



Rivendell READER

W I N T E R 2 0 2 0 / 2 0 2 1 • V O L . 2 4



Dear Friends of Rivendell,

While each year holds its challenges and triumphs, this year of the COVID-19 pandemic is most striking in my Rivendell memories. The challenges have surely been great. After five months of operating remotely from March through August, our drive to provide in-person school experiences and special education services for our students competes with the ongoing threat of COVID-19 and the need to be ever vigilant in our mitigation efforts. Rivendell has certainly felt the emotional impact of the pandemic and the value and limitations of remote programming for our young students, particularly those with special needs.

In the midst of these complicated and stressful times, our triumphs in the face of the pandemic deserve considerable attention. In mid-March, our Preschool and special education teachers pivoted swiftly to remote teaching platforms, quickly developing a unique and meaningful curriculum to engage students. Parents became partners in 'zoom school' and all agree that the relationship between home and school became ever more collaborative. An innovative remote summer school program was received warmly. Rivendell's evaluation team also became experts via zoom, connecting with parents to provide assessments that accurately reflect the strengths and needs of the children they meet. Administrators set up offices at home, maintaining the organized flow of Rivendell business. While school was operating remotely, our custodial staff sanitized and improved our physical plant, readying the spaces for the eventual return of staff and students. We became COVID-19 experts and teaching staff invested time over the summer to study protocols and plan for their return to in person teaching. We were relieved when authorization to begin on-site special education services again was granted in August.

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Relationships Amid Crisis

THE CORE PROGRAM TEAM

Rivendell School's CORE program is a relationship-based model that uses SEIT and related service providers to help young children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders to develop the readiness skills they need to learn with others. Our educational model is based on the belief that relationships are the core of learning. Through therapeutic teaching methods, clinical services and intensive team member collaboration, the child develops an awareness of what it means to be at school. We work to look deeper into how CORE children think socially and gauge the effect those thoughts have on classroom learning. At school, most children learn to balance the pursuit of their own interests while considering those of others. In this way they develop a social community that promotes learning for all. Making sense of the dynamic preschool is challenging for CORE students. They may see what other teachers and children are doing and may make use of the classroom materials, but they struggle to understand the ongoing relationships that are the foundation of school life. The building of the teacher/child relationship is the primary focus that guides the CORE child's direct learning experience. Through this relationship we teach children the meaning behind the skills they acquire and the generalized understanding they need to apply the skills they've learned in a variety of settings. When experiences are meaningful and shared, social understanding takes place.

For over twelve years, our unique and highly regarded programs of direct service to young children with ASD and training initiatives for families and teachers have relied on three psychosocial constructs to organize our work. We call these the Fundamental Competencies of Social Relationships. They are to understand the difference between self and other; to understand the roles of teacher, child and self; to follow

a teacher's directive. We believe that the meaning behind following directions can only be understood when a child has a sense of self and other. To learn in a classroom a child needs to understand that she/he is an individual and that there are other, separate individuals nearby. For the young child, the understanding of self develops from experiences of and engagement with others. This understanding is particularly challenging for CORE children who struggle to perceive and define their own wants and needs. Their teachers greeted these children at school every morning and, together, they worked to strengthen their Fundamental Competencies. That is, until that terrible day in March when schools were forced to close indefinitely, and the search began to provide appropriate remote education that would strengthen relationships and, slow the subsequent regression that threatened in the absence of face-to-face learning. In the wake of that closure, CORE parents, SEITs, related service providers, and classroom teachers found themselves having to form new relationships with each other. The boundaries between home and school vanished as goals for children were expanded to become family goals. Parents and CORE SEITs were initially overwhelmed by the demands of remote learning and they shared the worry that the children were made more vulnerable and self-directed by the abrupt changes in service delivery. We, the CORE team, questioned our own Fundamental Competencies as we struggled to work outside our job descriptions and allotted work schedules to abruptly acquire technological skills we might not have possessed. Developing curriculum that is unique to each child for up to twenty-five hours a week demanded a tremendous amount of time and energy, as did sustained collaboration with parents and related service providers, some of whom were new to the CORE program. We worked to reconfigure "society" from school to home with children who struggle with all but

the simplest relationships. When our “school world” was suddenly reduced to the rectangles that encapsulate remote teaching and learning, parents and teachers found themselves unsure of how to provide experiences that held meaning for us all. In the process, we had to explore our own identities and the identities of others as we embarked on new partnerships that made relationship-based learning possible for us all. The roles of parents, SEITs and teachers shifted, often during a single remote session, compelling us to adapt and revise our learning plans together.

