

## At the Bernice M. Wright School, Student Teachers



Alizé practices her construction skills with cardboard "bricks" at the Bernice M. Wright Child Development Laboratory School.



## and Researchers Watch How Children Work and Play

# a preschool

## WHERE LEARNING IS FOR ALL AGES

BY GARY PALLASSINO

Richard sits on the rug listening to his teacher read *Over on the Farm*. After absorbing enough information about animals, the 2-year-old decides to check out the real thing. He gets up and strolls to the classroom fish tank, which he studies intently for a while before moving on to the water table, a four-legged basin filled with cups, boats, plastic fish, and other water toys. Other children are variously occupied with the room's many books, stuffed animals, and toys, including a large, brightly colored playhouse with slides. It could be chaos, but it's not. Over on the rug, the reading group continues without pause. Assistant teachers move throughout the room, providing quiet guidance without disturbing anyone's play.

This is the "blue room" at the Bernice M. Wright Child Development Laboratory School, located in the M-17 building in the Slocum Heights area of South Campus. Four days a week, children ages 2 to 5 are learning in this building—as are their teachers and their teachers' teachers. Run by the College for Human Development's Department of Child and Family Studies, the school is a center for teacher training and faculty research. It is also a place where independence and individuality are stressed over the three R's. "Many parents ask, 'Do you teach ABCs and counting?'" says Scharman Grimmer G'98, interim director of the school. "Our philosophy is to be child-directed, to help the children use their environment to explore and learn. So you'll see us singing the ABCs and talking about words, but we don't do the letter of the week. We focus on social development between children and other children, and between children and teachers."

The school's three classrooms—color-coded blue, red, and yellow and divided by age—are run by graduate students. Assistant teachers are undergraduates studying early childhood education. Mirrored-glass windows and microphones in each classroom allow observers to watch and listen without affecting what goes on inside. "It's exciting to see the teacher-child and child-child interactions from this view," says Grimmer, who taught in the red and yellow rooms as a graduate student. Undergraduate classes use the windows to observe language and social development. Graduate students collect data for their theses. Faculty members conduct studies. And parents see how their children fare away from the nest.

The school was founded in 1970—long before on-site day care was prevalent—as a cooperative effort by the College for Human Development and students who had young children. It was named for the late Ber-

nice M. Wright, dean of the college from 1964 through 1973. Through the years the school expanded to include children of faculty and staff members and families in the community. Despite not having a full-day program, the school is at capacity, with more than 100 children enrolled. "We have some families who feel so strongly about the program that they bus their children in from a day care center, or pick up their children in the afternoon and take them to a different center," Grimmer says. "That's a big family commitment."

Grimmer says the school's present name, changed last year from the Bernice M. Wright Nursery School, reflects its three-fold mission: providing an optimal early childhood setting, teacher training, and research opportunities.

### EARLY EXPLORERS

Bernice Wright's educational program is based on a "constructivist" orientation—the belief that a child actively constructs knowledge through interaction with physical and social environments. "Teachers provide a variety of developmentally appropriate and open-ended activities that allow children to create and experiment with their own ideas," Grimmer says. "Children also have many opportunities to become involved in group activities that promote cooperative effort and sharing of ideas."

The program's goals include encouraging active curiosity and enthusiasm for learning; developing problem-solving skills; supporting individual creative expression; promoting cooperative social interactions; making children part of a classroom community that cares about each of its members; and developing self-confidence and positive self-esteem.

"I've been thrilled with the program and the experiences my children have had," says Misty Preece, president of the school's parent board, which advises Grimmer on a range of policies and procedures and organizes fund-raisers for the school.

Photography by John Dowling



## "Warm, positive, caring interactions betw

Preece's son Tanner attended Bernice Wright for two years before entering kindergarten; son Caleb is in his second of three years at the school. "My son looks forward to going every day," she says. "He comes home and tells me everything he did, and gets very excited about showing me his work, talking about activities with friends, his interaction with teachers. My first son was the same way." Preece likes the mix of free and organized time at the school. "It's not so structured that the kids feel pressured to be learning, but it's not a free-for-all the whole day," she says.

One aspect of the program—commitment to outdoor play—has been well publicized by the Central New York media. "If it's snowing and 30 degrees outside our children are out there sledding and playing, because we believe large motor skill development is important and we can't wait until the summer months to do that," Grimmer says. "We want them to have that experience in their environment, which means bundling up in snow clothes every day and heading outside.

