Child Development Institute

Annual Report

October 2010-August 2011

Compiled by
The Child Development Institute Working Group
Mission and Point of View

The Child Development Institute (CDI) was established in 1987 by a dedicated group of faculty. It functions as an outreach arm of Sarah Lawrence College to promote a developmentally informed view of children, childhood, and education and also to act as an internal resource on campus. CDI’s mission is accomplished by:
1. representing and promoting our views on child development and progressive education to the world beyond the College;
2. providing meaningful educational experience, support, and intellectual challenges to educators and child development professionals locally and nationally;
3. serving the campus community by providing co-curricular programming, offering research opportunities for students, and serving as a resource for and participant in campus-wide conversations about issues such as historic and changing ideas about educational pedagogy; the role of experiential learning in education; and assessment methodologies able to capture both qualitative and quantitative aspects of learning.

In the past year, we continued to build our capacity for developing programs that directly serve both the campus and the community. We also worked to extend our outreach beyond the Westchester/NYC area, serving as a resource for parents, educators, and other professionals across the country. Our contribution to the understanding of crucial issues in child development and education has continued through small scale research studies and capacity-building efforts that expand our reach. We have also successfully developed projects that engage Sarah Lawrence students in community-based research and service, and we have increased Sarah Lawrence’s visibility by providing material for the Web site, for InTouch and the Sarah Lawrence magazine, and for the local press. Regularly-scheduled planning retreats have helped the CDI group to set priorities; to explore and benefit from each other’s thinking, work and ideas; and to move forward with intentionality.

In the perspective of progressive education with which we identify, the child is viewed as an individual in the social context, actively engaged in constructing knowledge through interactions with other people and the physical environment. We believe that the child’s educational experience should encompass social, emotional, and imaginative aspects of life in concert with intellectual development. We emphasize that the individual child, as well as groups of children, should always be considered in the context of their environments—family, neighborhood, school, and culture. Further, we are concerned that schools and other institutions be developed as communities that attend to the interests and needs of children from diverse backgrounds.

Who We Are

For most of academic year 2010-2011, CDI was without a director and functioned as a working group of six: coordinator, faculty advisory group (four psychology faculty), and chairperson of the CDI Professional Advisory Board. As of August 2011, we have a new CDI administration group (see below for history): CDI Director, Indhira Blackwood; Administrative Assistant, Saundra Norton; Faculty Advisory Group, Lorayne Carbon, Jan Drucker, Barbara Schecter, and Sara Wilford; and PAB Chair, Abigail Angell Canfield. The four faculty members are also directors of programs: the Empowering Teachers program under CDI, the Early Childhood Center (ECC), the Art of Teaching graduate program, and the Child Development graduate program. We have three consultants who generously offer their expertise to CDI: Margery B. Franklin, Rachel Grob, and Yvette Richardson; and an with an advisory board made up of Sarah Lawrence alumnae/i and professionals in
education, social work, developmental psychology, media, and advocacy, as well as others with a strong interest in children and child development.

Web Site

Our Web site (www.sarahlawrence.edu/cdi) is updated regularly. It includes notice of upcoming events, descriptions of ongoing programs, and related links and resource materials. We continue to increase the usefulness of the site and make it more interactive.

Public Events

A series of public events sponsored by CDI each year brings our College community together with colleagues, experts, community partners, students at other institutions of higher education, and the public at large for lively presentations and discussions on a range of topics germane to children and childhood. These events help the campus remain connected to existing community partners of all kinds, and also to reach out to new constituencies with whom the College can fruitfully interface and collaborate.

The Longfellow Lecture

The Longfellow Lecture is an annual event, initiated in the first year of CDI (1987) and funded by an endowment established by friends and family of Cynthia Longfellow (SLC ’72). The 2011 lecture, “Fear of Spoiling: Rethinking Common Assumptions about Children (and Parenting),” was presented by Alfie Kohn on April 7, 2011 to approximately 350 faculty, staff, students, parents, and community members in Reisinger Auditorium. This year’s Longfellow Lecture was also co-sponsored by the Early Childhood Center, the Art of Teaching graduate program, and the Larsen Chair.

The Thomas H. Wright Lecture

In 1996, the Leon Lowenstein Foundation gave us a grant to launch a fund in child development honoring Thomas H. Wright, former member of the Sarah Lawrence College Board of Trustees. The Lowenstein Foundation provided additional funds in subsequent years. Following consultation, the decision was made to use the income from the fund to establish an annual lecture, the Thomas H. Wright Lecture. Since 1997, the lecture has been the keynote of the Empowering Teachers Summer Institute. This year the Wright Lecture was given by Mary Hebron, Associate Director of the Sarah Lawrence College Art of Teaching Graduate Program. Entitled “Children’s Voices, Teachers’ Voices: Reclaiming the Classroom,” the lecture was very well received by an overflow audience of more than 100 people in the Donnelly Theater, Heimbold Center.