At the time of this writing, most of us have returned to face-to-face experiences with our CORE children and we are grateful for that opportunity even as we are mindful of the ongoing health concerns that we face and the terrible losses so many have sustained. As we hope for better days, we are determined to maintain and strengthen the partnerships with parents that are a product of our shared crisis.

Back to Rivendell’s Garden

BRIGITTE YOHE

The children from Classes 3 and 4 already planted the kale seedlings in their seed starter pods. The spider plant “babies” were propagated by Class 2 friends and were supposed to go home with them soon. The lima beans, carefully pushed into the soil by our youngest students from Class 1, were about to sprout in their small pots. The daffodil and tulip leaves started to peek through the soil. The children were patiently awaiting the appearance of the early spring flowers. The peas and lettuce seeds were ready to be planted and eventually grow into treats that could have been tasted by our students. Then everything changed and we were told to stay home and safe. The seedlings dried out and none of the seeds were given the chance to turn into plants. The children didn’t get to admire the flowering daffodils and tulips. No kale, peas, lettuce, radishes, carrots, tomatoes, peppers and basil to pick and taste throughout the spring and summer.

When schools closed, my family decided to move to our upstate home for a while, then ended up staying for months. Throughout that time, I missed seeing the children coming to the garden with their faces full of wonder and curiosity. From the beginning, there was no doubt in me that they should continue Growing Connections at home. However, the question was how to do that without access to the greenhouse. I had to come up with a curriculum that used hands-on materials that we could find at home and didn’t require that families go out and purchase tons of items for the lessons. We started simply by finding fruits and looking for their seeds. In addition, I did something I had never done before; I filmed my lesson and put it on a private YouTube channel, so the children could watch it any time they wanted. Talking into a camera was definitely not something I felt comfortable with at first. Also, I felt disconnected from the conversations that would have taken place between the children and myself. There were no “I thinks”, “I wonders” and “why’s”. Despite the challenges and changes, making this first video led to twelve more!

The spring months passed, summer flew by and my family moved back to Brooklyn. My only connection to the garden had been a well-appreciated





occasional picture sent to me by Katy Hill. I saw that the daffodils and tulips eventually bloomed. Additionally, the pumpkin seeds left from our decomposing Jack-O'-Lanterns did grow into vines and tomato seeds, hidden in the soil from last year's crop, sprouted. Regardless, I returned to a different garden in September, one that lacked the hard work and love of the children. However, when they came back to the greenhouse in October, the children immediately filled it with enthusiasm and joy. I am quite certain that with their help, the magic of our garden will return!

Thinking Together

ELISA LUNDY

At their annual retreat, Rivendell special education itinerant teachers took the opportunity to think together about their students, their relationships with parents and classroom teachers and the changes they observed in themselves as a result of working remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Different aspects of student behavior, style and ability became increasingly apparent to SEITs as they adjusted to remote platforms. They wondered whether these characteristics were there all along but revealed while learning remotely, or if the differences were a direct result of learning in this new way. SEITs recognized that the classroom curriculum often needed to be individualized further to meet their students' needs and fit individual learning styles more specifically. The value of one on one time with students was re-discovered through remote teaching for some SEITs, while others missed the social opportunities of the classroom for their students. Interestingly, in some cases working one to one provided greater opportunities for exploring academic work. That remote teaching and learning must include attention to family needs and dynamics was also highlighted and contributed to the development of deeper bonds between SEITs and parents.

The biggest observation about relationships with parents seemed to be the depth of communication between the two groups. Before the pandemic, communication often took the form of reporting - SEITs to parents or parents to SEITs. The on-going need for planning and problem solving, opportunities to observe one another as partners and joint attention to the children strengthened the work parents and teachers did together. Those experiences influenced the way SEITs looked to their future relationships with parents and an investment in maintaining the depth discovered while working remotely.

