Building From *At-Promise*: Scholarship and Mentoring for Transformation

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Abstract

This personal narrative focuses on the author's journey from being a classroom teacher in the United States, dispirited by education policies focused on standardizing curricula, teaching, and diagnosing children's academic weaknesses, to becoming a university faculty member in Aotearoa New Zealand. The narrative bridges lessons from her earlier professional life, with ones learned in her new cultural context. The tipping point was a meeting with Beth Blue Swadener, which led to engaging with critiques of the term *at-risk*, to the multilayered idea of *at-promise*, and eventually a scholarly career focused on children's rights and voices.

Key Terms: Personal narrative, at-promise, children's rights

In 2005, I had my first conversation with Dr. Beth Blue Swadener. I can pinpoint this moment in my memory perfectly, as it transformed my life forever. We were sitting at a café table under an umbrella in the Tempe, Arizona sun, both of us sipping on tea. A mutual acquaintance suggested I reach out to her, and I was nervous about meeting this professor.

My post-graduate academic career had been a bit unconventional to that point. I had accrued many graduate credits with an English as a Second Language (ESL) endorsement and postgraduate classes to improve my teaching. I had nearly completed a master's degree, but last-minute changes in advising and requirements led me to discontinue that work. I used research skills I learned in this coursework to create resources for my school district to develop a multiage (grades 1 to 3) program in my school, and to advocate for my young children and my teaching practices.

Meanwhile, I had begun assisting with the local university's teacher education program through my teaching colleague. University classes were taught on our elementary school campus, and field experiences for those students occurred in our school and a sister school. I helped with making these placements and worked with many student teachers. I caught the teacher education bug and had always had a drive for research with an advocacy focus. I wanted to do so much more! However, I was uncertain how to proceed and who to trust. I wasn't certain about what I needed to do next, but I knew I had to do something.

A Meeting at a Crossroads

I was a classroom teacher fighting for my young students, extremely frustrated by how the education system viewed children and how teachers were being limited in how we could teach. Increasingly, teachers were being mandated to teach from a box of prepared curriculum materials, regardless of children's interests, passions, and own knowledges. Increasingly, specific scripted lessons based upon standardized testing and diagnosing children's academic weaknesses. None of these measures matched my own personal beliefs about children and families, nor my professional teaching philosophies.

When we did eventually meet, I told Beth about the program I and my colleagues had developed and how it countered these measures, recognizing children's own strengths and capabilities, and refusing to put them in the little boxes required by these mandated assessments and curriculum programs. Yet this work was becoming

more difficult with every new mandate and within the national and the state political climates.

Beth listened and encouraged me. As she listened, she would say something along the lines of, "Have you heard about ___?" making a connection between my teaching and other research or theoretical perspectives. When I read one of her articles some time later, I better understood how Beth and I were of such similar minds. As deceptively simple as it may seem, we both believed we need to treat all children like human beings, without using terms like *at risk*, *doomed to fail*, or other limiting adjectives or qualifiers. As Beth writes, we need to treat children as "'Human beings at promise,' needing our care, confidence, and faith." (Swadener, 1995, p. 41). Beth helped me to view myself *not* as some "overly passionate teacher" (as my principal had labeled me), but as a person *at-promise*, a teacher-advocate-researcher-educator who was ready, willing, and able to make a leap into further postgraduate studies so that I could better address daily educational injustices and inequities.

Beth sees the world at-promise. My part of this Festschrift builds from this initial conversation with Beth and this point of perceiving myself and the world at-promise, to describe how Beth has impacted my professional and personal selves and those of others throughout the world. And yes, for those of you who have had the fortune of conversations like this with Beth, I did leave that 2005 conversation eating a piece of dark chocolate from her bag, energized to take on another day (see also, Richter et al., this issue).

Viewing the World At-Promise

I was in a tough place when I had the conversation with Beth around that café table. As I mentioned previously, more and more mandates were being imposed upon the program my colleagues and I had developed for children in our primary school. We had developed this multiage program viewing children through the lens of at-promise, not knowing that Beth had written about this very perspective. Each of my teaching teammates and I held teaching philosophies that saw strengths in each and every child. We were already uncomfortable with the at-risk discourse being used to supposedly address inequities in the education system.

