OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM AT WSMS…What’s really going on?
LEAVING THE CLASSROOM

OUT THE CLASSROOM DOOR
First things first! Some important classroom transition strategies need to be implement-ed before you can get a group of twenty-plus good-humored, cooperative, all senses open and receptive, three-to-six-year-old WSMS students out the door—all at once. Children need to be mentally and physically prepared in order to make the most of an upcoming activity.

There are many creative strategies that teachers employ to signal to children that they need to put away their work, or place-hold it for their return. Some teachers use a song as the signal to get ready to go outside or upstairs to the gym or the roof: We’re at the door, we’re at the door, we’re ready to begin. We’re at the door, we’re at the door, we’re going to the gym.

Some use a music box to indicate five min-utes to finish up your work, and a xylophone tone to announce that it’s time to go. Other teachers may start a sing-along that accomplishes the same thing: We’re standing in the line. Our arms are by our side. Our eyes are looking straight ahead. We’re ready to go. Voices are off…

Still others begin the transition by having the children sit on the steps, ready to be called to the line by the host of the day or the teacher according to specific criteria. For example: If you are wearing red, please come to the line; and so on. In 4Eam, the host stands with the teacher, while the teacher calls children to the line, one by one. The message: accept with kindness the hand you are holding. This strategy also gives teachers a chance to pair up children to maximize the benefits for each child and the classroom community: younger children with older, social with shy, etc.

Just before exiting the door, some teachers ask children to do a body check: hands at your sides, eyes front, quiet voices. Safety procedures are reviewed: if you bump into someone, check in to see if they are all right; let a teacher know; and, even if you weren’t the bumper, show your kindness and check in with the child who was bumped.

No matter which transition strategy is be-ing used (and WSMS teachers have dozens of them), its purpose is always the same: to create an environment where children can be successful. Going up or down the stairs with more than twenty children may seem simple, but there is a lot going on individually. The children are developing the physical skills of climbing stairs; keeping up with their classmates (without tripping); holding onto the handrail; keeping their eyes focused on the person in front; listening and understanding verbal and visual directions. In addition, they are practicing all-important social skills: being a kind partner; conversing in a quiet tone; being spontaneous in hallway conversation; using “quiet voices” out of respect for the children in the classrooms they pass on the way up.
UP THE STAIRS TO ANOTHER PLACE TO LEARN

The trip up the stairs goes fairly quickly, because the children are excited about their destination. They enter the gym in an orderly fashion and quickly prepare for fun by taking off shoes and socks. Being barefoot provides additional sensory stimulation for developing large motor skills and a sense of your body in space. They tuck their socks into their shoes and line them up neatly against the wall. Grace and courtesy prevail; if asked, older children will gladly help younger ones manage shoes and socks or the fasteners on their outerwear. Once the class is ready for play, the host of the day reviews the protocol: how many children can be on the loft/jumping tube/bike/climbing bars/jungle gym, etc. Then the host of the day demonstrates the chosen direction for running (clockwise or counterclockwise) while classmates cheer, and he or she calls all children to play: by the color they are wearing, by age, by first letter of first name, and so on. (Entry to the roof is equally organized, though shoes stay on there.)

WORK IT ON OUT

At this point children are free to play in this large and inviting space. Their exuberance is unleashed; most children break into a run, making individual and group beelines to the rockers, to the loft, to the jumping tube, to the scooters. Or they run laps around the space. Or they head to the play equipment and ask, “Who wants to build a brick house and play the Three Little Pigs with me?”

You might imagine mayhem, but no: children manage themselves remarkably well, while their teachers carefully watch, ready to guide or intervene if necessary. “Sometimes, I might suggest that two or more children play together,” says Cailyn De Blie, teacher in 2E, “if I want to foster new or stronger relationships. But for the most part, as Maria Montessori would say, ‘the children are working as if I did not exist,’ which is the best possible learning situation for them.”