Special Events

Concluding the series that was developed around the Longfellow Lecture by Temple Grandin, Jan Drucker worked with the Health, Science and Society Group to organize the final program in the series of autism-related events. On Thursday, February 10, 2011, the group presented a panel discussion titled “After an Autism Diagnosis: Clinicians’ and Parents’ Perspectives on Navigating Interventions and Treatments” in Titsworth Lecture Hall. Panelists were Jan Drucker (who also moderated), Cindy Puccio, Nicole McDonald, and Lyde Sizer. The panel discussion was well attended with a lively, engaged audience of around 50-60 people.
Leading up to the Longfellow Lecture by Alfie Kohn, CDI sponsored a screening of the documentary *Race to Nowhere* on Monday, February 28, 2011. The film is part of a nationwide movement, led by the director as a parent, to challenge the way we educate and prepare our children and youth for the future. The initial response to the screening was tremendous: first Heimbold and then Reisinger completely sold out. We had a good crowd in Reisinger with an audience of around 250. As an added bonus, the director, Vicki Abeles, joined us to facilitate the discussion following the screening.

**CDI Professional Development Programs**

Professional development programs are a core commitment for CDI. These programs open up our campus to working professionals in a variety of fields; provide meaningful educational experiences for participants; keep the Institute’s own thinking and practice energetic and informed; and serve as laboratories for exploring ideas.

*Empowering Teachers Program*

Jan Drucker, Director

The Empowering Teachers program was established in 1989 as a forum for professional development and support for teachers, administrators, and other professionals working with children in early childhood, elementary, and middle school settings. For one week each July, we hold a Summer Institute centered on a current educational topic. Sarah Lawrence faculty and distinguished guest presenters facilitate the exploration of each year’s central theme. The Summer Institute typically opens with a keynote address, the Thomas H. Wright Lecture. The program has served as a resource and network for more than 300 beginning and experienced professionals from school districts in Westchester and adjacent counties in New York, Connecticut, and New Jersey, as well as regions as far flung as Florida, Georgia, Michigan, California, Texas, Maine, and Venezuela. Participants who complete the program receive a letter of attendance for 30 contact hours for which public school districts traditionally offer professional development credit.

The 2011 Empowering Teachers Summer Institute was held July 11-15 and attended by 20 participants. We had a mix of teachers and administrators who work with children from infancy through middle childhood. Our focus for Empowering Teachers was looking at the individuals who make up the classroom community. Under the theme of “Each Child and the Curriculum: Finding Multiple Pathways to Meaning-Making,” we looked through a variety of lenses at issues of the learners, teachers, and individual needs in the classroom. Some of the hands-on workshops provided participants the opportunity to tinker with electronics, build and create with recycled and found materials, experiment with psychics, practice mindfulness, and explore collections of children’s artwork. Small break-out sessions, large group discussions, and even break time provided ample opportunity for the teachers to process their experiences, brainstorm about how best to implement such activities in their own classrooms, and share other ideas, concerns, and questions. This year’s group fell in sync with one another quickly, and the participants’ evaluations of the entire Summer Institute were again extremely positive.

Starting in the summer of 2008, we increased the nominal fee charged to participants to $150 per year to help offset a fraction of the program costs. We offer financial assistance when needed, and we encourage participants to explore funding options that may be available through their employers. The bulk of the Empowering Teachers program continues to be funded through income from the Thomas
H. Wright Fund (including the Wright Lecture and other faculty expenses), as well as through CDI endowment funds generously supplemented by donations from Mariela Cisneros (in 2003) and Mary Lynn Bianco (via The Marcled Foundation in 2006).

**Play's the Thing: Facilitating Play for Young Children**

Barbara Schecter and Margery B. Franklin, Co-Directors

The Facilitating Play program was established in 2008 as an outgrowth of our strong interest in promoting and strengthening children’s play. With start-up funding from Community Playthings, this week-long program has now served a total of nearly 100 professionals who are engaged with children’s play, including early childhood teachers, social workers, therapists, children’s museum educators, playground developers, parks department personnel, and our own graduate students in the Art of Teaching and Child Development programs.

