A mosaic of our 215 students in all of their uniqueness, reflecting the diversity that exists in our world.
Great Beginnings
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IN MIMI’S VOICE

The cover of this issue of Great Beginnings inspires me: a mosaic of our 215 students in all their uniqueness, reflecting the diversity that exists in our world. Providing an unparalleled beginning education to 215 very different human beings—during a time in their lives when learning and development are happening at an exponential pace—is both an exhilarating and intricate endeavor. How do we make every day matter for every child?

We believe that every child has unique potential, reflecting his or her particular heritage, culture, and socio-economic advantage, and that our school community is enriched by these differences. Our Montessori approach provides the foundation for delivering on our every day, every child promise because it places respect for the individual at the core of all that we do. We carefully observe, listen and form an understanding of each child, then build a learning plan that’s specific to their needs.

Our community mosaic is reflected in my article “Celebrating Differences.” I hope you will let me know what you think about expanding our opportunities to learn about each other.

I am excited to share the news of our latest inspiration to make every day matter for all members of our community: converting what is already an exceptional gym for our children into a shared multi-use space that current faculty, faculty in training, and parents can use as well for learning and gathering. Getting more out of every square foot of floor space is a transformation made necessary by the astonishing realities of New York real estate. Boundless thanks to our Annual Fund donors whose steadfast financial support over the years helps support this project.

I hope that you enjoy the articles in this issue by and about faculty as much as I do. They provide insight into the competence and motivation that permeates our work with students, and the joy that is taken in doing that work well. I am grateful to Donna Longdon, Katherine Fordney and Cara Zelas for giving us a glimpse of what they do with children. I see it every day and I’m delighted now to share it with our readers.

And kudos to the fourteen teachers who are enrolled in master’s programs for the commitment they are making to build on their already formidable knowledge and skills. It’s a challenge to obtain an advanced degree while giving one’s all to students each day, but I am proud that our trustees have enabled us to provide our teachers with an annual tuition stipend to support their efforts.

We look forward to welcoming you into our new gym space in the fall, and extend our gratitude to our community—faculty and administration, current and former families, and friends—for your involvement and support throughout this past year.

Mimi Basso
Head of School
EXECUTIVE FUNCTION SKILLS IN YOUNG CHILDREN

BY MIMI BASSO, Head of School

The academic media is full of references to executive function. I can pretty much guarantee that Maria Montessori never used that term—but she would be right at home with this current academic thinking.

Just what are executive function skills? And why are they important to children between the ages of two and six? Basically, executive function skills are the “how” of learning. They are the skills children (and adults) need for the learning process to succeed:

• analyzing
• planning
• organizing
• focusing
• adjusting
• remembering

Research shows that these skills begin to develop shortly after birth, develop quickly through age five or six, and max out in early adulthood.

The good news for us is that the Montessori curriculum has always been aligned with developing these very same skills.

In fact, there is a Montessori term associated with these skills that can sometimes be confusing to parents: normalization. Maria Montessori described it this way: “Normalization is the single most important result of our work.” She went on to say that normalization is the foundation upon which “spontaneous discipline, continuous and happy work, social sentiments of help and sympathy for others...” arise.

To put that in more modern language, I would say that normalization is what happens when children are free to choose meaningful work in a structured environment, and the work provides child-friendly materials and activities that engage the child’s attention.

Montessori teachers are comfortable allowing children to make mistakes and to learn from them, to provide guidance, and to intervene only if a situation requires adult support. So children learn that it’s okay when things don’t work the first time, that they can try again or use a different approach, that they can seek help. They develop pride and confidence and independence. And all this happens when they are two, three, four and five years old.

Think about the WSMS classrooms: calm, structured, organized, and peaceful.

• Children are encouraged to work independently in areas of their own choosing, and guided/encouraged to explore new areas.
• In class meetings, children quickly learn to focus attention on the person who is speaking, and wait until they are acknowledged to contribute their own thoughts.
• When a teacher (or classmate) demonstrates a new work, children learn the specific steps—and the order of those steps—to accomplish it.
• They learn the daily schedule, and from that knowledge they can prepare for each next stage of the day, and also learn how to adapt if the schedule changes.
• They learn to wait until a classmate finishes a work and puts it back carefully on the appropriate shelf before they may use it. And they come to recognize that related works may be successively more complicated or difficult—so they develop the skills to deal at each more complex level.
• They work independently on some projects and in partnership with peers on others. Montessori mixed-age classrooms provide the opportunity to learn from more experienced classmates and mentor younger ones.

