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"The Hundred is There!: Helen Gordon Child Development Center"

"The 100 is There!: Helen Gordan Child Development Center"

Article and Case Study by Sheryl Reinisch and Will Parnell.

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Introduction

"And thus they tell the child that the hundred is not there. The child says: No way. The hundred is there." (Reggio Children, 1996, p. 3).



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Imagine walking into a school for the

very first time. The space greets your senses with energy full of invitation, wonder, and intrigue. You are drawn in by this powerful magnet, longing to touch, explore, and learn more about those who dwell here. You find yourself wanting to stay, sensing strong connections in this community of children, families, and educators encompassed within this learning environment.

What is it about a place that creates this powerful draw? As teacher educators, we find ourselves visiting numerous learning environments. Each school has its own unique characteristics and personality. Some schools seem to have this magnetic draw, while others do not. This energy stems from a symbiotic relationship, a flow of spaces that work together harmoniously. Symbiotic relationships change how groups and how individuals work together—causing a powerful connection between individuals and the spaces that they occupy. Ceppi and Zini (1998) describe it as following:

It is not a question of styles. A relational space is an environment fabric rich in information, without formal rules. It is not the representation of a school, but a whole made up of many different identities, with a recognizable feel about it, in harmony with a set of values and references that guide each choice and line of research. In this space, the aesthetic quality depends (also) on the quality of the connections. (p. 13)



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Register Login Aesthetic qualities, those features in the environment that are perceived through the senses (Eisner, 1998), play an important role in learning spaces such as these. Attention given to lighting, color, textures, sounds, items from nature, and children's representative work is critical, because these features touch the senses and ignite wonder and intrigue. Yet aesthetic qualities alone are not enough; rather, it is human relationships in harmony with the aesthetic qualities that make the difference. There are many beautiful spaces filled with aesthetic appeal that still feel cold and empty, they are lacking the relationship factor. Aesthetic qualities woven with experiential relationships create a powerful, magnetic force activated within the learning environment—a fluidization:

When we talk about relational space we mean an integrated space in which the qualities are not strictly aesthetic but are more closely related to "performance" features. This means that the space is not composed of functional zones but of the fluidization of functional zones. In the relational space, the predominant feature is that of the relationships it enables, the many specialized activities that can be carried out there, and the information and cultural filters that can be activated within the space. (Ceppi and Zini, 1998, p. 12)

As we reflect upon aesthetic qualities interwoven with relationships, we are reminded of a school which embodies these attributes. How did this learning environment mesh relationships with aesthetics? The following sections outline a potential recipe for connecting environment, aesthetics, and relationships to successfully create a learning atmosphere full of wonder and intrigue.

Purpose and Problem

As early childhood professionals, we have had the opportunity to spend time in many schools. One particular learning space that embodies this symbiosis is the Helen Gordon Child Development Center at Portland State University. The unique and fascinating architecture, design, and make up of this preprimary school is the hallmark we are seeking to share.

How do we become intentional about creating a symbiotic relationship between the physical space and those who live and learn there? What motives and strategies can be used to invite people in and be captivated with this sense of wonder and intrigue? These key questions guide our thoughts and reflections as we seek to capture this unique relationship between the physical space and those who learn in them.

We believe the recipe for creating a symbiotic relationship that flows throughout the learning environment consists of three key ingredients: (1) the physical space, particularly those that are often

taken for granted, such as entry ways, pathways, and transitional spaces, (2) the interior design, including the aesthetic qualities of color, texture, lighting, and items from nature, and (3) documentation, including photos, representations, narratives, and quotes that capture the learning of those who live in the space.

In the next few pages, we will explore the significance of these three ingredients and offer concrete examples of aesthetic qualities and relationships evidenced throughout this school.

Context

The Helen Gordon Child Development Center is nestled in the heart of the city of Portland, Oregon. It is named in honor of Helen Gordon, a strong advocate for children in the local community. The center was constructed for children's programs in 1928 by the Fruit and Flower Mission and is currently on the National Register of Historic Places. The Helen Gordon Center offers a spacious and home-like environment with a unique and inspiring presence. The building features indoor sun porches, a multitude of functioning window-panes, and wrought iron balconies extending from second story classrooms with stairwells leading to the play-yard below. It includes textures rich in authentic wood tones, chair rails, and archways built with a sensitivity to the size of children.



