Rosa Parks Early Childhood Education Center

The best time to influence a child’s trajectory in life is during the earliest years when the architecture of the brain is literally under construction. Though brain development continues throughout the life, the most important changes occur during the time from birth to five. That is why it is critical for all children to participate in high quality; early learning experiences – particularly ones that link parents, educators, and family support specialists together. Such programs have been proven to offer the most solid evidence that the negative effects of poverty can be ameliorated and that the potential of all children can be actualized.

The Rosa Parks Early Childhood Education Center is a unique partnership between Community Action Project of Tulsa County (CAPTC) and Union Public Schools providing educational services for 240 three-year-old children who meet federal poverty guidelines regarding program acceptance. CAP provides Head Start and state and philanthropic funding to support programs operated with the expertise of Union’s early childhood educators.

Our school is unique not only in its early childhood education funding sources, but in its components of practice including the Reggio Emilia approach. These braided components of funding and programming bring many eyes to our school seeking models of practice further fueling our need to gain a clearer understanding of both the roots and nature of practice in our school.
As we sought out and explored research-based practices that let us again “see” the enchantment of youngness, we recognized that a local private school and its connection with Reggio Children could fuel that need. We began with multiple study tours at that school and an invitation to attend the 100 Languages Exhibit and its accompanying conference. From there, we created shared agreements as a staff and starting moving forward with multiple program consultants.

As author Lela Gandini suggests, we started with the premise that children, teachers, and parents are the three central champions for students in the educational process. We strive for an environment that serves as the third teacher and supports the belief that all children are competent and capable, encouraging them to “let loose” their ideas through a variety of activities. To that end, you will find comfortable, inviting classrooms that are well designed for children to express themselves, whether it’s through clay, wire, and technology; creating music and collages; or painting and storytelling.

In the last several years Rosa Parks Early Childhood Center has hosted multiple local and national groups seeking models of practice including Geoffrey Canada (CEO of the Harlem Children’s Zone), Oklahoma State University, Community Service Council of Tulsa, Lisa Guernsey (Director of New America’s Early Education Foundation), Northeastern University, Ruby Takanishi (President of Foundation for Child Development), Head Start, Stanford University, The University of Oklahoma, and the George Kaiser Foundation.

As our study tours debrief, we consistently hear comments from our guests noting an increased engagement of children and staff; the artful and thoughtful presentation of environments and the spirits the room share; the use of open-ended authentic materials and the opportunities it brings regarding cognitive development; the inclusion of fine arts; the learning that is made visible in teacher documentation; the enchantment with our students’ long term investigations and the social, emotional, and cognitive benchmarks it supports; and finally the community and respect students, staff, and families have for each other.

In summary, I believe as principal of Rosa Parks Early Childhood Center that we are serving as a model of practice that is not only inspiring but sustainable. A model that not only combines braided sources of funding and community involvement, but a model that supports and enhances outcomes for young children in poverty. To date, our children’s cognitive, physical, social/emotional and language outcomes appear to be even or ahead of their peers who have not received a head start in Tulsa County. Our hope is that as we become more confident and competent in our practices as educators and students, that our students’ outcomes will excel those students of higher social economic status and that ultimately other educators will find inspiration and support in their work with children in poverty.