The academic media is full of references to executive function. I can pretty much guarantee that Maria Montessori never used that term—but she would be right at home with this current academic thinking.
What happens after that?

Our children move to ongoing schools having learned key strategies for success: they are respectful of others, organized in their approach, willing to make mistakes in trying to solve a problem. They can work independently, and are comfortable asking for help when they need it. They work happily in small groups with other children and take leadership roles when appropriate. And they continue to develop their executive function skills, albeit at a slower pace.

A study summarized on the web site of the Harvard Center on the Developing Child declares: “Research on the developing brain shows us that early childhood experiences build the foundation for a skilled workforce, a responsible community, and a thriving economy. … When children have had opportunities to develop executive function and self-regulation skills successfully, both individuals and society experience life-long benefits.”

To quote Seneca the Younger (in Moral Letters to Lucilius, AD 65): “non scholæ sed vitae discimus,” or “Not for school, but for life, we learn.”

“Basically, executive function skills are the ‘how’ of learning. They are the skills children (and adults) need for the learning process to succeed:

- analyzing
- planning
- organizing
- focusing
- adjusting
- remembering”

MIMI’S TIPS: ANYTIME & ANYWHERE

Your children are developing their executive skills all the time, not just at school. So what can you do as a parent to foster this? Here are some ways to take advantage of little opportunities throughout your day:

IN THE KITCHEN
- Have accessible drawers/shelves for snacks, utensils, and napkins, so kids can help themselves and help you
- Let kids make their own snacks—sandwiches, cut fruit or veggies—using kid-size tools
- Help with cooking: measure/pour liquids, slice eggs, butter toast, grind spices, count ingredients, follow directions

IN THE BEDROOM/PLAY AREA
- Have accessible shelves for clothes, toys, learning materials—not catch-all drawers or toy boxes—so they learn to sort and organize
- Label things like drawers and containers; when they learn the letters have them make new labels
- Rotate toys so your child is not distracted by too many options
- Post a bulletin board and/or white board for messages and display
- Play music
- Use an analog clock and point out the connection between the hands of the clock and numbers
- Do puzzles of increasing complexity
- Play sorting games: size, shape, color
- Ask your child to tell a story or describe what he or she is doing
- Encourage imaginary play based on

IN THE BATHROOM
- Wash in a particular order: toe to head, left side/right side
- Tell stories
- Sing songs that require counting (Five Green and Speckled Frogs) or repetition (alphabet, The Wheels on the Bus, Found a Peanut)

OUTDOORS
- Throw and catch balls
- Run up and down an incline
- Walk on a balance beam or straight line, foot after foot
- Take turns in games, in using equipment
- Play games that require decisions on activity levels: freeze dancing; Ring around the Rosie; Motorboat, Motorboat

The key is to take advantage creatively of interactions wherever you are: on the bus, in the living room, at Grandma’s. Every interaction has the potential to concentrate attention, learn self-control, and stimulate creativity within structure.

And one more thought: research has shown that being bilingual can contribute to the development of executive function skills. So, if you are fluent in more than one language, use them in your conversations: your child will benefit in more ways than one!

Resources:
- Enhancing and Practicing Executive Function Skills with Children from Infancy to Adolescence. http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/tools_and_guides/enhancing_and_practicing_executive_function_skills_with_children/
New Yorkers know that in this city a building’s footprint is destiny. But West Side Montessori School leaders—armed with vision, ingenuity and the support of an experienced architectural team that knows how to maximize floor space and ceiling height—have pushed back against that truism yet again. WSMS is no stranger to this kind of transformation. In 2012 we created a beautiful and highly efficient multi-purpose space that combined a children’s library, a classroom space for our “After Lunch Bunch,” and a meeting room for parents and teachers, from what had previously been a single-purpose space called the Parents’ Room.

We have been working with an architect for several months on the design to transform our already exceptional gym for children into a multi-purpose space, and we are delighted that it will be fully functional by mid-September 2015.

**A Single-Use Space Transformed**

The renovation of our gym will not only maintain the exceptional gym experience that our children enjoy every day, it will enhance that experience! For example, we know that children love to climb. While they may not be conscious of the benefits climbing provides to developing core strength and large motor development, we certainly are. To that end, we’re adding a splendid, proven to engage, cargo net (the grid structure in the far right corner of the gym rendering). The technology is simple, while the joy and benefits it brings to children are immeasurable.