For example, we didn't believe that equitable education included removing a child from their classmates for 30 minutes a day for intensive drilling that targeted reading skills, when those classmates were investigating how the world worked through science or were creating music and visual art. Often students removed for this targeted instruction (an interesting term in itself—with the thoughts of young children as *targets*), were those whose cultures, languages, strengths, and talents were not recognised and who were actively repressed and punished by traditional, historical, and current school policies and practices. Where school officials looked at one screening test to make these determinations of needed targeted instruction, we brought with us boxes of our own data and samples of young children's work and accomplishments in an attempt to provide a more comprehensive, balanced appraisal of each child.

At-Promise and Children's Networks of Knowledge

Our conversation that day began reaping benefits when Beth pointed me in the direction of the at-promise concept she and others presented in their edited volume, *Children and Families "At Promise": Deconstructing the Discourse of Risk* (Swadener & Lubeck, 1995). Finding others in academia who approached children, families, and learning as I was attempting to do, I digested each of the chapters in that book. She also pointed me to the recent work coming out of the University of Arizona regarding children's family funds of knowledge (González et al., 2006; Moll et al., 1992), which emphasizes how families have their unique knowledges and ways of interacting with the world.

Some of these ways of being, doing, and knowing are closely aligned with schooling, such as read-aloud times and writing shopping lists or notes to each other. Other ways of being, doing, and knowing are not included, are marginalized, or are forbidden in schools, such as learning through verbal storytelling, using multiple languages, applying technical knowledges associated with mechanics or other trades, and expressing oneself through dance, song, or visual arts. While our multiage program had been working to change the focus from family-school communications to a more integrated approach working *with* families, connections to families' funds of knowledge opened further avenues for our team and more ways we could approach working with children and their families at-promise.

From General Funds of Knowledge to Te Ao Māori

Several years later, as I finished my doctoral studies, I had the good fortune of working with Norma González at the University of Arizona, where our early childhood teacher education program centered around working with children's funds of knowledge (Clift et al., 2015). In my current research and teacher education work based in Aotearoa New Zealand, I am building on this understanding of funds of knowledge to incorporate research from this region (Hedges et al., 2011) and te ao Māori (a Māori world view) into my work.

In te ao Māori, it is acknowledged that tamariki (children) bring with them all the values and knowledges of their ancestors. Thus, when you welcome tamariki through the doors of the early childhood setting, you are also welcoming in their whānau (extended families) and their tīpuna (ancestors) (Gaches, 2019). A direct line can be drawn from these current and evolving understandings of viewing the world at-promise back to that café conversation I had with Beth in 2005.

Collectively At-Promise

Other postgraduate students and colleagues have been impacted by Beth's view of the world at-promise. While a complete review of Beth's scholarship is beyond the scope of this Festschrift (wouldn't that be a fascinating piece of work!), and these brief comments cannot do justice to the complex criticality she brings to her work, her at-promise approach toward challenges, inequities, and issues is clearly evident throughout. Table 1 provides but a few brief examples of how her collaborations, building from the promise of what and who has been marginalized, have had a far-reaching impact.

Table 1
Examples of At-Promise Collaborations

Authors	Focus of work
Adams & Swadener, 2000	Lessons learned from collaborations with early childhood educators in Kenya
Arndt, Urban, Murray, Smith, Swadener, & Ellegaard, 2018	How localized, diverse, plural professional identities of early childhood professionals provide an important pathway for confronting issues of neoliberal control and domination

Faragó, Swadener, Richter, Eversman & Roca-Servat, 2018	How engagement in student activism fosters leadership, furthering activism and scholarly endeavours
Kabiru, Njengam, & Swadener, 2003	How empowerment of youth and young mothers drives community initiatives and "practices of direct democracy and civic participation" (p. 363)
Maldonado, Swadener, & Khaleesi, 2019	How collaborating with immigrant children and discovering their counternarratives provides insights on issues that affect their daily lives
Ng'asike & Swadener, 2019	Utilizing indigenous knowledge of pastoral Kenyan communities in local early childhood programs
Peters, Ortiz, & Swadener, 2015	Challenging neoliberal constructions of school readiness and calling for working with children and their families, communities, and cultural funds of knowledge
Rolstad, Swadener, & Nakagawa, 2008	Shifting power dynamics in a dual-language immersion preschool project
Rogers & Swadener, 1999	Learning from the field and challenging the academy as the point of power
Soto & Swadener, 2002	Challenging positivist constructions of child development for more "liberating, anti-racist, feminist and critical" (p. 57) perspectives
Swadener, Peters, & Eversman, 2015	Doctoral peer mentorship and its enduring impact
Swadener, Peters, Frantz Bentley, Diaz, & Bloch, 2020	Early childhood teachers' perspectives and