Recently, parents, faculty, and the public came together to fulfill a long-standing vision for Portland's children. As a result, a large construction and renovation project was initiated. A new wing, complete in 2003, was designed to compliment the historic architecture of the original building. With the new space, the Helen Gordon Center has added infant-toddler and preschool classrooms as well as shared spaces—including a large indoor town square, called the piazza, similar to Portland's downtown Pioneer Square, a central library, studios, a reuse center, a large motor indoor play space, and a children's theatre. Additional design features are interspersed throughout the new wing as well as in the original building with the intention of promoting relationships between spaces and those who inhabit them.

The Physical Space

When we think of the learning environment, we often focus on the classroom. Yet spaces such as entry ways, pathways, and transitional spaces (such as coat racks and cubby areas) are critical in their own right. We will now turn our attention to these spaces.

Entryway

As you walk through the creamy yellow rounded arched doors, the vestibule invites you to viscerally engage with the architecture—a feeling of "I want to touch this place" comes over you. There seems to be a message of "this is where I belong, this is where I want to stay" seeping from the warm and inviting colors, textures, and messages in the design.

Coming through the arched doorway we are greeted with children's drawings and thoughts of the recent construction—"diggers digging," "a cracker to break the road it goes on," and "bars to hold up the walls"—and along with their work is a strong mission statement of diversity, the center's philosophy and other markings of the culture inside the school. These traces of thinking forge an immediate connection between the children's study of the school's architecture and the people who reside in the spaces.

Furthermore, a friendly face behind the large reception window-panes fashioned from rich spicy wood greets you warmly. Teachers' pictures, their names, a child's drawing of the teacher, and a small doll-like figurine made from natural-materials rests just beyond the entry. We can see that there is more to come as we cross the threshold of the entryway into what we shall call the first pathway to the many spaces for children.



come

together for group singing, story-reading, playing with materials in a new context, and relaxing. The textures in this space only partially come from the warm-toned walls and tack-panels, muted and blended into the backdrop. Mostly, texture extends from the rich display of children's work and study in the form of large photos and text, three-dimensional graphic representations, and signs of emerging group projects and ideas.

Outside of several classrooms hang markings of the work taking place inside the space or from a small group within the area. Three displays of one-year-olds are featured next to one classroom door. These presentations, entitled, "Conversations with Trees," "Revisiting the Trees," and "Seeing the Trees in a New Way" rest beautifully inside a series of pictures, each telling its own story requiring little additional explanation. Powerful statements from the teachers such as, "Before the tree, we proclaim our own changes: Our increased stature, our sturdier stance, our confident voices," allow the observer

into the complex thinking and the engagement of the children who discovered relationships with the trees in the park blocks. This small group had been taking walks through the University campus and city's park blocks each morning and visiting with the trees, playing in the grass, and communing with the city's animals and foliage.

Many other stories exist in the pathways and in the classrooms as there are over two-hundred children in the school who contribute to the narratives, studies, and representations. The kindergarten ceramic animals installed in the piazza are born of the kindergarten trips to the arboretum and to the Audubon Society. The installations of the animals offer trails and traces of the children's thinking made visible. These trips and children's inquiry about what lives in a city helped to create a puppet play of animals in the park. They also helped facilitate a reconstruction of city animals in drawing, puppetry, and painting, as well as clay figurines made with the guidance of a community clay artist.

The documented stories of children's school experiences lead inhabitants, learners, and guests toward the classrooms and other shared learning spaces in the school. The pathways are not only for the traveler seeking a destination, but also serve as a resting stop for engagement with the learning in the school. They function as a meta-cognitive shell and crossing point to more deeply embedded school experiences.

Transition Spaces (Permeability) and Classrooms

As you cross through the pathways and reach the classrooms, places open to one another inviting cross pollination between idea and space, which is intentionally formed through open shelving, displays of and access to materials, uncomplicated design, aesthetic codes (Tarr, 2001) and organization (Cadwell, 2003). These are places for unique provocation and research studies. This is what creates the beauty.