The 2011 Facilitating Play program ran the week of June 18-22 and brought together 13 participants and diverse faculty from CDI and other partner institutions and agencies. The curriculum focused on a broad range of issues, including the developmental importance of play; observation and documentation of children’s play; the role of environment in facilitating play; therapeutic uses of play; play advocacy; and cross-cultural perspectives on play—all of which was well received by the participants. This year, we modified the structure of the week to include a weekend, and we organized a pop-up adventure playground as part of the fieldwork experiences for participants. This addition was arguably the group’s favorite session and one that will most likely be incorporated into future programs: participants and faculty alike appreciated the opportunity to observe the free, unstructured play that the program champions.

Unlike the Empowering Teachers program, Facilitating Play is primarily funded through registration fees. As a result, the program is more expensive to attend. We encourage participants to seek funding through their employers. However, in the current economic climate, the full fee of $750 has proved challenging for participants and employers alike. The grant from Community Playthings allowed us to extend significant financial assistance during the program’s first few years, and we are now exploring new funding and financial models to sustain the program moving forward.

**The Learning Child Series**

*The Learning Child Series*, which is produced for public television by Jonathan Diamond Associates in association with the Sarah Lawrence College Child Development Institute, is one of CDI’s most successful outreach tools. All four of the films continue to reach the general public, and they have aired on more than 150 stations across the United States, with re-broadcasting and DVD sales expanding that reach. The documentaries are also powerful tools for communicating CDI’s work in a broad range of public venues. The visual display of children interacting in educational and home environments sends a powerful message about how children learn, creates an immediate shared experience in the room, and stimulates a meaningful dialogue about educational, parenting, and program-design issues. Our efforts to reach educators directly have had positive outcomes, and we continue to expand our outreach in this area through the Workshop and Speakers Bureau and through conference presentations (see below).

Descriptions and clips of the documentaries appear on our Web site and on the producer’s Web site (www.thelarningchildseries.org), which also contains ordering information.
During the past year, the booklets written to accompany the films were translated into Spanish and are now available on the website.

Outreach and Collaborative Projects

In accordance with our mission, CDI pursues a range of outreach initiatives and collaborative projects. These include:

Workshop and Speakers Bureau

In 2009, CDI formally launched a Workshop and Speakers Bureau and enlisted the expertise of the ECC teachers to expand our capacity to reach beyond the campus community to connect directly with groups committed to facilitating lifelong learning. Funding from the Marilyn M. Simpson Charitable Trust, the Wallace Global Fund, and a number of individual donors supported the Bureau’s launch. Our programs are designed for educators, school administrators, children’s librarians, parents, community coalitions, and others who are engaged in the complicated, rewarding process of promoting children’s creativity and healthy development. We address a range of topics and issues around children, childhood, and education, including but not limited to play, early literacy, ethics, and children and nature. Many – though by no means all – of our programs are designed to explore the themes embedded in *The Learning Child* documentaries. Showing these films creates an immediate shared experience in the room, which our expert speakers then build on in a facilitated dialogue. We envision this as a way of reaching a wider audience in the community and of meeting the increasing number of requests for workshops, speaking engagements, and partnership that greater visibility has brought to CDI’s door. If it continues to grow, it can also be a mechanism for giving graduate students valuable experience as members of the Workshop and Speakers Bureau, as well as for connecting in a sustained way with alumni who now work in education, child development, or related fields.

During 2010-2011, we worked with the following groups:

- Tewksbury Arbor Day Program (Tewksbury, NJ): In April 2011, we gave a presentation titled “When Learning Comes Naturally: Discovering the Natural World at Your Feet and all around You” to around 100 third graders at Tewksbury Elementary School as part of the district’s annual Arbor Day celebration. We also met with teachers to discuss *When Learning Comes Naturally* and some of the ways they might incorporate the natural world into the curriculum.

- Blue Rock School and Nyack Public Library (Nyack, NY): In April 2011, we screened *When Learning Comes Naturally* and facilitated a discussion about “Why Our Children Need Nature” for 25 parents, teachers, and community members.

- Rockland 21C Educational Symposium (Stony Point, NY): In April 2011, we presented a workshop titled “Understanding Play and How It Is Important to a Young Child’s Development” to about 30 participants as part of the annual symposium for parents, teachers, administrators, child care providers, social workers, and others who work with children and youth that is organized by Rockland 21C. The 2011 symposium included a keynote by Ellen Galinsky and a series of conversations and workshops about “How Children & Youth Learn & Grow in a Stressful World.”
White Plains Public Library (White Plains, NY): In May and June 2011, we served as an informal resource for the Parent-Child Connection program in the library’s children’s room.