	experiences within the COVID-19 crisis

Beth doesn't approach these topics and issues through rose-colored (or perhaps, lavender-colored, as purple is *her* color) glasses. Through her work, she approaches an issue, unpacks and deconstructs that issue, examines potential power relationships and only then, and perhaps most importantly, seeks to find ways to approach that issue differently, building on areas of promise and potential.

Looking back now, it feels as though Beth approached my future in the same manner. We unpacked and deconstructed who I was, what I was attempting to achieve, and the ongoing issues and challenges I was confronting, including how to take my unconventional post-graduate work forward. In those moments, I feel Beth recognized potential and promise in me I could not imagine for myself, much less envision and enact. Over the years that have followed, I have valued and drawn strength from her mentorship, building on this at-promise perspective of myself.

Children's Rights and Working With Children

In the first doctoral class with Beth, so much of my world and my perspectives started to make more sense as we engaged with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). I began to link together seemingly divergent aspects of my teaching/learning philosophy, which were provoked by our class discussions. I had grown up in a household strongly influenced by a grandmother whose own mother had been an early kindergartener (a term for early Froebelian kindergarten advocates), trained in Watertown, Wisconsin, home of the first kindergarten in the United States.

Thus, children and children's perspectives were always prioritized with my paternal grandparents. It was part of my own funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005; Hedges et al., 2011), and at the core of my own work with children. Beth's doctoral class helped me to better understand the importance of children's rights, particularly children's participation rights, provoking me to better understand these perspectives from multiple critical perspectives.

It was also through children's participation rights that I first became involved in research and research with children. One of Beth's great mentoring enactments of working with at-promise perspectives is the way she engages postgraduate students in research. She finds manageable entry points, perhaps a role on an existing project that fits well with a student's expertise or current work, while also creating a bridge to new areas or further responsibilities. During that project, Beth defers to students in their area of expertise, but subtly keeps the project focused on its purpose and needed outcomes.

As a student gains more experience and confidence, Beth steps back becoming more of a co-collaborator or consultant. For example, while she and others worked on part of a larger early childhood education grant, Beth included me in my capacity as classroom teacher and co-researcher, as well as my primary students, as those with important child-culture knowledge, in a smaller part of the study. The desire was to put into practice article 12 of the UNCRC by seeking guidance and consultation from children on how best to approach interviewing children slightly younger than themselves about their experiences in kindergarten.

Thus, Beth, Lacey Peters, and I began our first collaborations (Gaches et al., 2015; Gaches et al., 2011; Swadener et al., 2013; Swadener et al., 2011). The consultation process with my students turned out brilliantly, and our young consultants provided some clear guidance. Unfortunately, this guidance was not adopted by the greater

research project. We were disappointed, but we nonetheless found promise in this consultation work.

Critical Community of Practice

When I moved to Aotearoa New Zealand and felt I needed to get to know the tamariki of my new home better and to learn from them what they thought about key aspects of their world, I drew from the promise of this collaborative, consultative research project with Beth and Lacey (Gaches, 2020, 2021, 2022; Gaches & Gallagher, 2019). First, I met with a classroom teacher who I had heard was also really prioritizing children's perspectives in her teaching. Utilizing the Arizona research as a model, together we consulted with the children in her class to help me determine whether I should conduct the research with younger children than those I was contemplating and how I should go about doing this (Gaches & Gallagher, 2019).

Based upon that consultation, a research plan was developed and carried out with younger children seeking their perspectives on how and where they learn, how they are involved in their community, and their views of the future (Gaches, 2020, 2021, 2022). Along the way in this work with the children, I encountered ethical issues and dilemmas. How I recognized and addressed these issues and dilemmas had their origins in my early doctoral studies. The critical perspectives introduced in that first post-graduate class and a later doctoral seminar with Beth focusing on children's rights have remained with me as I continue my own children's rights-based research. Throughout this research project, it was as if Beth was sitting on my shoulder, guiding and provoking further critical reflections about the research (Gaches, 2020).