Once you are in the studio or classroom space then you start to see how the spaces are organized, how materials are displayed, and how the lay out provokes children's thinking. Children walk into the entry zone, which allows for the stimuli of the classroom—the transition space between home and school. This is a space where each child has a "cubby" to store his/her coats, extra clothing, and items from home such as pictures and photo albums of family members. The transition space prepares the child for entering the learning environment. This space opens the senses to the rhythm of the day. Children can hear and see beyond the threshold of the entry zone into the classroom as they prepare for their arrival.

There are also windows between paths and classrooms and between classroom and studio or other shared spaces. These windows invite a value of transparency, a value that our work and world should be shared with those outside of our experiences. Not only can visitors "visit" the classrooms through the one-way observation windows and playful close-to-the-floor peak-a-boo windows, but families routinely depart with child on one side of the peak-a-boo and parent on the other tapping and waving and kissing good-bye. Additionally, teachers and children have intentionally set up connections between these windowed areas, such as a mini-studio in the classroom on the other side of the window from the studio space. In the end, transparency invites us to confront isolation and to see the power in building relationships.

Aesthetic qualities and documentation are woven throughout the transition spaces, classrooms and other shared places, such as studios, reuse center, piazza, theater, and library. An example of this rests in the school's daily pages—a snippet of the day/daily happenings in each classroom. These pages hang in the transition spaces. They are periodically placed into a nearby binder and available for ongoing reference. The value of reference to daily thinking and action in the classroom is especially enjoyed by parents at the end of each day. As they pick up their child they glance over "a happening" of the day, which often starts a specific conversation regarding the day's journey.

In the end, teaching and learning experiences may begin or end in the classroom, but they also have a tendency to move out into community spaces through transition spaces, pathways, the entryway and ultimately, the learning community. As in the thought of Ceppi and Zini (1998), "A school should not be a sort of counter-world, but the essence and distillation of the society. Contemporary reality can and should permeate the school, filtered by a cultural project of interpretation that serves as membrane and interface" (p. 15).

"Classrooms, like wine, are known by their smell and tactile qualities as well as by their sight" (Eisner, 1998, p. 68).

Aesthetic qualities have the ability to evoke emotions in children and adults. The term "aesthetics" is often associated with thoughts of beauty, perhaps because of its connection to feelings of pleasure and contentment (Adams, 1991). Aesthetic qualities in the classroom include (but are not limited to) lighting, items from nature, textures, children's representative work, and color. Within the physical spaces of the Helen Gordon Center, we find a variety of aesthetic qualities that ignite the senses and evoke powerful emotional responses.



Light

Light plays a primary role in aesthetically pleasing environments. "Light, in fact, is one of the great emotive components of our aesthetic perception" (Ceppi & Zini, 1998, p. 46). Lighting comes from two sources, natural and artificial. Daylight, in contrast to artificial light, has positive psychological and physiological effects on individuals (Hathaway, 1982). The Helen Gordon Center is designed to allow as much natural light in as possible, while illuminating with indirect artificial light when necessary. Within the classrooms, numerous panes of glass framed in deep, rich wood allow the natural light to permeate the rooms. Throughout the center, classrooms share sun rooms–small cozy spaces consisting of three walls of windows. In other locations, light not only pours from operable windows at children's eye level, but also from clearstory windows and indirect lights bouncing from reflective ceilings and walls. Rather than using harsh, fluorescent lights that hang above, indirect lighting is designed so that 80 % of the light reflects off of the ceiling and the remaining light shines down directly through perforated spaces. Artificial lighting such as this creates a feeling of softness and warmth without shadowing.

Items From Nature

Items from nature such as plants, rocks, shells, flowers, and animals are considered essential for creating aesthetic experiences. Natural items



such as pebbles, seeds, and driftwood

add a richness of texture and color to the sensory experience. Plants help purify the air and are an excellent source of oxygen. Animals offer a source of wonder and joy as children discover their attributes, care for their well-being, and observe their daily antics. The Helen Gordon Center asks parents to contribute to collections of natural items that are used in children's representative work. From vibrant and healthy plants to driftwood flowing in enthralling patterns and sensory tables filled with dirt, pine boughs, and walnuts, items from nature add aesthetic beauty and intrigue, making the most ordinary spaces come to life in unimaginable ways. Children typically take items from nature to create patterns and geometric shapes in the style of Andy Goldsworthy.