Once completed, here’s how the 2,000 square feet on the fifth floor will “expand” to serve all of the members of the WSMS community. Our fifth floor will be:

- **A classroom space for 50 adult WSMS-TEP students**
  WSMS–TEP—our teacher education program that provides Montessori Early Childhood and Infant/Toddler certification for more than 50 students each year—is growing significantly. Although it may not be readily visible to our parent community, this program benefits our school in three important ways:
  1. Student teachers intern in our Multi-Age and Twos Program classes, providing additional adult interactions. We choose our student teachers after having the benefit of getting to know them well through their work.
  2. WSMS master faculty are hired to teach in WSMS-TEP, providing them with career and professional development benefits as well as with the opportunity to supplement their income.
  3. WSMS-TEP allows us to extend the benefits of our highly respected approach to Montessori education beyond our walls. Our graduates are hired in Montessori schools across the country and abroad.

- **An auditorium and gathering space for WSMS parents**
  WSMS has long wanted to provide a more extensive speakers program for parents and community members, but lacked a large enough gathering space to accommodate them; now we will be able to do so. In addition, this new layout provides a much more comfortable setting for curriculum nights, parent orientations, admissions open houses, and for getting current and alumni families together to celebrate community and reunite with friends.

- **Two windowed meeting spaces on the balcony level**
  These too will have many purposes, including admissions interviews, parent-teacher conferences, faculty and/or staff meetings, and more.

- **An adult bathroom**
  As of now there are only two adult bathrooms located on the Garden level. Need we say more?

- **Enhanced storage to support Parents Association activities**
  Our volunteers make a tremendous contribution to the culture and spirit of our school. Simplifying access to stored materials needed to support the many activities that take place during our school year is an absolute necessity. Note the moveable ladder on the storage wall to the far right of the rendering; even little things make a huge difference.

Mimi Basso, our Head of School, explains: “I firmly believe that maintaining excellence is a product of knowing our mission, examining our performance, and making continuous improvements. WSMS promises that every day will make a difference for every child—for that, we need an integrated and highly functioning community of teachers, parents, staff and administrators. My job is to make sure that they have the best facilities to work within.”
View of the gym space for our children

View of the classroom/auditorium/gathering space for adult education and WSMS parents
Prospective parents who look at our website or visit the school learn that we proudly consider WSMS the first step in a lifetime of learning for their children. But what they may not realize is that our focus on a lifetime of learning extends to our faculty as well. In fact, thirteen of our 44 faculty members already have graduate degrees (nine in early childhood education, and four in other fields). And, currently, fourteen WSMS teachers are working on a master’s in early childhood education: eleven at Concordia College and three at Bank Street College of Education.

Like most schools, we have academic requirements for our faculty: our eleven head teachers are Montessori- and NYS-certified and have (or are in the process of getting) a master’s degree. Student teachers (there are eleven of them) are enrolled in our accredited Montessori teacher education program, WSMS-TEP.

WSMS supports faculty excellence through a strong professional development program and provides many opportunities for growth in professional knowledge, skills, and self-awareness. These opportunities include regular meetings between the Head of School and each team, observations, mentoring and peer coaching programs, peer-to-peer meetings, workshops, seminars, a career ladder, and our visiting scholar program.

So why get a master’s? Well, for one thing, the teacher salary ladder reflects the education level, and the head teacher position requires a master’s. Another reason centers on the values of Montessori educators. Our teachers display open and fertile minds, and challenge themselves to explore new horizons. Montessori training encourages teachers to learn from those around them by always being available and reflective. They learn from observations in the classroom of child-child and adult-child interactions, watching how
WHAT THEY ARE SAYING...

When asked about her experiences in the master’s program, Margot Mack reports: “I love being part of the [Concordia] cohort: studying, working, learning with colleagues; we learn about each other and sustain each other; this is life-changing; I feel very supported.”

Katherine Fordney agrees: “Although at WSMS all of the teachers have Montessori training, our different backgrounds and cultures enable us to bring a diversity of perspectives to what we do. In my Bank Street program, I gain perspective from people who have experience and insights from other schools which helps me recognize the brilliance of Montessori and share ideas with my colleagues at WSMS.”