"Student teachers have a harder time with that than the children," she says with a laugh. "We do have a weather policy; if it's below a certain temperature, we do not go out."

The school has a high teacher-to-child ratio, Grimmer says. In addition to the head teachers and assistants, staff members from the Jowonio program for children with special needs work with all children in each classroom. And all parents take turns volunteering in their children's classes—they're known as "helping parents." "They're here to get an inside picture of what the day's like and to see their child in the classroom, but also to get to know the other children and teachers," Grimmer says. Many early childhood and day care settings don't offer as much adult-child interaction, she says, and research shows that such associations during the first five years of life affect the way a person builds relationships for the rest of his or her life. "Warm, positive, caring interactions between teachers and children are invaluable," she says.

### TEACHING TEACHERS

**A**s a teacher training site, the school has four graduate assistants working as head teachers. Three run morning sessions in each classroom, and the fourth handles an afternoon classroom of 3- and 4-year-olds. Their responsibilities include developing and implementing appropriate curricula, designing and maintaining a good classroom learning

environment, evaluating children's development, supervising and mentoring undergraduate assistant teachers, teaming with early childhood consultants and therapists from Jowonio, and maintaining effective communication with parents. And they still have to find time to go to their own classes.

Melissa Neal, a doctoral student in child and family studies with an emphasis on early childhood education, is in her second year as a head teacher. She works with 16 children Monday through Thursday mornings, then attends afternoon and evening classes. "I love the kids," she says during a rare break in her hectic schedule, "but there are times when it's stressful—being a student, not getting much sleep. You really need to have sleep."



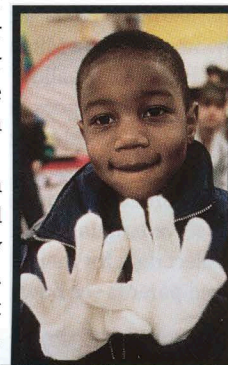
Assistant teachers Dayna Luftig '01, left, and Suzanne Iasillo '01 bundle children for their daily outdoor play time.

Neal arrives at the school between 7:30 and 8 a.m. She prepares materials for her assistants, who arrive at 8:30 to help get the classroom ready for the day. "Each week I plan the lesson for the following week, so the student teachers know what has to be set up," she says. At 9 a.m. children begin to trickle in. "From 9 to 10:15 is free play, when children choose their own activities. We invite ourselves in to play with them for that first hour and 15 minutes. Then we have cleanup, and after that we have circle time in

small groups." Circle time includes a look at the calendar and the weather, as well as answering the question of the day—usually something like, "Did you like the tractor at the farm?" Activities during this time are related to the week's lesson—simple addition or subtraction, reading stories, or playing games.

At 10:45 a.m. the children break from their groups, wash their hands, and sit down for a snack. "We have helping parents come in each day, and they bring the snack for the day," Neal says. "It's a special day for the child because his or her mom or dad is with them the whole day." After snack time the children head outside to play until their parents pick them up at 11:30.

Neal knows most of the children from her first year of teaching—and they know her. "They know what my limits are," she says with a smile. "They know 'Melissa's not going to let us do this.' If it was another teacher,



With his gloves on, Eddie is ready for the playground.



# Teen teachers and children are invaluable."

they would test the waters." Still, there are good days and bad days. "It really depends on how the kids arrive in the morning," she says. "Some kids who come in very active might need more one-on-one help, where other kids don't need as much. Some days, circle time may be chaotic. We may cut it short, have our snack, and get them outside. There are times they need to be out and running around, when being closed inside is hard. And then some days it's very quiet in there, and I'm looking around, counting heads to make sure everyone's in the room. They are, but they're playing with other kids, doing what they want to do."

Neal, who finishes coursework this spring, says her experience at Bernice Wright will help when she begins looking for work in the field. "I work with children, I work with parents. I train student teachers, and work with the Jowonio team. All those different aspects—I've learned so much I didn't know before."

Undergraduates from CFS 332, Foundations and Principles of Early Childhood Education, spend two days a week as assistant teachers in each classroom. "They're all focused on child development and many will work in a similar setting," Grimmer says. "Others are going into marriage and family therapy or family advocacy. So this is a great experience for them. They have a whole semester to learn, read textbooks, and then put that into practice."