Textures

From hard surfaces to soft objects, textures add richness and dimension to the learning environment. Materials such as woven fabrics, beads, tile, wood, and glass can be used to create intoxicating aesthetic experiences. Within the Helen Gordon Center, textured material abound. From upholstered chairs to fabric flowing in waves across the ceiling to wooden lattice-work separating spaces, one cannot help but reach out and touch the various textures offered within the environment. Baskets, galvanized steel buckets, and glass jars are used instead of plastic bins to store books, learning materials, and art supplies; this adds layers of texture to the environment. Imagine carrying manipulatives to your work space in a basket with wide, smooth reeds and knobby rope or a hard, cold galvanized steel container compared to a plastic storage tub. Such materials offer rich aesthetic appeal and are noticeable to the senses.

Children's Representative Work

Rather than viewing children's work as art, the Helen Gordon Center views children's work as representation of their thinking, their feelings, and their creative expression. Displaying and highlighting the works of children conveys the message that they are valued and "belong" (Bickart, Jablon, & Dodge, 1999; Dodge, Colker, & Heroman, 2002). Teachers often buy commercial products to decorate classrooms because they feel they lack creative talent or wish to save on time. Davis (2004) suggests this current age of consumerism often drives teachers to "buy" classrooms—in the form of commercialized borders, posters, and materials. Such materials may be "cute" but at times are intrusive and take away from the essence of the children learning in the space. Presenting the children's own work gives more meaning and ownership to children, which instills a sense of pride and self-esteem (Reinisch, 2006). These documented works help to generate a metacognitive field where children learn about their own learning and patterns of thinking (Parnell, 2005). The entryway,

pathways, and transitional spaces into the classrooms highlight children's thinking, work, and lives at the Helen Gordon Center. The intriguing displays of children's work invite curiosity, awe, and deeper questioning. The photographs that document children at work capture the creative process of children, conveying the message that children and their thoughts and ideas are deeply valued.

Color

Color has the power to invoke various feelings and emotions. Many seem to think children are drawn to bold primary colors or soft pastels; much of children's furnishings and materials are replicated in such fashion. Literature recommends classroom walls be neutral and light, so that color from natural materials and children's work becomes the focal point of the learning environment (Ceppi & Zini, 1998; Isbell & Exelby, 2001). The walls of the Helen Gordon Center consist of rich, creamy, off-white paint. Bulletin boards are covered in fabric of the same hue. With this backdrop, displays of children's work come alive and are made more visible as the primary visual stimulus. This creates a value for the learning, thinking, and representing within the school. The vibrant colors featured in paintings, drawings, collages, weavings, and photographs dance amid the backdrop of warm, neutral backgrounds.

Summary

Color, children's representative work, textures, items from nature, and lighting all contribute to the aesthetic dimension of the learning environment. Paying attention to aesthetic qualities within the physical space is crucial, yet there needs to be more. One final ingredient is necessary to create learning spaces of wonder and intrique...documentation.

Documentation

Living inside an urban school we find the identity of the children, families, and staff. The Helen Gordon Center radiates a sense of the identity of its inhabitants through:

An environment that documents not only the results but also the processes of learning and knowledge-building, that narrates the didactic paths and states the value of reference. The environment generates a sort of psychic skin, an energy-giving second skin made of writings, images, materials, objects, and colors, which reveals the presence of the children even in their absence. (Ceppi & Zini, 1998, p. 25)

In the Helen Gordon Center's Reggio-inspired practices, documentation is thinking about thinking, talking about learning, revisiting the subject matter studied, and displaying it for further discussion and learning opportunities. Developed over time, this has become a way for the learning field to communicate what is being learned, how, and why. Documentation has become a meta-cognitive process for children, teachers, and the community. Children revisit documented panels and representative work, create new stories about their prior learning with parents, friends, and colearning teachers, and talk about past happenings while looking at their own languages on the walls and display shelves of the school.

The documents are strategically placed in the spaces where the materials had been explored as well as in the hallways where visitors can see the story up close. As a part of the documentation, three-dimensional works such as clay work and collage correlates with one-dimensional documents such as text and photos. The dimensional spaces are considered an aesthetic quality of the display and create interaction among the visitor, the document, and the materials located nearby. Anyone documenting



work devotes a portion of his/her time to bringing a variety of languages together—verbal, photographic, representative, and many, many more.