And Giuliana de Grazia expands on this idea: “The Bank Street program widens your perspective, giving one a broader understanding of education in the city and in the country. You learn from special education courses that everyone should have access to appropriate education, and to think about the bigger picture. Maria Montessori encouraged this.”

Maiko Iishi and Julianne Butterfield are enthusiastic about the Special Education focus that the Concordia Masters offers. Maiko states, “I am imbued with Montessori and am enjoying learning new information and techniques for working with children with special needs. Many of these techniques can be adapted to our population.”

Julianne piggybacks on this idea: “Montessori is well known for its focus on the individual; we observe the child and guide his work in the classroom. The special ed curriculum expands on this idea of working with children as individuals, with unique skills and abilities.

Melanie Hernandez: “The master’s is the next step in my development and I’m grateful that what I’m learning helps me make improvements in what I do inside the classroom.” An Anglo agrees and adds: “I’m both learning new strategies to employ in the classroom while validating strategies that I am already using. This builds my morale: you know you are taking the right path, finding the right tools.”

Mija Lee adds: “Being in the Concordia/WSMS master’s program allows you to continue professional development to stay relevant, get energized, stay current. Beata Owczarzak wisely concludes: “So many things depend on the skill, knowledge and leadership abilities of the teacher; the program and direct access to mentors makes you more confident.”

Finally, on a very practical note—and echoing our focus on a lifetime of learning—Gretchen Amberg commented that studying for a master’s while working full time helps “you learn to be efficient and prioritize what you have to do.”

fellow teachers handle situations, mentoring student teachers in their classrooms and being open to their fresh perspectives.

As readers of our Fall 2014 issue know, it is now much easier for our teachers to obtain that master’s degree. In partnership with Concordia College in Bronxville, NY, WSMS has designed a dual master’s degree in Early Childhood & Special Education specifically for Montessori teachers who already have a bachelor’s degree and want state certification to qualify for a head teacher position.

The program will accept up to 15 WSMS-TEP credits toward its 46-credit master’s degree. As a result, credentialed Montessori teachers need to earn only 31 additional credits toward their degree. Students earn an MA in early childhood education with a special education concentration. Concordia College faculty teach all classes at WSMS, making it easier for our faculty and student teachers to participate.

And, as part of our commitment to excellence in teaching, WSMS provides generous tuition assistance towards courses leading to a master’s degree. Faculty who are enrolled in an early childhood education master’s program receive up to $8,000 per year towards tuition.

Our teachers exemplify our commitment to education at every level and at every stage of life. Our children thrive in an environment where our belief in a lifetime of learning is embedded in our walk as well as in our talk.
I was fortunate to be born into a family of musicians: Mom was a classical pianist and Dad played the French horn when not playing guitar in a rock band. Music of every genre was performed and enjoyed by my family and by the range of friends who visited our home in northeastern Wisconsin. By five, I was attending a Montessori school where the Carl Orff method was used to encourage children to learn rhythm and make their own music using percussion instruments and vocalization; I also played the piano at home. I gained tremendous confidence in making music in the early grades and continued singing—in choirs and ensembles—throughout my schooling. I completed high school and received my BFA at the North Carolina School of the Arts.

In 2007 I came to West Side Montessori School after completing my Montessori certification in Chicago. I wanted to relocate to New York and a classmate in the Montessori program told me that WSMS was tops. In mid-May I will complete my MA in Early Childhood Education and Special Education at Bank Street College of Education. I’ve learned through my own experience, as well as through practice and theory, that music is a powerful and joyful means for helping children grasp language, numbers and content, as well as master social skills.

Research by Howard Gardner, a developmental psychologist and Hobbs Professor of Cognition and Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, has confirmed my focus on music. Gardner studies the different types of human intelligences—linguistic, logic-mathematical, musical, spatial, bodily/kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic—and asserts that they are relatively independent of one another. According to Gardner (1999), what makes musical intelligence so special is its function as a primary organizer for cognition. His breakthrough thinking has reinforced the importance of teaching music to young children and helped teachers use a wide range of approaches to help children develop their full potential.

Music is a particularly important tool in our classrooms at WSMS. Singing, keeping time with and moving to music—easily accessible, enjoyable experiences for young children—provide opportunities for them to listen, respond, imitate and use their voices, fingers, hands, arms and bodies in creative ways. In addition, music is a delightful way to teach children the alphabet and number seriation, how to add to and take away concepts, and the meaning of conceptual pairs like up/down and over/under (Gardner, 1999).

