental in helping Ben wiggle out loose baby teeth! Ben has stories about Ron (the master puppeteer) and Windy, balloon shaving at the Spring Fair, spending hours on Lego constructions and basketball, and bringing sliced red peppers as the class snack—to the great disdain of his fellow students! Ben has been back to WSMS in a professional capacity: While producing segments for Hip Hop Nation, he brought Pharoah Monch, a popular rapper from Brooklyn famous for his song “Simon Says,” to WSMS to play Simon Says with the kids; and he brought Rahzel, aka the Human Beatbox from the Roots, to come and read with the kids and make animal and robot noises.

Along with Billy and the two Bens, Jawn Morales moved on to the Collegiate School after WSMS. Jawn remembers eating breakfast before school in the Parents Room with his mom; reveling in the Spring Fair on 92nd Street; being in Garden with Ron and Windy; climbing the stairs to the gym and rooftop; and, in his last year at WSMS, hiking every day up to 4W, where he and Ben Bronfman enjoyed their days with Smita. All that physical activity was later reflected in his love of sports: Little League with Ben Lyons, varsity teams in high school and college. Jawn became a star athlete at Wesleyan University and joined CBS Sports right out of college. Today he is the guy responsible for the on-air graphics that help you understand all those statistics in college and professional athletics.

In 1988 these boys were West Side Montessori kids... in 2010 their overlapping careers in the environment and the media reflect a commitment to making our world a better place for the next generation of WSMS alumni.
Wherever you go when you’re at WSMS, you find windows onto the rest of the world. You meet teachers and staff who come from places all over the globe (Japan, South Korea, Tibet, Colombia, the Philippines, Canada, Austria, Germany, Syria, and more).

On the walls of the classrooms you see maps and photos that teachers and students have brought in showing countries they have visited. You see children working with world map puzzles, globes, and flags of various nations. You hear children singing songs in different languages such as French, Japanese, Spanish, and Korean. One of the things that makes WSMS such a special place is the way this internationality is so effortlessly incorporated into the daily lives of its students. As a result, the children learn about other countries and cultures organically, and learn to view themselves as part of a global community.

WSMS parent Frances Rosenfeld recently had this to say about WSMS’s approach to global education:

“I love that the curriculum uses geography as an organizing principle. To me, that’s a great way to start introducing the concept of a wider world to young children...the approach is not to introduce children to different cultures right away, but rather to start objectively with the concept of geography—continents and countries. It’s a way for kids to begin organizing their sense of the world spatially.”

For example, even the youngest students at WSMS can sing along to this song:

CONTINENTS, CONTINENTS
DO YOU KNOW YOUR CONTINENTS?
NORTH AND SOUTH AND EAST AND WEST
AND ALL AROUND THE WORLD
ASIA, AFRICA, NORTH AND SOUTH AMERICA
OCEANIA, ANTARCTICA, AND EUROPE, TOO

In addition to learning this song, this year the children of the Garden class took a more hands-on approach to mastering the continents. For their annual project for the WSMS Auction, the class created a quilt of the world using the technique of finger knitting. Using their fingers, the children knitted representations of the seven continents out of orange, pink, white, red, yellow, green, and brown yarn, in accordance with the traditional Montessori continent color palette. Their work was then sewn onto blue fabric, resulting in a handmade map of the world.

As Frances points out, “If you start with the whole globe, you get a broader perspective...This gets kids interested in other countries and they are able to focus on more than just what’s right around them. Little kids who have never traveled start noticing things, but in a very objective way, without judgment.”

Here’s another popular song you hear in the classrooms at WSMS:

HELLO, BONJOUR, BUENOS DIAS
NI HAO, GUTEN TAG, KONICHIWA
CIAO, SHALOM, DO-BREY DIEN
HELLO TO ALL THE CHILDREN OF THE WORLD!
WE LIVE IN DIFFERENT PLACES
FROM ALL AROUND THE WORLD
WE SPEAK IN MANY DIFFERENT WAYS
THOUGH SOME THINGS MAY BE DIFFERENT
WE’RE CHILDREN JUST THE SAME
AND WE ALL LIKE TO SING AND PLAY!
This ultimate “big picture” dovetails with Dr. Maria Montessori's holistic view of the child, which regards each human being as a uniquely endowed whole individual living a whole life in a whole world. Just as all aspects of a person's life are intertwined, so are that person's self, family, neighborhood, and global community interconnected. As Dr. Montessori herself once said:

“Let us give the child a vision of the whole universe...for all things are part of the universe, and are connected with each other to form one whole unity.”

And therein lies perhaps the most important aspect of WSMS's mission: providing children with the skills and attitudes to become caring and responsible global citizens. Or, as Frances sums it up: “I wish everyone could be sent back to preschool to learn to think globally!”

Frances Rosenfeld, a PhD in History from Columbia University. Her younger daughter, Nora, is three and is currently a student at WSMS; her older daughter, Rebecca, is a WSMS alum and is now in second grade at a public school on the Upper West Side.
“Let us give the child a vision of the whole universe... for all things are part of the universe, and are connected with each other to form one whole unity” – Maria Montessori
Very special thanks to the WSMS faculty. They have provided the majority of photos used in this magazine. Kudos to them for their photographic skills and their desire to provide parents and colleagues with a window into the classroom.

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