We never cease to be amazed by all that has emerged because a conscious commitment was made to document the stories of learning that happen within the school. The center has evolved over the course of time and truly generates that psychic and energy-giving skin that Ceppi and Zini (1998) describe. Here, relationships are truly symbiotic. Relationships between parent/child, teacher/parent, teacher/child, child/material and child/child radiate a true partnership in learning and knowledge building through documentation. Ultimately, the relationships are not only between those who live and learn in the school, but also between the building and its occupants, with all of the spaces and materials afforded them.

As teachers who make learning visible,

the field of learning becomes more

valued and children and teachers are re-imaged by the school and for society (Parnell, 2005). The strong, competent, thinking teacher and child are made evident. They are illuminated through the many stories and representations that portray the children's character, thinking, feelings, and ideas regarding the world around them. While teachers seek to bring the children's voices to the forefront of the experiences being displayed, we cannot and must not forget the teachers' act in documenting the encounters. They bring their camera-like eyes and recording-like ears to the observation and story-reconstruction table to create and display the learning put forth by the children. Teachers are the recorders of the routine moments as they whisper to the world the extraordinary and complex experiences confronted by children each day.

Once actualized, documentation serves to change the image of the teacher, child, learning environment, and the school. We record the group's thinking to awaken and reinterpret ourselves as learners in new and inventive ways. Magical moments are achieved when we stop looking at the mundane in our classrooms and begin to see and document the huge breath-taking moments unfolding before our very eyes.

For teachers at the Helen Gordon Center, documentation is a way to develop a projection and reflection of the ongoing life happenings in school for children, teachers, and the larger community. Taking the time to ponder our shared thinking and strategize about learning and ways of using material to construct meaning becomes essential in a document-rich school. By capturing the moments in children's work and reflecting on the thinking that occurs, an educational energy is generated that allows curiosity and clarity to emerge and be recognized.

In the end, documentation develops the reciprocal teaching-learning relationship, awareness of learning, and meaning-making processes. At the Helen Gordon Center, teachers recognize that documenting children's learning is mind expanding, yet carries limits and biases for teacher interpretation. "We are aware that the medium we choose for documenting the experience observed—in other words, for making it visible and sharable—contains limitations and sources of bias that can be favorable only when multiple documents, media, and interpretation are placed side by side" (Edwards et al., 1998, p. 121). Documents such as wall-panels, books, pictures, and the like, support communication and daily interaction for children, teachers, parents, and community visitors. It is an ingenious way to "offer the teacher a unique opportunity to listen again, see again, and therefore revisit individually and with others the events and processes in which he or she was coprotagonists" (Edwards et al., 1998, p. 121). Documentation leads the teacher to further (self) reflection as well as collaboration with children, colleagues, parents, and others. The efforts put forth

to collaborate and reflect on what is happening in the field of learning show up in the documentation and in the spaces which tell the stories of the school.

Documentation is a way of thinking about teaching and learning. (Guidici, Rinaldi, & Krechevsky, 2001) It is not an after effect of the work produced, but rather extends teaching-learning into a new realm where learning is central to the field of study in the school. Documentation leads classroom experiences into a meta-cognitive awareness as it is practiced within the context of reflection. As children's thoughts, works, and documents are shared, understanding of the learning and context behind classroom work is strengthened and solidified.

To achieve a vibrant teaching and learning atmosphere, teachers must develop a plan for documenting the learning. This plan must be developed within the learning community and revisited with the learner-participants. It is the thoughtfully placed documentation that communicates the vitality of the learning through the voices of children, teachers, parents, and community.

Summary and Implications



Overall, our three ingredients of physical spaces, aesthetics, and documentation make a strong and visible mark on a community of learners in Portland, Oregon; a mark we hope to continue to share with other educators and advocates for children's schools. Moreover, like Elliot Eisner's (1998) belief in the role of aesthetics, we believe the qualities of our ingredients (physical spaces, aesthetic qualities, and documentation) in the Helen Gordon Center are an encouragement to the world of young children. "To confer aesthetic order upon our world is to make the world hang together, to fit, to feel right, to put things in balance, to create harmony. Such harmonies are sought in all aspects of life" (p. 38). At the Helen Gordon Center we find such harmony and balance.

The Helen Gordon Center is a unique and magical space filled with the creative work of its participants. The children, families, teachers, and surrounding community of this pre-primary school are all central protagonists in the life-story of this school and this is obvious through the powerful essence of their spaces. As we draw this project to a close, we see implications for more storytelling opportunities about the synergy in the school.