The clarity and consistency of the ground rules for safe and kind behavior, which are set forth at the beginning of the school year and reinforced in myriad ways throughout every day, enable this wonderful freedom. Gretchen Amberg, head teacher in 2E, explains: “Children are able to support each other’s safety and navigate inevitable glitches in social interactions, for the most part, on their own. If child falls or is bumped, other children will check in to make sure he is okay.” (If the child is not okay, they know to involve a teacher immediately.) Usually kindness from a peer does the trick, and before you know it, the bumped or fallen child is quickly back in the game. Kindness works in navigating situations where there is some conflict or disappointment, too. For example, if two children want to be the ‘big sister’ or play with the same piece of equipment, the first thing they do is have a conversation. “I feel sad that I can’t be the ‘big sister’ too,” says the disappointed child. The child who has the “big sister” role might say, “You can be the ‘big sister’ next, or let’s be twin ‘big sisters.’”
“The remarkable thing about this,” remarks Gretchen, “is how often the children can work it out on their own.”

WHAT THEY’RE PLAYING…
WHAT THEY’RE LEARNING…

Children use the gym and roof equipment in multiple ways. Each element of our state-of-the-art equipment set up is designed to help build children’s strength and agility and inspire their imagination—all within clear guidelines for safety. The loft becomes a lighthouse, a space station, a super hero base, a treetop in the jungle. The rockers become boats, baby cribs, and islands in the ocean. The variously-sized foam blocks and mats are used to build houses and bridges and castles and more. Maiko Ishii, teacher in 4E, points out: “The children are stretching their muscles in very positive ways when they lift and pull the mats and the foam blocks to create their structures. It’s wonderful to watch them build, destroy what they’ve built, and then build again, each time figuring out which combinations of blocks and mats will help them realize their vision.”

Julianne Butterfield, teacher in 3E, points out: “The energy and camaraderie during gym is amazing. Children use their imaginations to create wonderful games, typically without any help from teachers. Watching them play, I can observe their language development and see what inspires them. Often children who are shy in using language in the classroom are much more verbal in this environment. By observing their spontaneous language, I’m better able to support them in the classroom.” Erica Clarke, who teaches in 3E with Julianne, goes further: “The energy and intense social interaction that take place in the gym and on the roof often help a child who might be subdued in class feel more confident and take a stronger place in group. Remarkably, these shining moments that occur spontaneously during play usually stick, and we can see the new sense of confidence displayed in the classroom.”

“Children need to move, no matter what,” says Rebecca Estomago, a teacher in 4W. “Our gym and roof are marvelous environments that help children form relationships and be creative with the equipment.” Donna Longdon, head teacher in 4W, adds: “Gym and roof play enables children to take more risks, to challenge their bodies in a safe environment designed just for them. One child who has avoided using the monkey bars came to me and said he wanted to ‘persevere on this’ (he just learned the word in the After Lunch Bunch), and asked for my help. He was able to climb up by following my verbal cues: put your right arm on the vertical bar, pull your self up, etc. He did it himself and rewarded me with a great big confident smile. If I had lifted him up to the bars, his sense of accomplishment would have been diminished.”

Our gym and our rooftop are exceptional play spaces for our children, but as Beata Owczarzak, teacher in 4Eam/pm, reminds us: “If we didn’t reinforce the rule: you can’t say, you can’t play, our gym and roof might be state-of-the-art spaces, but not be nearly as wonderful for children.”

The children don’t realize it, but their gym and rooftop play is integral to all they learn at WSMS: language, problem solving, spatial relationships, personal relationships, motor skill development, and so much more.
ON THE STREET AND IN THE PARK

GOING OUTSIDE WITH OUR MULTI-AGE CLASSES

In anticipation of a trip outdoors, 4Eam co-head teachers Robyn Mernick and Chelsea Petrozzo make sure that children know the agenda in advance. Are we going out on an exploratory mission to find leaves, to look for stones? Is it part of a cloud study? Is it a neighborhood architecture survey? Is it just a quick walk around the block for exercise?

The 4Eam class took a recent foray into the park to observe the changes that had taken place in the daffodils and other flowering bulbs since their last visit a week earlier. Children were reminded of park protocol: don't take growing things or live worms; we must be good to our environment.

On the walk over, the children were enthralled, talking about the flowers, the clouds and the birds’ nests with teachers and each other. Gathering by a perennial garden where many blooms were evident, Robyn handed each child a personalized handmade journal to use in capturing his or her impressions. Children were very focused, making drawings and using their words to express what they were seeing. Binoculars were handed out, too. Children took turns sharing them with surprisingly little teacher intervention.