Kahsi Smith, a junior in the child and family studies program, spent last semester as an assistant teacher at the school. "I've worked with children all my life—I taught soccer and have four younger brothers and sisters—but this was my first hands-on experience in the classroom," Smith says. "Working on such a personal level with the children and their parents was a wonderful experience."

Smith says the CFS 332 lecture Grimmer delivered each Friday had direct applications in the classroom. "Scharman was very clear on requirements and how to work with children," she says. "She taught us well. One week we'd learn certain things about playing with children. When we went into the classroom, if we were in a situation where a child wouldn't

play, we knew how to get him or her involved in the activity."

The combination of lectures and practical experience goes beyond knowledge gained from a textbook, Smith says. "Anyone can read about something in a book. You'll learn it, but if you don't experience it, then it doesn't have much relevance. I've gained a better understanding of how children interact with other children and teachers, and of the different develop-

mental levels in children. I saw that my personality had a lot to do with how the children interacted with me."

Professor Mellisa Clawson, director of undergraduate studies in the Department of Child and Family Studies, says the school is a tremendous asset to the department and an important part of the curriculum. "Observations at the school are required in a number of courses, including child development, prosocial and moral development, and language development," she says. "In all three courses, the observational component enables students to examine the practical implications of theory and research in child development."

Clawson, who is faculty liaison to Bernice Wright, says the school is the first setting at SU in which undergraduates can work with young children. "Because the lab school provides a model early childhood environment, it is a wonderful setting for our students to

learn how to interact effectively with young children and their families," Clawson says. "Later, our students take the knowledge and skills they have developed into the community when they complete internships at other preschools."

Assistant teachers stop working at the school when CFS 332 ends, so the children have to learn new faces each semester. And children who attend the school four days a week see different student teachers every other day. "The student teachers change, so maintaining consistency is pretty hard," Grimmer says. "It can be a benefit if a child has a variety of teachers and styles to interact with—we know that different personalities bring out different qualities in children. But it can also be chal-



Teacher Suzanne Quinn leads her class in a song as students Siobhan, left, and Gun Ha enjoy front-row seats.



## "Bernice Wright is set up as a child-directed enviro

lenging to get used to different faces. We let parents know from the beginning about that aspect of the school."

### ROUNDING UP RESEARCH

"When parents enroll their children here, it's a given that they want to participate in research," Grimmer says. "They're willing to have their child interviewed or observed. And we only choose research that benefits children."

The school releases an annual research update so parents can see the results of studies in which their children participated. "As a researcher, I have to justify why I'm doing the research," Grimmer says. "And sometimes I stop and say, 'Who cares? What does this mean for families and children?' The report is a way to say, this is what matters."

Preece says she and her husband did some research of their own before enrolling Tanner at Bernice Wright. "We did our homework to find out exactly what kind of research was done there, how our children were going to be involved, things like that. We were glad to help." One benefit of the school's research component is the portfolio teachers keep of each child's work throughout the year, she says. "At the end of the year you have an idea of how your child developed over time. The teachers are actually watching the development of the children and they're able to report that to the parents. I like that. I definitely feel I'm not just dropping my child off to be baby-sat."

Clawson has supervised a number of research projects at the school over the last three years. "In all of them, graduate and undergraduate students served as research assistants and had the opportunity to co-author presentations for professional conferences and publications," she says. "A number of unique questions can be addressed because the lab school serves such a diverse population, including children with disabilities and children for whom English is a second language."

In a few recent research projects:

- Clawson and doctoral student Kathleen Bigsby '89 examined processes occurring in families of preschool children and compared families of children with and without special needs.
- Grimmer and fellow master's degree student Tara Vaccaro compared Bernice Wright with nonprofit and for-profit community settings and found the school far exceeded others in terms of quality care provided to young children.
- Doctoral student Meera Shin and master's degree student Jungsun Hyun examined how children's interactions with teachers differ by age, gender, and native language.

Clawson says current research projects at the school involve assessing students' teaching experiences through in-depth interviews with them, and extending the expertise available in the model environment of Bernice Wright to child care and preschool centers in the community.

### EDUCATION FOR EVERYONE

The school has long been committed to fully including children with special needs, Grimmer says. For three years, the Jowonio School has placed a team from its Educational Network and Resources for Inclusion in Community and Home (ENRICH) program at Bernice Wright. Jowonio, which means "to set free" in the language of the Onondaga, is a private, nonprofit preschool program that has operated in Syracuse for 30 years. Jowonio School, on Bassett

Street near Thornden Park, has eight preschool classrooms where 100 typical children and 60 children with disabilities learn side by side.