There are other spaces such as the piazza, the studios, the reuse center, the large motor rainbow room, and the theater that beg our attention. The stories, documents, and happenings in these spaces can entertain the senses and demonstrate the influence of inspired teaching and learning. There are infinite possibilities for the development of children's one-hundred to one-million languages. As Loris Malaguzzi writes in his influential poem The 100 Languages of Children: "And thus they tell the child that the hundred is not there. The child says: No way. The hundred is there" (Reggio Children, 1996). We find that we could shout this message from the school's rooftop because we are so inspired by the happenings inside! We believe that at the Helen Gordon Center, the hundred is there!

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Author Information:

Sheryl Reinish:

Sheryl joined the faculty of Concordia University in 1999, following 19 years of experience in the field of early childhood education. She currently teaches undergraduate and graduate level courses in child



development, early childhood curriculum, and play in early childhood. She also supervises student teachers in clinical experiences and graduate students with action research projects.

As a supervisor of student teachers, Sheryl has had the opportunity to visit many elementary school classrooms. During her visits, she noticed that some classroom environments were warm and inviting, while others felt cold and lacked intrigue. She became particularly interested in the aesthetic dimension of learning environments. Ultimately, Sheryl spent 14 weeks interviewing a group of first grade students as aesthetic elements were added or removed from their learning environment. This study was the focus of her doctoral dissertation, Children's Perceptions of the Learning Environment and Aesthetic Qualities within Their Classroom.

Sheryl began her professional career in Chicago teaching kindergarten and preschool classes. After moving to Florida, she taught 2nd grade for several years before assuming the role of director of Prince of Peace Preschool and Kindergarten; she held that position for 16 years. Throughout her career, Sheryl has been actively involved in the field of early childhood. While in Florida, Sheryl served as President of the Orange County Association for the Education of Young Children, Historian for the Early Childhood Association of Florida, and on advisory boards for institutions such as Mid-Florida Technical Institute and Sea World of Florida. Nationally, Sheryl served as Chair for the Department of Early Childhood Education of the Lutheran Education Association. Sheryl currently serves on the board of the Oregon Association for Childhood Education International.

Additionally, Sheryl has her B.A. from Concordia University, Chicago, IL; her M.Ed. from the University of Central Florida, Orlando, FL; and her Ed.D. from Portland State University, Portland, OR.

Will Parnell, Ed.D.:

Will has been in the early education field for over twenty years with a wide background of teaching and leadership, ranging from work in places as lab schools, parent cooperatives, and in public school settings. Will has consulted and started several



schools for young children and he has designed children's indoor and outdoor spaces with local architects over the years. He now teaches adults about family, teacher, and children's work and development and he generally lives, breathes, eats and sleeps children's education in the Portland Metro area. Will currently serves on the Reggio Inspiration Network Council and is an Emerson School Board member.

Will finished his Doctorate in Education at PSU in 2005, and has been studying the role of the studio, studio teachers, children's creative expression, and children's representative work in the life of the school. Currently, Will is in the progress of writing a book focusing on experiences he encountered working alongside of two studio teachers in the Helen Gordon Center studios.

Will currently co-directs the Portland State University's Helen Gordon Child Development Center a as well as coordinates the Master's specialization in early childhood education for the Graduate School of Education's Curriculum and Instruction department. His specialty areas are environments and designs for learning and teaching, equity and culture in early education, and documenting young children's learning. Will's passion for learning spaces can been seen through his work in the programs he touches.

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About the Helen Gordon Child Development Center:

The <u>Helen Gordon Child Development Center</u> is Portland State University's full-day infant/toddler, preschool and kindergarten program and laboratory, which serves 180 children aged six-months to six years.

With a strong reputation in the Portland community for quality care and education, Helen Gordon Center maintains full enrollment and a continuous wait-list numbering over 300 families. The Center was accredited by the National Academy of Childhood Programs December 2000.

Helen Gordon Center serves a dual role within the University: It serves the student and faculty/staff parents by providing a high-quality on-campus child care program and additionally, it serves as an academic laboratory resource, inviting participation by University faculty and students in the fields of early childhood education, child and family studies, psychology and related fields.

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