Given the tremendous long-term impact of these preschool years and the relatively short time in which they occur, the faculty and I recognize that we must make the most of every moment. This sense of urgency informs all of our thoughts and actions—whether planning curriculum, identifying the strengths and needs of each individual child, or working with individuals or groups of children in the classroom.

"Every day matters" is the linguistic shorthand that the teachers and I use to center ourselves on the promise we make to the children (and families) we are privileged to serve. We are keenly aware that children between the ages of 2.6 and 6 are absorbing information and building brain connections at an astounding rate, and that our job is to prepare the classroom to enhance the across-the-board development—physical, cognitive, social, and emotional—that must take place in each of our students. Maria Montessori understood that during these years children are constructing the pathways that will become the foundation of their approach to learning and to life.
Every Day Matters
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In linguistic longhand our promise is this: We are dedicated to making a positive developmental difference in the life of each child every day. Our purpose is to nurture the whole child—mind, heart, and body—while partnering with parents to support each child's strengths and learning style.

More Than Just Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic
Focusing on academics alone at this stage would be a disservice to our students. Literacy and numeracy are essential, but equally important is the context in which these and other important life skills are gained. Our task is to provide a structured environment in which children:

- feel safe to venture forth and explore their own interests
- perceive adults as a reliable source of emotional support and security
- develop self-respect, empathy and respect for others
- discover their ability to be flexible thinkers and creative problem solvers encouraged to find solutions rather than “the one right answer”
- develop confidence and the capacity to communicate—the social skills so important to success in school and beyond

Visiting Scholars Help WSMS Faculty Become Even More Effective

Cutting-Edge Information
The WSMS mission statement describes our faculty as “a community of learners” who “use the process of reflection to continually improve what we know and what we do to best support our students.” One of the unique ways in which we advance this process at WSMS is by appointing a Visiting Scholar to work with faculty over the course of an academic year. This past year we engaged Lesley Koplow, Director of the Center for Emotionally Responsive Practice (CERP) at Bank Street College of Education. I strongly believe that immersing the entire faculty in a focused and comprehensive exploration of a relevant topic every year is one of the most effective methods of keeping our school at the cutting edge pedagogically. I chose CERP because it is a renowned source of information and research related
to a fundamental part of our mission: creating classrooms that children experience as supportive and meaningful learning environments.

Lesley began our year with a series of introductory seminars on the stages of child development—a discussion that continued in more depth throughout the year. One of the most discussed topics centered on the fact that developmental stages (e.g., attachment and separation), if not resolved satisfactorily by the child, continue to reemerge at later stages and can prevent the child from maximizing her/his potential for exploration and learning, both in and out of the classroom. This knowledge made us understand even more clearly how social-emotional issues impact children learning.

Another important insight had to do with our role as educators. We realized that in order to support the emotional well-being of students, it is not enough to carefully observe their actions and listen to their stories; we need to be able to identify and effectively address both the subtle clues and the more blatant expressions of potential emotional stress. We talked about the fact that this definition of faculty responsibility encompasses more than what teachers and administrators in most schools would be willing to accept. Pedagogical education has, for the most part, relegated the emotional aspects of education to the realm of psychologists and social workers.

**Hands-On Strategies**

Helping us to take this understanding into the practical realm, Felice Wagman, a member of the CERP faculty, became a familiar and welcome face at WSMS, observing each classroom at several points throughout the year. Felice focused primarily on identifying the behavioral clues that might indicate the existence of emotional stress. Upon identifying a clue, she would model a strategy to address it. She then led team feedback sessions, in which she and the teachers analyzed and discussed these interventions. (Melissa Vallo, my right hand in education administration, attended all of these sessions to ensure that these new insights developed into a school-wide common language and approach.) These sessions not only provided the teaching team with insights about the interactions that Felice had witnessed, they also helped faculty hear and see the children's communications and actions with newly sensitized ears and eyes, and provided us with a wide range of useful strategies. Here are two examples:

