Dear C&C Families,

Several years ago, we undertook to explore some key City & Country practices and policies in greater depth and to put them in writing for our families. We're continuing this practice with our spring 2007 issue of *Currents*.

On February 14th, Sarah St. Onge gave a presentation on the development of Group Plays in the Middle and Upper School to the C&C Parents Association. Group Plays are integral to C&C's educational practices. Sarah explained the process of creating a Play in detail and discussed its importance as a culmination of the children's extended study of a society or time period. We have highlighted below many of her comments and provided some images from her presentation. Educating our parent body about our philosophy and practice is vitally important to the community. We hope your knowledge of the work of the children at C&C is deepened and that you will share our enthusiasm for this unique and progressive way of creating a play.

If you have any comments about Group Plays or this issue of *Currents*, please feel free to speak with me.

Sincerely,

Kate Turley  
Principal
The Value of Play

Too much pressure on external ideas, too much preoccupation with mere skills and mere information, crowds out the elusive spark of original thought . . .
- Caroline Pratt

City & Country was originally known as "The Play School." When C&C's founder, Caroline Pratt, began to formulate her ideas about education, she observed that children express their curiosity through play. They show us what they know and what they want to know. Furthermore, using play as a tool for making meaning of the world around them is a way for the children to utilize their intuitive learning. Children are constantly absorbing new facts about their world. Some of it can be immediately accessed and expressed, while other information may lie quietly below the surface. Dramatic play and creative work draw on this intuitive thinking and open the child up to develop "the elusive spark of original thought."

Dramatic play helps integrate children's learning, not only at the youngest ages but throughout the entire age range from three to thirteen and perhaps beyond.
- Jean Murray, former Head of C&C

The children of C&C develop their ability to represent what they know in play throughout their years here. Play in the Lower School is explored in myriad ways: with Blocks, in Rhythms, with babies and at the water table, as just a few examples. Children in the VIIs master block building and phase out of using wooden people and structures to represent their world, as they continue to explore interpersonal dramatic play.

The Middle and Upper School draws on this practice and begins to formalize play into the curriculum by introducing the Group Play in the VIIIIs. As Pratt observed, children have the tendency to carry out in play what they have seen and know about. A way for them to express that knowledge and to learn more about it is to create a play.

Plays in the Middle and Upper School

. . . the entire production - thinking, planning, executing - was all theirs, and the knowledge opened for them a fascinating world into which they walked with confidence in their own powers.
- Caroline Pratt

What is a Group Play?

A Group Play is an integral part of the educational process at C&C. Over the course of a year, each Group in the Middle and Upper School studies a society or time period in depth. The children deconstruct the history of the people or era through research, writing, reading and discussion. Each child takes a piece of research that he or she is interested in and becomes an expert in that area. In this way, each member of the Group plays a role in informing one another while creating a base of information for the Group as a whole. The teacher encourages the Group to take ownership of the research process while filling in the gaps and assisting in synthesizing their work. The reconstruction of their knowledge is further developed through the creation of a Group Play. The Play pulls together all of their individual pieces and retells it in a way that makes sense to the Group. The children own the play-making process at every level - all
props, costumes and set pieces are created by them throughout the year in their Social Studies research and through work with Specials, such as Music, Art, Science and Shop.

**The Play Process**

The most fundamental aspect of all of the Plays in the Middle and Upper School is that they are based on the Group’s shared knowledge of their Social Studies work. As discussed above, the children’s individual research on topics of their choosing informs the Group and provides opportunities for the children to engage in hands-on learning. The children develop intellectual and kinesthetic information that is later utilized in the creation of their play. The children combine these individual and group efforts to create a whole base of knowledge. For example, when the VIIIs recreate a Lenape Village in their classroom, they sometimes build a longhouse together, and often each VIII creates a different piece of the environment, such as animals or tools, in Shop and Art; thus the artifacts of their research process become props in their Play. In this way, they “play” with their research and have a deeper relationship to it—these facts become related in a relevant, meaningful way. Through the creation of their Play, the children are also engaged in a tremendous amount of social collaboration. Together, they: develop the storyline and main theme; create characters and their dialogue; choose roles; design and build props, scenery and sets. All of these aspects of the Play are created in an improvisational way. The Play process is grounded in the Group’s social dynamic and through the give and take of the Group interactions, the Play changes. In this way, the Play is quite fluid and is not rigidly scripted. The end product is the result of this most important social process.

**Where and How Does the Play Develop?**

Research for the Plays is conducted throughout the year in the context of the Group’s Social Studies work (although sometimes a play is a direct result of a piece of literature that has captivated the Group). Much of their information is gathered through: Read Aloud in the classroom; taking trips; developing their physical and artistic knowledge in Rhythms, Art and Shop; research in the Library; Internet research; work in Science and Math. In essence, the children’s research in one context leads to research in another and most likely results in more trips and more research!