Parents, too, had new opportunities to witness their children learning in action as they accompanied them to school remotely. Strengths and challenges were observed with greater clarity and parents were empowered to recognize the critical role they play in the educational life of their children. Their already strong respect for parents grew and SEITs reported greater curiosity about parent-child relationships and the power they hold. Every SEIT expressed the belief that working collaboratively with parents benefited everyone.

SEITs also expressed renewed respect for classroom teachers who shared their expertise around curriculum development for strong remote teaching, but also the technological skills and techniques that make remote learning meaningful for adults and children alike. Moving forward, SEITs were

inspired to commit to greater engagement in classroom curriculum, ripe with opportunities for daily routines, playfulness and social engagement.

Some SEITs will continue to teach remotely, while many others have returned to the classroom, each group committed to using what they learned about themselves, their students, parent partners and classroom teachers throughout the pandemic to continue to make meaning together.

Teaching in a Pandemic

ABBIEY MCBRIDE

As a new teacher this year, I haven't experienced Rivendell without a pandemic. My 'normal' is mask curriculum, hybrid learning, saying goodbye to parents at the front door and a plethora of hand sanitizer. Teaching in a pandemic is complex, rewarding, exciting, challenging, but most of all it gives me hope. Every day I witness the remarkable adaptation of this Rivendell community with children, parents and teachers taking on new ways to imagine school with open minds and willingness to adapt.

What I see in the children, remote and in person, is an eagerness to connect. This year more than ever, we are all seeking connection. As parents and teachers, we long for a sense of community, too. We connect differently this year and dare I say these connections feel more vital than any other year. Whether an hour-long zoom session, or a whole day with in-person friends, these moments spent with each other give me hope. Hope for the future of education. Hope for children who are developing complex adaptation skills early on. And hope for this community as a whole. One that continues to hold space for children to explore connections, their abilities, and the world around them. As a new teacher in a pandemic, I'm thankful for a supportive space to cultivate learning. I'm thankful for the understanding and flexibility of the Rivendell community. And I'm thankful to have hope.





At Ease and Thankful

SANDY LIN

Rivendell Parent

A a family we consider ourselves old hands at Rivendell, having spent nearly half a decade shuttling one or both kids to and from the school. But this year was different. As September approached, my news and social feeds were flooded with articles and heated discussions on school reopening plans and COVID risks. Like many other parents, we were concerned about sending our daughter Clementine back to school in-person. What would the classroom environment be like under new COVID guidelines? Would Clem still be able to bond with friends and teachers under their masks? Would repeated school closures cause more disruption than we could handle? Would the teachers feel safe and supported? While Clementine had taken to wearing a mask over the summer, often putting it on before we even ask, we weren't sure if other parents were having the same experience.

On a call with Shelly in August, we expressed our doubts, which she addressed patiently. At some point, she said, "You know us. This is Rivendell." And it struck me that we do know the soul of Rivendell- it is the reason we sent both Colton and Clementine here. Rivendell puts the children first, always. Even in the midst of a pandemic storm, we can count on Rivendell to do what's right. Henry and I moored ourselves to this thought whenever the news and information became too overwhelming.

It may take a while, but we know children adapt. The first few weeks of school, at drop off, Clementine would launch into a comical and awkward game of hide-and-seek around my legs whenever Katy or Shelly tried to take her temperature. With a lot of patient conversation, she has learned to get through the door easily and quickly. Now we even prefer the drop off at the front door- it makes for a quicker exit for the

parent! Another hurdle is virtual school, when it must happen. The Clementine from this spring, when the Preschool transitioned to remote learning, was not a fan. She would hide under the table whenever she saw herself spotlighted or heard her name called. When she stayed home from school for a couple days this fall, I didn't know what to expect logging into Zoom for the morning meeting. We had carved out a corner of her room with a table that is her special school spot, with lots of art supplies and paper ready to go. To our delight, she was excited to log in, was eager to participate in Delsa's art class, and even shoo-ed us away so she can attend her meeting in peace. We- the teachers, the parents, and the children- have all gotten better at this.