I use music in 3E to:

Build a sense of community and individual confidence: Playing group games, such as Charlie Over the Ocean or Doggie, Doggie, Where’s Your Bone, encourages communication and collaboration, and allows children to take on leadership roles. Charlie Over the Ocean is a call-and-response singing game, which makes use of a lead and echo. Both sides must rely on the effort of each other to create a conversational exchange. The lead child sings, “Charlie over the ocean, Charlie over the sea, Charlie caught a blackbird, Can’t catch me!” and is echoed by the group at each line. The lead child models rhythm and melody for the group, and other children are exposed to the musical aspects of the game before they are asked to lead. The game also involves chasing, creating excitement and intrigue. As children are
rallying for others to move quickly or do well, they build a sense of empathy and respect. While playing *Doggie, Doggie, Where’s Your Bone*, a lead child hides as a “bone” is hidden behind a group member’s back. The group must keep a collective secret while the lead child guesses who has the hidden bone. It can be difficult to resist calling out the answer. Children must delay gratification to give their peer the opportunity to guess and continue the game.

**Encourage language acquisition and learning numbers:** During circle and transitions, we often use the same repeated songs to practice important language and establish a routine. For example, every day we sing a hello song that features the greeting in language from around the world. We also sing songs about the days of the week, months of the year, and seasons. When lining up to departures, we often use the same repeated songs to remind children that the leaves will change as they travel. The script is simple: “Please listen!” A song is often used to signal that the lesson has begun. Children have many opportunities to learn and use language. Careful music repetition builds brainpower.

**Foster hand, body, and voice coordination:** Song and movement games and musical instruments provide entry points for artistic, sensory and cognitive development. Children listen, respond, and imitate, and use their voices, fingers, hands, arm and bodies in creative ways. Multi-sensory activities like these encourage a wide range of participation; children hear and feel sounds as they play instruments and sing songs, move in musical ways, and see adults and children repeat movement.

**Teach content:** For each new unit, we incorporate content-specific songs to encourage understanding and interest in learning. For example, when studying the tropical rainforest, the children learn The Rainforest Song—about the different layers of the rainforest and the animals that inhabit them.

**Signal the start of a routine:** When beginning a circle or lesson, teachers often use a song to gain the attention and interest of children. Sharing information or giving messages is more easily heard and accepted through music. During group time, a song often helps to collect and focus the group, signaling that the lesson has begun. Children begin to “listen” without a teacher having to say, “Please listen!” A song is often experienced as a change and inspires attention and focus.

**Manage transitions:** Music makes routines predictable and helps children anticipate events. Songs have a beginning, a middle, and an end, and thus signal to children how long they have to prepare themselves. For example, when cleaning up, children know how much time they have to finish by listening to the scope of the song. While lining up, a song alerts children to the expectation of walking in the hallways, and is an indicator of when we will leave (when the song ends!). Songs can be useful for arrivals and departures.

Your children love to sing and move to music. I encourage you to use some of our tips to keep that music going at home too!

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**TIPS FOR ENCOURAGING MUSICAL DEVELOPMENT AT HOME!**

Long commute or just around the corner, singi ng songs and playing games while traveling makes time fly by! Play *Skip to My Lou*, changing the locomotor movement for each verse. Play the A-B-C game, by looking for the letters of the alphabet in the environment. Play *I Spy*. Share your favorite nursery rhymes. Sing language-rich songs like *On Top of Spaghetti, Monkeys Swinging in the Tree, How Much is that Doggie in the Window?, or Down by the Bay*.

**Trouble getting out the house in the morning?** Make a piece of upbeat, recorded music your “leaving the house song.” When the song is finished, it’s time to walk out the door! Use another song for “clean up time.” And you can always use an egg timer as a visual reminder of time passing.