**Plays in the VIIIs - Xs**

Plays in the Middle and Upper School reflect the development of the children who create them, and there are significant differences among the ages. In the VIIIs, children represent people through the wooden figures in their block schemes; in the Middle and Upper School, the children become the people themselves. By the VIIIs, the Group is much more informed by the written word and facts. At the same time, they are very much engaged in the process of their work and have little detachment from it. Caroline Pratt is quoted as describing the play process at this age: “The value of the drama seems to lie in getting ready for it.” The VIIIs, who are creating a play for the first time, have many ideas and a tremendous amount of energy, and they are apt to bite off more than they can chew. The process itself is so exciting to them that the play is made much for their own enjoyment. The VIIIs and IXs get truly absorbed in
their process—they tend to turn their backs to the audience and have little sense of stage conventions. This is perfectly appropriate for their developmental stage and the teachers do not interfere with that tendency. When the children enter the Xs, they read literature such as *King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table* and the *Canterbury Tales* as a full Group and want more of a storyline in their play—as they are more aware of the craft of storytelling, they develop more interest in form. They also have a greater interest in authenticity and develop conscious awareness of audience reaction, scripts and voice projection.

**Plays in the XIs - Xllls**

Children in the Upper School take their newfound experience with form and run with it. Their developmental abilities to use more complex critical and abstract thinking allow them to create plays that not only retell their research in their own words and ways, but also allow them to “play” with the stories they have learned. Their use of music, dance, scenery, props and script all become more focused on communicating their plot. The Groups also become much more interested in the entertainment value of their play and often fictionalize their story to create a new form for it. One year, a group of XIs who had studied the Spanish expedition to the New World created a plot based on a trip that the painter Velasquez never made, but it was one they imagined based on what they knew about him and the people of the Cortez expedition. A group of Xllls who read *Prometheus Bound* set the Greek story in Latin America after having seen a production of another play by the Repertorio Español. When the children do this, they are contributing to the tradition of storytelling by developing their own way of telling their tale. They are also communicating their experiences with the research while further developing their sense of stage conventions and interaction between player and audience.

![A Xlls' Mural of Ancient Greek Life](image1)

![An Xlls' Mural of the Globe Theatre](image2)
The VIIIs Make a Play
A Detailed Look at
How a Group Makes a Play

The VIIIs Play is based on their study of the Lenape Indians and New York City long ago. The VIIIs learn about all facets of Lenape life: games, food, shelter, fishing, hunting, crafts and everyday life. They are informed by trips to Inwood Hill and the Bronx Botanical Gardens, both places where there the island still resembles how it looked when the Lenape lived there. They consult books, visit museums and hear presentations from experts in the field. They collect their information and synthesize it through discussion, writing stories, creating myths, work in Rhythms and recreating a Lenape environment in their room. All of this information eventually comes together as a Play—the children recreate what they know through dramatics, storyline, music, scenery, costumes and props.

Murals

The VIIIs depict the details of Lenape daily living in murals. Some elements of Lenape life that can be seen here are: lacrosse playing, the Hudson River, trees from the time studied, hunters, animals, cooking and many more. As the VIIIs represent aspects of their research in the mural, they make sense of the information. Murals become part of the Eastern Woodlands landscape of the classroom and become part of the scenery for their play.
Constructing a Longhouse

The VIIIIs learn that the Lenape Indians lived in longhouses. They research a good deal about what a longhouse is and how it is constructed. Some years, the VIIIIs’ families bring in saplings for the Group to create a longhouse in their classroom. The Group then has to learn how to lash the saplings together, how to make it stand and figure out what they should put on the outside as a covering (bark). The longhouse becomes a social focus for the Group. When it is fully constructed, they wonder about its significance for the Lenape and further research the kinds of activities that are held inside it. They learn that the Lenape had fires inside longhouses, they gathered there to tell stories and to sleep. Groups pursue a variety of questions such as: What did they bring in? What was left outside? The process of answering these questions and creating the longhouse informs them and is incorporated into their Play.
Making Objects for Daily Life

The VIIIs also make objects used in the daily life of the Lenape, such as lacrosse rackets, a vessel for liquids and grains, clothing and a stick for a bow. The authenticity of the objects is taken seriously and the children conduct careful research on each one. They will all be used as props in the Play.
Costumes and Scenery
Making costumes is a large and time-consuming task. Parents sometimes help with pattern-making and teaching how to use the tools needed. Children use their knowledge of Lenape dress to inform the process, often adding intricate beadwork, footwear and other decorative elements.

If the children need more scenery than was already created for the classroom murals, they make additional pieces and utilize objects made in Shop and Art, such as papier-mâché animals.
Putting It All Together

Finally, the children bring all of their efforts and knowledge together into the Group Play. Song, dance, dialogue, props, scenery and costume all communicate the in-depth study that they have accomplished. In this photo, a piece of their longhouse is on the right, scenery is in the background, artifacts from daily life are in the middle of their song circle and you can see them wearing their costumes.

Edited by Jennifer Marck