The ENRICH program brings Jowonio's services into other parts of the community. Its team includes a special education teacher, a speech language pathologist, an occupational therapist, and a physical therapist. At Bernice Wright, they work with eight children with special needs who participate in classes with typical children. "Some have speech and language

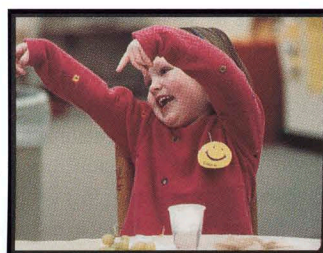
delays, some have developmental delays in their socialization and play skills, and some have physical disabilities," says Linda Karmen, former Jowonio ENRICH coordinator. "We're addressing needs across a wide range of development."

The school offers a strong, positive experience for these children, says Karmen, now co-coordinator of the Onondaga County Health Department Division of Special Children Services. "Bernice Wright is set up as a child-directed environment that really values children as individuals. The school emphasizes the ability of children to learn and explore on their own through play. That's something we want children with special needs to experience with children their own age."

This inclusion plays a valuable role on several levels, Karmen says. "It's important for children to be among their peers. Especially during the preschool years, children learn best through play with other children. They interact



Child and family studies students observe classrooms through mirrored-glass windows. Microphones allow them to hear children and teachers interact.



Laura sings a song while enjoying a snack.



## onment that really values children as individuals."

better with other children and model the behavior of other children. They learn to communicate better by having those language models around them.

"On another level, it's important for children to understand that we're all individuals," she adds. "Everyone learns at a different rate and has something special and important about them that should be respected. For future generations, inclusion is incredibly important. When these children are adults they'll be much more accepting of a diverse society than some older folks are."

Jowonio hopes that by including children with disabilities at the preschool level, families will be better advocates for these children at the elementary and higher levels, Karmen says. "Hopefully there are staff members and families of typical children who better understand the diverse range of needs and how they can be addressed in a regular education setting."

Grimmer says the ENRICH team also works with typical children in each classroom, collaborating with the teachers. "They add enrichment to our program, and they've been a great resource for parents with questions about their child's development," she says. "The children don't have just one teacher, they have a whole team."

Making ENRICH staffers part of the classroom team that interacts with all the children is part of the inclusion mission, Karmen says. "We're models for the children in terms of giving them opportunities to interact with each other and working together to try to make a nice classroom experience for everyone."

Preece says parents appreciate having the ENRICH program at Bernice Wright because it offers benefits not found in many preschool programs. "It's made both of my children a lot more sensitive to differences in people and accepting of them," she says. "They're learning sign language, for instance, and they love it."

Parents, administrators, and staff warmly welcomed the ENRICH team to Bernice Wright, notes Karmen. "It's been a very positive experience," she says. "It's a teaching program, so we've

had the opportunity to work with the undergraduate students placed at Bernice Wright as teaching assistants. Part of our mission is to try to help educate both undergraduate and graduate students about children with special needs and ways to provide a warm and nurturing classroom environment for all children. I feel that philosophy is present in the forefront at Bernice Wright, that they really do accept children right where they are and try to facilitate learning by providing a rich environment."

The school's diversity extends to language as well: Because SU has so many international students, Bernice Wright serves a number of families for whom English is a second language.

Foreign languages currently represented at the school include Arabic, Korean, Malay, and Chinese. Grimmer says the school gladly accommodates these children. "It brings such fullness and diversity to the school, making it a wonderful place to be," she says. "The children may not speak the same language, yet they're friends and they're communicating in other ways, or they're teaching each other vocabulary words from their native tongue."

Karmen says other preschool and day care centers she has seen throughout Onondaga County do not compare to Bernice Wright. "I'm sure it's partly because it is a teaching facility, so there is an emphasis on understanding children and child development, but the quality of the curriculum and the richness of the program is really head and shoulders above most of what we see in other places," she says. "Bernice Wright as a laboratory school has offered a lot to the



Assistant teacher Annalisa Bergquist "oo listens as Katherine discusses a picture that interests her.

community and to Syracuse University."

The school has been successful, Grimmer believes, because it evolved to meet new demands as it grew. "We're still in the process of doing that and looking at what would make our program better," she says. "That's the advantage of working in a university setting—we are fortunate to have the most recent research and knowledge of the field of early childhood education."