**Leaving the house:**
- A-B-C: Jackson Five
- *Good Vibrations*: Beach Boys
- *Good Day Sunshine* or *Here Comes the Sun*: The Beatles
- *Don’t Worry, Be Happy*: Bobby McFerrin
- *You’ve Got a Friend in Me*: Randy Newman

**Cleaning up:**
- *Whistle While You Work*
- *Clean up! Clean up! Everybody, everywhere!*
- *Tokido*: Samite

**Need help at bedtime?** Incorporate a nightly lullaby before bed or lull children off to sleep with peaceful, dreamy recorded classical or jazz music. Sing *All the Pretty Little Horses, Somewhere Over the Rainbow, and Hush Little Baby.***

**Classical music:**
- *Prelude Apres Midi D’un Faune*: Debussy
- *Air on the G String*: Bach
- *Raindrops*: Chopin

**Jazz music:**
- *Hit the Road to Dreamland*: Mel Torme
- Dreams are Made For Children and *Russian Lullaby*: Ella Fitzgerald
- Two Sleepy People*: Johnny Hodges
- *Lullaby for Helene*: Bill Evans
- *Conversations with Baby*: Abbey Lincoln

**Have a weekly family dance party!** Pick one night to dance to a new style of music. Share your dance moves with your kids, blow off some steam, and expose your children to a diverse range of music. Try reggae, jazz, blues, Latin, funk, classical, world music, etc. Ask them: “How does this music make you feel?”

**Use music to instill important information.** Try teaching your child your address, telephone number or safety instructions by linking it to a simple tune. For example, to the tune of *Row Row Your Boat*, try this:

- *Three three oh nine*
- Ninety Second Street
- *That’s where I live*
- *Where I go home*
- *On 92nd Street*

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**All the Pretty Little Horses, Somewhere Over the Rainbow, and Hush Little Baby.**

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*Your children love to sing and move to music. I encourage you to use some of our tips to keep that music going at home too!*
Happy and engaged children learn more easily and better—this fairly obvious statement happens to be supported by a growing number of studies on how the human brain develops most successfully. Maria Montessori understood this truth more than 100 years ago, and science—having caught up with her prescience—has proven her right. The children in 4W, and in fact throughout WSMS, are fortunate beneficiaries of this belief. As a teacher in 4W, Donna Longdon is a master at using creative ways to engage children in developing multiple skills, while simultaneously learning literacy and numeracy. What’s her magic?

One of the tools that she uses so effectively is grounded in an approach to music with children developed by well-known composer, musician and educator Carl Orff. Donna attended a series of workshops on the Orff technique as part of WSMS professional development program and was inspired to adapt specific aspects of the Orff approach in her own classroom. Over the years, she has honed her technique and describes some of her skills on this page.

Donna Longdon began her distinguished career at WSMS in the fall of 1991. With a BA in education from Hunter College, Donna completed her Montessori training through our own WSMS-TEP and earned her MA in early childhood education from NYU School of Education.

There are many ways to make a beat, and children respond very quickly to repetition and rhythm. I tell my students that their body is an instrument—and wouldn’t it be cool if we could make music JUST with our bodies? This question typically gets their attention. I begin with a simple song and have the children keep the beat: with their feet, with their hands, and even using their mouths to make varying sounds. Once they get caught up in the fun of making music without maracas or drums or tambourines, I begin to add more complexity.

For example, we move on to a game called the “Cup Game.” This circle game enables me to teach children increasingly complex directions and language, while keeping it fun and lively. It works like this:

• I ask the children to repeat after me.
• They say a succession of words: tap, up, down, pass.
• We then accompany the words with motion.
• After that we eliminate the words and just do the motions.
• After much repetition to get the motions in unison, I finally introduce a cup on the floor and we perform the motions on the cup as we pass it around the circle.

There are many variations on this, but I think you get the idea. This game illustrates how children can learn to keep a beat and experience it internally. It also develops large motor skills and coordination, as children learn to speed up the tempo while accurately following directions. Most of all, the children enjoy it and learn in the bargain.

Some other examples of how we use music and rhythm are:

• The children sing the days of the week to the “Adams Family Theme.”
• The children learn syllable segmentation: how many sounds are in butterfly, hippopotamus, awesome, and other words?
• The children create a personal rhythm performance for their classmates accompanied by a three-minute music CD.

There are many other ways that I use music and rhythm in the classroom, which I would be happy to share with the readers of Great Beginnings. If you are interested, please email me at 4W@wsmsnyc.org.
DEVELOPING KINDNESS AND EMPATHY

WITH CARA ZELAS, 4Epm

Little Dude is a 15-pound dog—part Shih Tzu, part Poodle, part Bichon—with a very big heart and has earned a degree in “people skills” from The Good Dog Foundation. Cara Zelas, Little Dude’s owner and biggest fan, is a teacher in 4Epm. She is also on a mission to build more kindness in the world. One of the ways she does this is as a volunteer in local hospitals, assisted living centers and the Charter School for Autism, bringing Little Dude to provide affection and comfort to adults and children alike. But that’s not all.