On the way back, the children found their partners, had “eyes” on the teacher leading the group and the person in front of them, and followed the rules of street safety that are talked about, modeled by teachers, and implemented often and in many ways every day: stay to the right, hold hands with your partner, and keep your place in line. They conversed using quiet voices. When they reached the two flights of stairs leading out of Riverside Park, they moved effortlessly and without being told to the right banister. When they reached the light at Riverside Drive and 91st Street, Robyn pointed to the street signs and read them out loud. The light was red. Children spontaneously sang this song (one that is often used when outside the classrooms):

Twinkle, twinkle, little light  
Shining on the corner, shining bright  
Red means stop  
Yellow means slow  
When it turns green  
Then you go.

A SAMPLING OF PARK ACTIVITIES FOR THREE-TO-SIX-YEAR-OLDS

Most of the time our three-to-six-year-old classes avoid the traditional park playgrounds. Chelsea explains: “I grew up in Manhattan; my parents’ go-to outdoor activity for me was the playground, then home. We never went further into the park. I only realized much later the immense opportunities for exploring nature that existed in city parks, and I’m so grateful to be able to provide this to my students.”

Here are just a few examples of what 4Eam children have done this year:

• Collected leaves in the fall and categorized them by color and shape, learning the names and the nature of the trees upon which they grow.
• Conducted a stick bundling ceremony: Each child finds a stick and brings it to the
teachers. Once all the sticks are collected, teachers demonstrate the strength of the individual sticks, showing that they are bendable or in some instances breakable. Teachers then bundle the sticks together to show the children the increased strength of a bundle. To emphasize the parallel sense of community, children are taught the song: *The more we stick together, together, together. The more we stick together, the happier we’ll be.*

- Identified and mapped primary, secondary and tertiary colors, and also identified the many shades of green that could be found in the park, using our color box materials.

**THE INCREDIBLE BENEFITS OF OUTDOOR PLAY**

Joan Shisler, WSMS Nature Specialist and teacher for 35 years, details some of the reasons why outside play is so good for children on so many levels: “They have the chance to get a little messy. They can be exposed to the bacteria that we need to be healthy. Instead of just using their eyes to play a video game, they are using ALL of their senses to learn. By inventing games and playing those games with a group of children, they are gaining a sense of control, the ability to express themselves and to play well with others. And, finally, playing outdoors is where children burn the most calories.”

“We’re trying to create global citizens who care for their environment,” says Robyn Mernick. “Yet we tend to put the cart before the horse by rushing to teach young children about recycling, and melting ice caps. I feel we must first help them to fall in love with the incredible beauty that is around them. Children love to explore the tiniest things. By helping them examine basic and easily accessible things like leaves, earth, worms, sticks and clouds, there is so much to learn and so much to love.”
As Twos Program Coordinator, Karen Deinzer marvels: “It’s amazing how many things two year olds are capable of mastering. Our program gives children the opportunity to discover things on their own, and the responsibility to do things for themselves.” Getting them out the door, and making sure that they are ready to be engaged and benefit from the activity, requires an intense level of preparation. “We follow a morning routine that helps children to predict what’s coming next. This is crucial to their readiness,” explains Maria Rosado, head teacher in 1W. “We have a work session; group time; nap; diapering; and then we’re ready to go outside.”

Neeta Arbeiter, head teacher in the Garden, describes the process: “The children put on their sweaters, jackets and coats, and then their reflective vests. Early in the year they may ask for help from another child or the teacher. As the year rolls on, they get better and faster at doing this all by themselves.”

While children are putting on their coats and safety vests, those who are ready will listen to a book being read or sing songs. As soon as all the children are dressed, the teacher gets out the “loop” that connects them to one another, and then they review the safety protocol.

By taking these youngest students out almost every day—weather permitting—we are helping them to learn many things: (1) how to walk on a city street; (2) the words to describe what they are seeing: the lions on a front stoop, the Joan of Arc statue in Riverside Park; (3) to observe and talk about the weather, the clouds, the sky, the trees, and to notice the changes that take are taking place with the changing of the seasons; (4) songs about what they are seeing: for example, that wonderful standard, The Wheels On the Bus.

