**Historical roots**

Walk through the doors of Wimpfheimer Nursery School and one enters a school unlike any other. Every detail of its architecture and every chapter of its history are evidence of care and respect for children. In Barbara Beatty’s book, *Preschool Education in America*, she describes the birth of Wimpfheimer Nursery School within the context of the emerging Nursery School Movement of the 1910s and 1920s:

_A more ambitious nursery school project was begun at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York, where in the 1920s interdisciplinary curriculum re-organization was under way to integrate the college’s courses around the concept of “euthenics” or “the idea of improving the individual through improving his environment.” ... Named for a Vassar graduate whose wealthy textile manufacturer father donated the money, the Mildred R. Wimpfheimer Nursery School opened in 1927 in a handsome gray stone building in “the style of the English Manor House.” The school...was the site of much child development research under psychologist Joseph Stone and is still in operation._

In 1927, the Vassar College Catalogue noted the opportunities for child study that this new nursery school would provide:

_Laboratory Nursery schools are viewed “...as a source of empirical information about what environment and educational procedures are best for young children. Nursery school leaders are active in conducting psychological studies and take pride in implementing the latest research.”_

While approaches to the education of young children have changed over the years, Wimpfheimer Nursery School continuously evolves to remain a state-of-the-art laboratory nursery school. In 2009-2010, Wimpfheimer was remodeled and refurbished thanks to the enormous generosity of Mary Lee Dayton. Mrs. Dayton graduated from Vassar in 1946 and trained at Wimpfheimer to become a kindergarten teacher. Her gift made possible the seamless integration of Wimpfheimer’s architectural charm and beauty with collegiate teaching and research facilities that will benefit teachers and learners for decades to come.
Why do children benefit from Wimpfheimer as a laboratory school?

The major components of high quality early childhood education are the cornerstones of Wimpfheimer Nursery School:

- Child-centered environment
- Developmentally appropriate curriculum
- Trusting adult-child relationships
- Educated and experienced teaching teams
- A commitment to model a demonstration of excellent care and education
- A vision for the integrated wellbeing of children, families, and educators

Architecturally designed as a nursery school, the physical structure and furnishings support child growth and learning. Socialization, friendship, self-help skills, child identity, and independence are fostered as children work and play in an environment that is their own; at their scale and built to fit their needs.

The outdoor classroom and playscape is also an integral part of the daily experience for young children at WNS. The program practices a philosophy of outdoor-play-in-all-seasons-an-all-weather, and acknowledges that movement is intricately linked to brain development. In all of human development, but especially in early childhood, the mind and the body cannot be separated. The Wimpfheimer playground not only includes swings, bikes and structures to promote climbing, jumping, balancing and strengthening motor skills; but it also features hills for sledding in the winter, gardens for planting in the spring, and a simulated river bed for wading and cooling in the summer. The value on child wellness and environmental education is also supported by the campus landscape, where children take walks to discover ponds and fields, and to form relationships with the ancient trees found at Vassar college.

By integrating college students into our program and attracting student teachers from respected early childhood education programs, the children benefit from a constant influx of diversity and new ideas supported by low adult/child ratios. These low ratios are essential for establishing meaningful relationships and in designing individual, small group, and whole group learning experiences. Although college students and may come and go for certain portions of the daily schedule, the children are always under the care of their primary and experienced and certified teachers. Teachers employed by the nursery school are chosen for their experience, education, dedication, and joy in working with children and families. They have Master’s degrees, Bachelor’s degrees, Associate’s or CDA (certificates) in early childhood education or related fields. Vassar College provides financial support for the teaching teams to attend professional conferences to continually improve the pedagogy and practice at WNS. The teaching teams are also engaged in ongoing reflective discourse within the nursery school, with regularly scheduled time for team meetings and parent-teacher conferences.
Wimpfheimer is also part of the wider Vassar community. The nursery school is viewed as an important ‘primary source’ to the Vassar students and faculty, where neither students nor faculty just read about children – instead they enter the child’s world. We view children as the first and original researchers. Children are full of curiosity, wonder, risk-taking, and meaning making. Just as children are continually seeking connections and demonstrating miraculously rapid growth in the first five years of life, so we seek to learn and evolve alongside children. At WNS, we are always asking big questions in our quest to design the best habitat for their development:

- Who is the child?
- How does the baby, toddler, preschool learn best?
- What are the developmental challenges and intelligences of these unique stages of life?
- How do we view the culture of childhood, and how do our views impact our ways of being with children and teaching and guiding children?
- As we learn from children, how do we become the kind of adults children need and deserve?

Using our contemporary laboratory, students and faculty and parents bring many important questions to light about child development, pedagogy, play, art, nature, literature, care, ethics, discipline, guidance, and family life. In an active laboratory school, it is sometimes difficult to figure out who is asking more questions – the students, the teachers, the faculty, the parents, or the children. We believe that children surrounded by learners thrive as learners. Our interwoven teams of teachers, student teachers, and faculty provides an ongoing exchange of ideas, curiosity, and innovations.