While the pandemic is not over, a new routine has developed in our lives. Whether school is open for in-person learning or goes virtual- we feel enough confidence that we parents, the school, and our children know what to do and can handle it together. We still look forward to the day when we can invite friends over for playdates, or organize a meetup in the park for the whole class. For now, we are at ease and thankful.



The Remote School Experience

LAILAH AND ANTHONY PEPE

Rivendell Parents

Starting a new school and beginning to work with new teachers and therapists you've never met before using zoom.... when you're a four-year-old...living through a global pandemic.... presents some daunting challenges. As far as we know, no one has really studied remote learning for neuro-atypical children with very low vision. So, teachers and parents are left to collaborate and experiment, feeling it out as we go along, changing in accordance with what works and what we've learned doesn't.

Being the parents of a remote student at Rivendell has been a true blessing for our family. It's hard and sad that our child can't go to school in person for medical reasons and so badly misses being around other children. But our Classroom Four Teachers, Lily, Judy and Jaron, and Janelle, who is the incredible SEIT that we work with, have done such an astounding job including our son Justice in the classroom experience. The other children know Justice and he knows them! He has favorite class buddies! He participates in circle time every day.

The teachers have sent materials to our home for Justice to work with and, knowing how much Justice loves firetrucks, they included firetruck stickers as a special treat. Now, Justice can paint along using the same materials as the children in the classroom. He can see a classroom friend painting a rainbow with dot markers and dialogue with that friend using his own dot markers.

Additionally, we think that Justice being a remote friend has helped the rest of the class have some context and understanding when other friends or teachers must go remote. It's not a strange or scary unfamiliar experience, it's just that someone is working with the rest of the class from home, just like Justice. Our class has expanded its model of inclusion to encompass working together from different spaces. Given that many schools struggle with the initial objective of including kids with neurological differences, this is truly incredible. I think Rivendell's mindset of inclusive thinking-- how do we help children who learn in different ways learn together?-- in addition to profound dedication and commitment on the part of school staff and therapists, is what permitted Rivendell to create this uniquely inclusive and fully interactive remote space unlike any other our family has experienced.

We are SO VERY grateful to all the wonderful people who have embraced us into this Rivendell family because we couldn't imagine any other school able to pull it off. Thank you to the entire Rivendell team!







From Our Board of Trustees

As the pages of this Reader demonstrate, Rivendell is a unique place where we take care of one another. Because the care for friends at Rivendell is so genuine and heartfelt, it is easy to forget that there are costs to making Rivendell the place that it is. The pandemic has increased those costs while reducing revenue.

Class sizes are smaller to ensure safety and mandates for special education itinerant teaching are fewer than expected. As a result, tuition and fee for service income are down. Rivendell has done everything possible to limit the impact of these revenue losses. The school has cut expenses, including salaries and other benefits. We also refinanced the school's mortgage to reduce monthly costs and long-term interest expense. Rivendell was already run efficiently before the pandemic, so finding additional cuts is a challenge. The school cannot function without space and the teachers and staff who are the heart of what makes Rivendell unique.

At the same time, the pandemic has created new costs, including improved technology, internet connectivity, and ventilation. The new costs and decreased revenue combine for a loss of approximately \$60,000 per month for Rivendell. Over the course of this school year, we anticipate a \$400,000 loss—more than half of the school's reserve. Although forgiveness of the school's Paycheck Protection Act loan may relieve some of this burden, Rivendell is unlikely to weather another school year like this one.

As we come out of the pandemic, we will be looking for ways to connect to the people around us. Please help us ensure that Rivendell, too, weathers the pandemic so it can continue to be the unique center of joy and learning that it has been and continues to be.

Rivendell School

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Dear Friends of Rivendell

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Throughout, our staff, children and families have been resilient, diligent and determined.

In contrast, the economic fallout of the pandemic for Rivendell has been great and financially the school has suffered significantly. If not for years of wise financial management, Rivendell School would have been without resources this year when under enrollment, the costs of keeping up with expenses related to COVID-19 and ongoing expenses such as the mortgage on our lovely building, made for gaps in income as costs increased. **We must and will count on your generosity to replenish our reserves to secure Rivendell's future. We are indebted to you for your support and your contributions to our Annual Appeal.**

With very best wishes,

Katy Hill

Katy Hill

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www.rivendellnyc.org

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