Tov Ba Teva – Discovering the Good in Nature (Rockville, MD): In October 2010, we were invited to present the keynote screening and panel discussion of *When Learning Comes Naturally* and to facilitate two smaller workshops for approximately 680 teachers and administrators at the Partnership for Jewish Life and Learning Early Childhood Jewish Education Conference.

Teaching the Hudson Valley (Hyde Park, NY): In October 2010, we screened *When Learning Comes Naturally* and facilitated a discussion with a small group of environmental educators, teachers, and parents as part of the Fall 2010 Workshop Series.

The Long Ridge School (Stamford, CT): In November 2010, we screened *When Learning Comes Naturally* for parents and community members and participated in a panel discussion with educators from The Long Ridge School.

Beczak Environmental Education Center (Yonkers, NY): In November 2010, presented *When Learning Comes Naturally* to 25 early childhood educators and parents and facilitated a discussion with colleagues from Beczak.

**Participation in Community Groups**

Members of CDI regularly attend meetings and contribute to the following community organizations, among others:

- Alliance for Childhood
- Child Care Council of Westchester
- Environmental Consortium of Hudson Valley Colleges and Universities (including the PreK-12 task force)
- North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE)
- New York Coalition for Play (Steering Committee and Membership Groups)
- OMEP-USNC (U.S. chapter of the World Organization for Early Childhood Education)
- The Teacher Institute of Lower Westchester (formerly B.E.P.T. Teacher Center)
- Westchester Association for the Education of Young Children
- Westchester Children’s Association
- Westchester Community College’s Early Childhood Curriculum Advisory Board
- Westchester Library System
- U.S. Play Coalition

On campus, CDI has had an active presence on committees, including the Sustainability Committee and the Health, Science, and Society Committee.

**Service Learning and Community Partnership Initiatives**

In 2009-2010, CDI strengthened some of its key community partnerships so that the knowledge and experience gained at Sarah Lawrence over the decades could be synergistically invested and augmented off our campus – with the involvement of faculty and students – as well as on it. Although our means
were more limited in 2010-2011, we maintained our connections to community groups, students, and faculty, and developed additional informal play events.

We are currently working with the new Director of the Office of Community Partnerships to share ideas and goals, develop programs of common interest, and explore ways CDI can provide support to undergraduate and graduate students working in various field settings.

We have been approached by the Hunts Point Alliance for Children to explore ways to partner with them in their Early Childhood Initiatives and explore placements for SLC students in their community projects.

**Pop-up adventure playground initiative for Sarah Lawrence and Yonkers.** In September 2010, again with pilot funding from grants and donations, CDI formed a partnership with Groundwork Hudson Valley and with consultants from the New York Coalition for Play to launch a “pop-up adventure playground” initiative in Yonkers. This initiative provided an optimal vehicle for introducing elements of the internationally-recognized adventure playground model – and the playwork approach to facilitating play that accompanies it – right here in our home community. The flexible, temporary playspace created at Yonkers Riverfest on September 11th was built largely with recycled material. Ten Sarah Lawrence College students received training in the playwork model, staffed the event all day, and joined a debriefing session in the evening. Partnerships and experience gained through this initiative, which the Institute hopes to continue, will feed back into the curriculum and recruitment for our annual Facilitating Play program; allow us to continually deepen the practice-based learning element of the College’s own educational pedagogy; and give us the opportunity to creatively extend existing campus/community partnerships in new ways.

In April, CDI staff and student and community volunteers hosted a pop-up playground in conjunction with Sarah Lawrence’s annual Mayfair event. The play materials were set out on the Westlands Lawn, and the event was well-attended by families from the community, ECC, campus faculty and staff.

A third pop-up playground was hosted at Sullivan Oval Park in Yonkers on Father’s Day. The playworkers were the participants of the Facilitating Play program and several CDI consultants, and received training from two representatives from the newly formed Pop-up Adventure Playground organization. The event was a favorite session among the program participants, and was enthusiastically received by the families and children who attended. Because it was free, open to the public, and offered at a popular weekend recreation spot, the event attracted children ranging in age from toddlers to older teens, as well as several whole families. There was a spirit of collaboration, creativity, and joy.

A participant of both the 2011 Play and Empowering Teachers programs connected CDI with San Andres Church in Yonkers. In early August, CDI facilitated a pop-up playground at San Andres Church’s summer camp for over 30 children ranging from age five to eleven. The event was well-received by the children, camp counselors and staff. Children worked both independently and collaboratively to play and concoct creative devices, art, spaces, attire and much more.

**Research and Publications**

Research projects and publications are another key tool for fulfilling CDI’s mission.