Once outside, children learn to keep up the pace, stomp their feet, take marching steps and clap hands. They also converse among themselves and with teachers about what they are seeing: owls; a balloon; all the things that are red, green, yellow, or blue.

“While walking, children often talk about what they do when they are not in school,” says Kassi Baxter, teacher in 1W. “One child might tell her partner or one of her teachers about ‘going to the Hippo Park with Daddy and my sister’; another will remark that ‘Grandma takes me to her house on a bus.’ They ask teachers how they get to school, and they talk about their own journey to school.”

Another discussion involves the different kinds of work that are being done by the people that they see on the street: taxi drivers, mail deliverers, construction workers, police officers, cherry picker operators, and more.

“Some of the best times,” says Kassi, “are when the children share an experience that leads to more discussion back in the classroom. For example, one day it was so windy crossing the street as we were returning to school, that the children just cracked up with laughter. Back in the classroom, the kids were totally involved in a discussion about the wind: where does it come from, what makes it so strong, and how wind is helpful to us.”

“When we get back to school,” Neeta remarks, “the process of building independence continues: children take off their vests and outerwear and place them into their own cubbies, wash their hands, and get ready for lunch.”

The two-year-olds, as a group, aren’t quite ready for the more structured park activities that the three-to-six-year-olds enjoy, but they are similarly inquisitive and insightful, and benefit in many of the ways Joan describes. Most importantly, with every trip they are developing independence, opening their eyes to new observations, becoming global citizens and getting plenty of fresh air.

Many thanks to the teachers who so kindly contributed their experience and expertise to this article: Neeta Arbeiter, G; Kassi Baxter, 1W; Karen Deinzer, G and 1W; Maria Rosado, 1W; Gretchen Amberg and Cailyn DeBie, 2E; Joan Shisler, 2E and 2W LAP, Nature Specialist; Julianne Butterfield and Erica Clarke, 3E; Robyn Mernick, Chelsea Petrozzo, Maiko Ishii, 4Eam; Beata Owczarzak, 4Eam/pm; Donna Longdon and Rebecca Estomago, 4W.
SEED [Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity] is an organization developed in 1987 by Peggy McIntosh and Emily Style. It was founded at Wellesley College, and today it is the largest nationwide professional development project led by peers.

The SEED website outlines their work: “The National SEED ProjectSM is a peer-led professional development program that creates conversational communities to drive personal, organizational, and societal change toward greater equity and diversity. We do this by training individuals to facilitate ongoing seminars within their own institutions and communities. SEED leaders design their seminars to include personal reflection and testimony, listening to others’ voices, and learning experientially and collectively. Through this methodology, SEED equips us to connect our lives to one another and to society at large by acknowledging systems of oppression, power, and privilege.”

SEED helps teachers become authorities on themselves and create a respectful community for each other, and furthermore, SEED helps teachers become more aware of their work in classrooms, with colleagues, and with families.

http://nationalseedproject.org

SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATION and WSMS
HELPING TEACHERS SUPPORT A CULTURE OF EQUITY

By Giuliana de Grazia, Head Teacher 3Wam/pm

When I first toured WSMS, I learned that economic, cultural and ethnic diversity had been part of the DNA of this school since its founding. I discovered that WSMS was one of the first NYC independent early childhood schools to define diversity as an essential part of its mission and had created a financial aid program to address equity of access more than 50 years ago. I came to learn that WSMS was also a community that is continually reflecting on its practice and growing through professional development, supportive leadership, and a faculty of dedicated, creative, and curious teachers. I soon realized that WSMS was a place in which I could further develop and share my passion for social justice education.

While working on my Masters in Early Childhood and Special Education at Bank Street College of Education, I completed an independent study called “Reflecting Together on Race, Privilege, and Teaching: Why Bank Street Needs Stronger Commitment to Teacher Education in Social Justice.” In my search for programs that successfully prepared teachers for diverse classrooms, I discovered an organization known as SEED [Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity]. The work they were doing really impressed me: it was reflective and collaborative, professional and personal. Last year, with Mimi’s support, I was able to attend SEED leadership training, which has allowed me to continue this work for myself and to share it with a trusted, caring, brilliant community of teachers at WSMS.