**Boys Don't Cry**

One child, after having caused a spill, said loudly, “I'm a bad boy because I'm crying.” Another child responded, “It's okay if you make a mistake.” Another said, “It's okay to cry.” The crying child said, “No, it's not okay, and boys shouldn't cry.” After drawing the teacher's attention to this incident, Felice helped the teacher facilitate a “then and there” discussion with the whole class about mistakes: mistakes are one of the ways we learn. And crying is one of the ways boys and girls express how they feel.
This incident heightened the teaching team's awareness of issues of identity and feelings that are on the minds of children. Moreover, addressing this issue in the context of the classroom community did not help just one child; it created a sense of security and intimacy in the classroom community. This episode also provided a springboard for rich and meaningful individual and collective classroom work in which notions of gender, feelings, and mistakes could be explored.

**Go Away, Monster**

A four-year-old boy was building in the block area. When asked about his structure, he said, “I’m building a strong room.” Felice asked, “Is the room in your house? What do you mean by strong?” The boy replied, “Every night I have bad dreams.” Felice asked, “What do you see in your dreams?” The child described a recurring dream about a “monster” that was going to take him out of his room and away from his mom and dad. At length Felice intervened. “I have a book that I think you will like to read. It’s called *Go Away, Big Green Monster!*” Felice read the book to the boy and then helped him “read” the book himself. Several classmates came over to listen and to share their own monster stories. This example reveals how one child’s fear was expressed, then validated by an adult in the room, and how it was then safely shared with and validated by peers through the reading of the book. In addition, a larger group of classmates could use the book and this one child’s “monster story” to share stories of their own, thereby increasing group trust and intimacy.

In the discussion that Felice led after this incident, the teaching team shared that the child’s grandmother, whom the child saw frequently, had died very suddenly. The discussion allowed the team to focus on other, more oblique clues to this child’s inability to be fully present and active in the classroom, especially after school vacations that included visits to his grandfather. After confirming their impressions with the child’s mom, the faculty was able to put the puzzle together and use their extensive skills and knowledge to develop strategies to help this child—and by extension all of the children at WSMS—feel safe and engage joyfully in classroom activities.

**Teachers Praise the Program**

In the words of one teacher who has been at WSMS for three years: “Having a yearlong, in-depth, scholarly discussion on an important topic with the entire faculty not only brings us to the cutting edge of knowledge in this area, it also builds a common language that we can all use in understanding the needs of kids. The net result is that the quality of what we can deliver on behalf of children is continually getting better.”

A master teacher with more than ten years at WSMS remarks: “Lesley and Felice have taught us to hear things that we might not have heard, and see things that we might not have seen. This new depth of understanding helps us know children better and provide better information to assist parents in being
knowledgeable advocates and guides for their children."

Another teacher adds: “We are confident that we can successfully address issues that might have seemed sticky to us in the past. For example, when a classmate asks, ‘What’s wrong? Why is Johnny sitting in your lap?’ I now feel that I can say, ‘Johnny is not feeling well, and he needs a hug until his Mom gets here to pick him up.’ In the past I would have felt awkward defining Johnny’s emotional state, thinking that it might cause him more distress. But now I know that the truthful answer is a good response. It lets Johnny and the rest of the class know that it is okay to ask an adult for comfort, and that it is okay to feel sad. Johnny’s sad demeanor and his choice to sit in my lap is already a clear non-verbal communication of the reality. My validation of it simply helps children better understand that the classroom is a safe and secure environment in which to grow from every kind of experience.”

“*This school focuses on the details; [the faculty and education administrators] really know everything about my child.*”

Ultimately, our continual efforts to strengthen the skills and the confidence of our teachers are all about the students. As one WSMS mom put it: “This school focuses on the details; [the faculty and education administrators] really know everything about my child.” Hearing a comment like this lets me know that our actions match our belief that every day matters for each child. It’s not enough to have a beautiful physical environment. Nor is it sufficient to have a well-thought-out curriculum. What is absolutely essential is to keep abreast of the best practices that evolve in early childhood education and research, and to use that information to provide each student at West Side Montessori School with a strong foundation for school and for life. By engaging a Visiting Scholar every year we are able to keep our school at the forefront. Our children, who will soon enough be asked to take on the known and unknown challenges of the future, deserve nothing less.