*Occasional Papers*
In 1998, CDI began a series of Occasional Papers, some written by members of our group and others by speakers at our events or other invitees. As part of our efforts to increase outreach and build our Web site as a resource for professionals and parents, we have now made full-text versions of the papers available online. Limited supplies of the printed papers are still available, and, prior to our electronic conversion, we sold well over 1,500 copies. Several of the papers are also listed, with abstracts, in the ERIC database.

**Current Research Projects**

**Pilot research about public perceptions of play.** Building on the Kindergarten Research Project carried out by a group of CDI faculty between 2006 and 2008 with funding from the Alliance for Childhood, the Institute initiated a new study (in collaboration with our partner at Yale University) about public perceptions of play. Specifically, we investigated what these perceptions are; how they connect to familiar ideas and images (e.g., play as recreation, play as trivial, play as learning); and how messages about the importance of play can be developed and honed based on these public perceptions for maximal policy impact. This research was initiated, along with evaluation-related work we had been asked to undertake, at the inaugural event of the “Ultimate Block Party” initiative. This event, which took place in Central Park in October 2010, was itself designed to emphasize the importance of play to parents, policy-makers and the general public. With a little bit of start-up funding, we trained a group of 24 students (18 of them from Sarah Lawrence) to do short interviews with parents at the Block Party. The data thus collected (approximately 250 interviews in total) assisted Block Party organizers with an important element of their initiative, and it allowed us to gather pilot data we can use to apply for substantial research funding on this important topic. The principal investigators on this project also participated in a National Science Foundation debriefing on the Ultimate Block Party initiative immediately after the inaugural event.

**Forthcoming and Recent Publications**


**Conference and Festival Presentations**

- North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE) Annual Conference 2010: Screening and discussion of *When Learning Comes Naturally*
- Environmental Consortium of Hudson Valley Colleges and Universities Annual Meeting 2010
- U.S. Play Coalition Conference on the Value of Play 2011: Co-authored a poster titled “Pop-Up Adventure Playgrounds: Improvising Outdoor Play Spaces” with Sharon Unis and Morgan Leichter-Saxy of Pop-Up Adventure Play
• Hudson River Environmental Society 2011: Environmental History of New York City and the Hudson River

• Rockland Environmental Education Symposium 2011: Participation in the sustainability fair at the annual symposium organized by Keep Rockland Beautiful

• New York State Association for the Education of Young Children (NYSAEYC) Annual Conference 2011

Publicity and Awards

• The Yonkers Riverfest pop-up adventure playground, a project CDI developed in partnership with Groundwork Hudson Valley and with consultation from staff at the New York Coalition for Play, was highlighted in an article titled “‘Pop-Up Adventure Playground’ at Yonkers Riverfest Engages Kids” in the Fall 2010 issue of *InTouch*.

• The Sullivan Oval Park pop-up playground will be featured in a forthcoming issue of *InTouch*.

CDI Staffing

As of October 2010, CDI was without its part-time Director when Rachel Grob returned to full-time work as Associate Dean of Graduate Programs. For the next ten months the Faculty Advisory group worked with Coordinator Cheryl French and, when she left that position, interim Coordinator Anais Murphy, to keep CDI fully functional as detailed in the sections above. At the same time, the Faculty Advisors and PAB Chair worked with the support of the PAB to explore possibilities, both financial and organizational, for a fuller staffing plan for CDI. Extensive collaboration and communication with the Dean of the College, and various other members of the College administration led to an agreement to appoint a full-time Director and a half-time Administrative Assistant. We carried out an internal search for the Administrative Assistant and a national one for the Director position. After a thorough search and interview process we were delighted that Dean Dodds appointed Indhira Blackwood to the new full-time Director position, effective August 1, 2011. Saundra Norton, who has been involved with CDI in various capacities in the past, began serving as CDI’s Administrative Assistant on August 15, 2011.

These appointments mean that CDI will start the 2011-2012 academic year in a good position to continue to build on and expand our programs. However, ongoing programmatic fund-raising and efforts, coordinated with the College’s Advancement offices, to increase CDI’s endowment remain highest priorities. In the long-term, it is our goal for CDI to support its activities fully and for the administration of CDI to be enhanced and its impact increased.

Fundraising and Finances

As of the most recent available information, CDI had a total endowment of approximately $1,000,000. This total is comprised of six endowment funds. The Marx Challenge and the Canfield Fund provide income for the operating budget. The Wright Fund and the Longfellow Fund provide income for two lecture programs. The Cisneros Fund supports the Empowering Teachers program. A final endowment fund (anonymous) provides for special projects. Approximately 70 percent of the CDI budget is covered by endowment income.