The work we do together at SEED also aligns with the life experience I have had outside of an early childhood classroom. Some experiences have been painful, even excruciating, but they have made me more aware, compassionate, and active in speaking up about injustice. I care deeply about supporting victims of rape and sexual assault, helping adolescents and young women and men to develop positive body image and to overcome eating disorders, de-stigmatizing mental health disorders, and facing the gross reality of the state of our country’s prison system. I’ve come to see how so much of the injustice is interconnected and holds firm in our complicated and busy lives. I also feel strongly that a simple way to learn, heal, and build a healthy community is through finding the space and courage to have hard conversations. I am thrilled that WSMS is providing a place for teachers to undertake these conversations, so that we can better understand ourselves, our society, and the teaching practice to which we are all so fully committed.

DO WE REALLY NEED SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATION IN AN EARLY CHILDHOOD SCHOOL?

It may seem that social justice education—or learning about and challenging the injustices in our society that are related to racism, sexism, economic disparity, ableism, sexual identity, etc.—have no place in early child-
hood education, or are unnecessary areas of expertise for early childhood educators. In fact, this work is critical. There is a clear need for teachers to better understand themselves and their perspectives while working in the diverse classrooms we are so lucky inhabit at WSMS.

Current research and Dr. Maria Montessori’s philosophy both point to reasons why we, as a community of adults who care deeply about the early childhood experience of our children, should pay attention to our own behaviors and perspectives.

First, a sampling of research shows:

- Children are not only living in an unequal society, they also develop an awareness of race and ethnicity at a young age, and they make assumptions based on what their society teaches them (Soto & Swadener, 2002; Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010).
- By three years old, children have already developed ingroup preference (Bronson & Merryman, 2009).
- Soto and Swadener note in “Towards Liberatory Early Childhood Theory...” that while “it has taken a whole ‘oppressive village’ to systematically educate young children to internalize racial stereotypes and hatred...at the same time these research projects helped make the case that early childhood education is truly a window of opportunity for equity, social justice, and reconstruction” (Soto & Swadener, 2002, p. 44).

Second, due to the highly malleable, “absorbent” state of the child during these primary years that Dr. Montessori writes so beautifully about:

- Children are taking in all of the information offered to them by their environment and the people they interact with, especially the teachers and parents they look to for guidance.
- We need to be especially aware of our own biases, preferences, and understandings as we interact with these rapidly developing young people.
- We need to be well-educated on the importance of having a classroom that reflects everyone within it, that respects the differences in the family and home cultures of our students, and that gives each child a safe place to be known and to celebrate his or her unique identity.

WSMS TEACHERS SEEK EDUCATIONAL EQUITY AND DIVERSITY

How do we create these equitable classrooms and positive relationships with families? We start with ourselves. As I’ve learned through my facilitator training at SEED, this is where we begin: we look into ourselves, our ideas, our practices, and we discuss and explore our perceptions with others, using resources, activities, and a dedication to sensitivity, openness, and honesty. I have the privilege of working with ten colleagues this year who meet with me once a month on Friday afternoons to engage in community building. We have deep very personal discussions related to a story we’ve been told, or a film we’ve seen. We write about our experiences with gender, race, power and then talk some more. We’re both challenged and delighted by what we are learning about each other and ourselves. Mimi is supportive and eager for us to continue and to expand our efforts to include more teachers.

Through SEED, teachers have a real opportunity to grow. Through their growth, this community can become a place that is more aware of its own diversity, and thus better able to celebrate, support, and respect every teacher, every family, and every child. This brings me back to the question of why I do SEED at WSMS.

I do SEED at WSMS because it is a place where we are all growing, children and adults alike. And through that growth, particularly the development of the young child, we bring peace and justice to our society.

Dr Montessori captures our shared vision:

“An education capable of saving humanity is no small undertaking; it involves the spiritual development of man, the enhancement of his value as an individual, and the preparation of young people to understand the times in which they live.” (Education and Peace)

“We then become witnesses to the development of the human soul; the emergence of the New Man, who will no longer be the victim of events but, thanks to his clarity of vision, will become able to direct and to mould the future of mankind.” (The Absorbent Mind, 8)

Bibliography