**The tools for learning**

Wimpfheimer’s curriculum is formulated with respect to the *National Association for the Education of Young Children* (NAEYC) and *Zero to Three* guidelines for developmentally appropriate practices and critical competency models. Our approaches for teaching and learning are inspired by the theory of constructivism and by educational philosophers like John Dewey, Jean Piaget, Jerome Bruner, Howard Gardener, and Loris Malaguzzi who have taught us to be observers and listeners of children, and to view children as respected citizens; whole and competent learners.

“Listening to children is like opening a curtain or driving away a blanket of fog. I encourage you to listen to what we often do not have time or patience to listen to; namely the extraordinary laboratory of experiments that constitutes the child standing by our side.” -Loris Malaguzzi
The educators facilitate play, follow the children’s interests, and design emergent investigations, while they consider development in all domains – intellectual, language, motor, and social-emotional growth. In the classrooms one can find the classic tools of experiential learning designed to promote intrinsic motivation, engagement, socialization and symbolic thinking, such as:

- Wooden unit blocks for constructive play and building while exploring size, shape, length, numeracy, balance, design and symmetry.
- Child sized easels for expressive painting, color mixing and exploration of lines, shapes and colors.
- Sand and water tables for exploration of matter while learning concepts such as of flow, volume, empty, full, sink, float, weight and density through sensory play.
- Children’s literature, poetry and song for developing a love of language, communication, and emergent literacy concepts and skills.
- Projects, provocations and investigations offered by teachers to promote collaboration and inquiry. These might involve meaningful experiences such as experiments, cooking, gardening, woodworking, nature observations, or mark making and drawing activities.

In the past two decades, scientists and educators have made tremendous advances in understanding what contributes to optimal learning for children. While we have known that children need to “learn by doing”, the significance of play based education and responsive early caregiving was not fully realized. Now, scientists have demonstrated that humans start learning the moment they are born, and that children’s experiences in the world literally wire their brains.

An exciting component of Wimpfheimer Nursery School is our relationship with the Infant Center and the opportunity it affords for studying human development from the start. Research on babies and toddlers and responsive care-giving has confirmed that nothing drives learning as powerfully as human connection. By engaging with others in a community of trust and care where we are well known to one another, we learn the most. Our educators practice relational-based teaching approaches that are grounded in attachment theory and in strengthening the child’s sense of security, belonging, and family bonds. Our teachers understand that care is education, that learning happens in every moment, and children do not distinguish between “educational” or “non-educational moments”. Early childhood educators are artful in their relationship building because they know that through these earliest relationships and experiences, children develop empathy and perspective taking, and form critical brain connections that they will use for a lifetime.

In the early years, teachers are collaborators and companions. The focus is not on telling children what to think, but allowing them to use their minds to learn how to think. With an emphasis on child development, the teaching approach
is not so much on *what* children learn, but on *how* they learn. We emphasize the child’s ability to form relationships, ask questions, make choices, reason, hypothesize, pretend, imagine and predict. An appropriate curriculum for young children focuses on supporting their innate intellectual disposition.

At WNS, educators have a strong identity as first teachers and in celebrating the first years of life. We respect the early years as unique and different than later stages of development. We do not try to emulate the big schools or push-down academics that are suited for children in elementary school, with a notion that earlier is better. Honored to meet children at the beginning of their learning journey, we see that it is our job to preserve the child’s sense of wonder and to plant the seeds for a well-nourished foundation. We design a program rooted in joy and in the love of learning. Intellectual dispositions may be weakened or even damaged by excessive and premature formal instruction, and early learning programs are most successful when focused on social-emotional and intellectual goals, rather than narrow academic skills. If children are told what to learn and memorize by the teacher, they may become more passive and dependent learners and less excited about learning something new or knowing how to express original, divergent, and creative ideas. Excellent early childhood pedagogy is steeped in a true respect for childhood and in the art and science of teaching through play, care, movement, songs, stories, conversations, and connections.

**The research gem**

While the curriculum embodies the application of contemporary theory and research, Wimpfheimer also contributes to furthering that body of knowledge through research at Vassar. Children may participate in research project with the written consent of their parents. Most research takes place in our children’s library or a room adjacent to a classroom. Parents are invited to watch their child participate by making arrangements with the principle researcher. Guidelines for research practices are provided to each family. The research projects are interesting, fun, and often challenge the children to think about something in a new way. Upon completion of the project, faculty members send out letters describing the findings of the study. Published papers or presentations resulting from these studies are displayed at Wimpfheimer. Much of the research conducted in the nursery school is likely to influence our educational practices in the classroom in the next five years. It is a valuable resource for our children now, and for the broader educational and early childhood community in the future.

**Suggestions for further reading**

*Brain Body Parenting* by Mona Delahooke
Baby Knows Best by Deborah Carlisle Solomon

The Importance of Being Little: What Young Children Really Need from Grown Ups by Erika Christakis


The Gardener and the Carpenter: What the New Science of Child Development Tells us about The Relationships Between Parents and Children by Allison Gopnik

The Whole Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child’s Developing Mind by Dan Siegel

Mind in the Making: The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs by Ellen Galinsky

**Links and Resources**

National Association for the Education of Young Children  [www.NAEYC.org](http://www.NAEYC.org)

Zero to Three [zerotothree.org](http://zerotothree.org)

Defending the Early Years [DEY.org](http://DEY.org)

Alliance for Childhood [allianceforchildhood.org](http://allianceforchildhood.org)