Little Dude is an asset in the classroom as well. He can often be found in 4Epm, where he helps Cara and her fellow teachers work with students to:

• develop social and emotional understanding
• promote social behavior and empathy
• build community and a positive classroom atmosphere

Maria Montessori wrote, “Character formation cannot be taught, it comes from experience and not from explanation.” Always ahead of her time, the idea that social, emotional and ethical concepts need to be taught and practiced, starting in early childhood, is now well supported by research. Notable among other researchers are the Making Caring Common Project* at Harvard University and the National School Climate Center (NSCC) at Columbia University. As Jonathan Cohen, Co-founder and President of NSCC, says, “We must educate minds and hearts… because the three R’s are not enough.”

So what does Little Dude do in the classroom? By patting and holding, feeding and walking him, the children in 4Epm learn how to take care of an animal. They talk about his “toileting” needs and what might make him sick, about going to the vet and getting shots. Through these activities and conversations, the children make connections between caring for a dog and caring for one-self—or for a family member.

Taking this further, the teacher might talk about Little Dude’s experience as a volunteer therapy dog. This information provides a jumping off point for conversations about kindness, empathy and compassion. During these dialogues children begin to develop a vocabulary to express their feelings of sadness, stress, and frustration, to see a situation from the perspective of another person, and to understand these feelings in themselves and others.

We know that children learn best in a joyful environment; Little Dudes’ visits to the classroom are as engaging and fun as they are valuable in developing the characteristics of kindness and empathy in our children.

Cara earned a BA in Elementary Education and a BA in Media and Communications from Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia. She received her American Montessori Society early childhood certification through WSMS-TEP. And, she has completed courses in Social Emotional Learning Through Kindness in the Classroom at Colorado University.

CELEBRATING DIFFERENCES

BY MIMI BASSO, Head of School

For more than 53 years we have taken great pride in our “multi” diversity: economic, ethnic and cultural. We’ve lived it, but we have never actively celebrated diversity.

At a quick glance I can identify teachers from 15 countries speaking 18 languages. We have children born in France, Ethiopia, United Kingdom and Uganda, and parents from Belgium, Puerto Rico, Haiti, Pakistan, Russia, Italy, China, Australia, Brazil, The Netherlands, Israel, Japan, Argentina, France, UK, Hong Kong, Venezuela, Jamaica, Mexico, India, ... and many more. We represent a broad range of nationalities—especially if you look back a few generations. And we are affiliated—or not—across a spectrum of religions and cultures. Many of us share our heritages within our families and communities: from traditional foods to music and arts, to clothing, to religious celebrations and cultural holidays, to the story of how our previous generations came to this country and where they settled.

But families new to WSMS are sometimes surprised when holidays such as Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas or Hanukkah are ignored—or at least not obviously acknowledged on bulletin boards or in class communications. Sometimes WSMS is a child’s first exposure to people from a different ethnic or cultural background. Children are curious about their classmates and classmates’ families: why does someone not speak English; or dress differently; or even look different?

So I have begun thinking about how we might actively seek to celebrate this diversity.

How can we learn more from one another about the world in which we all live? Montessori teachers respond to children’s statements and questions in a way that is balanced and non-judgmental. So a question from a child about a man wearing African garb or a woman in a sari will be answered in a way that encourages curiosity while emphasizing respect for individual differences.

But perhaps we need to take this a step further.

Celebrating a cultural holiday or experience at school, as well as at home, can confirm for children the relevance and importance of their special background.

We have never discouraged parents who want to share their heritage in the classroom—perhaps reading a favorite story, demonstrating a musical instrument, or bringing in a special ethnic treat—but we haven’t really sought them out. Our teachers often do this as a special lesson, but with nearly 200 families there is a lot of potential out there!

With the help of our exceptional faculty, I will be initiating some activities starting next fall that will help us discover the wealth of different customs and ways of celebrating life that are embedded in the brilliantly colored and intricately textured tapestry that is the WSMS community. I look forward to your thoughts.

"How best can we bring the range of differences that create the magnificent WSMS mosaic into the foreground of our life together?"
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Great Beginnings

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