However, it wasn't just Beth's critical voice I was hearing, but also those of other colleagues Beth had introduced me to over the years. Again, in building upon our at-promise-ness, Beth provides opportunities and connections, welcoming students into a critical community of practice. I remember taking a day away from teaching to be a notetaker at a meeting for the Una Children's Rights Learning Group, an international group of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners who created working papers and resources on topics promoting respect for ethnic diversity amongst young children.

During those meetings, I was not only introduced to other international critical scholars, but Beth also encouraged me to speak out a few times when my role of notetaker shifted, so I could include my experiences as a teacher of young children in the complex and non-child-centeredness of current schooling. I was learning that my experiences and voice actually mattered. In September 2018, Beth was instrumental in bringing together several academics from across the world for a few days of deep discussion regarding the current state of children's participatory rights research and its related ethical concerns (see Ndimande, this issue). I felt honored and privileged to be invited to these research discussions. I still carry our complex discussions and confrontations about children's participatory rights into my research and teaching.

Bringing People Together

As should be quite evident by this point, Beth does not conduct research or her writing in solitude. Beth works alongside people from diverse cultures, geographical locations, academic fields, community activist groups, and more. How she collaborates or provokes/supports others to collaborate has been inspirational for my own endeavors.

International Collaborations and Advocacy

In her international research, particularly her work in Kenya, Beth has immersed herself in the culture, yet as an outsider, she stands alongside her Kenyan collaborators with great appreciation and desire to know more. As I have begun my

life in Aotearoa New Zealand, I have thought a great deal about this and have worked to maintain a similar positionality. I will always be an outsider, but an outsider who moved here because I felt my own values and principles were well-aligned to many te ao Māori perspectives, values, and beliefs. I also have a deep commitment to the thriving of Māori culture in the face of colonizing practices, to more just and equitable systems for tamariki (children) and their whānau (families), and to early childhood education systems that continue to value the strength and empowerment of tamariki as taoka (treasures) and rakitirataka (leaders).

Towards that end, I am on my own te reo me kā tikaka Māori (Māori language and practices) journey, working for an always-increasing understanding of te ao Māori (Māori worldviews) and becoming as fluent as possible in the language. I have worked with both Māori and non-Māori colleagues to find ways to better integrate te ao Māori into my teacher education classes—a critical step for the thriving of te ao me te reo Māori (Gaches et al., 2022). Moreover, as an advocate for localised knowledges and ways of being, I am also working with local iwi (tribes) to privilege their cultural narratives and dialect throughout my work and daily life, for how can you work alongside, advocate with, and privilege a culture you, as an outsider, do not know?

Mentoring Collaborations

You'll seldom see Beth as a first author. Her scholarly generosity helps to push against power imbalances of the tenure and promotion processes by relinquishing her sole author positioning and providing avenues for junior academics to be first authors. From my own experience, she reserves being first author for when she has been specifically invited to contribute to a publication.

One of my first publications as a new doctoral student was a book review that we did together. She had been asked to review the book, but she knew I had a particular interest in the topic. I'm sure working with me on that project took at least double the time it would have taken her to complete herself, but it taught me the value of well-timed mentoring, which helped me build confidence for scholarly work.

When we were working on the Arizona child research consultant project, Beth ensured we took turns on first authorship so that those who most needed the credit for tenure and promotion would get benefit. While I have not been able to implement these practices much yet due to my still-junior standing, it was important the teacher who worked closely with me on the children's research consultation project, Megan, was included as a co-author, despite her stating she hadn't "really done that much." That consultation project would not have been possible without Megan's ideas, support, and help with understanding the localized contextual meaning of students' input.

Not long after I began my doctoral studies, Beth suggested I come along for one of the writing group seminar meetings where she brought together postgraduate students from several disciplines to share their successes, challenges, fears, and more. At one point this was a class for which students enrolled, but I believe by the time I joined they were much more informal meetings. I came along to my first meeting, not surprisingly held at a coffee shop. Beth is great about supporting locally-owned coffee shops!

I was a newly minted, enthusiastic doctoral student sitting at a table with others whose promise was coming to fruition, as they proceeded through their research. Listening to Mark Nagasawa talk about how his research and writing were progressing toward culmination, I became a bit less enthusiastic and much more terrified. However, Beth doesn't just bring people together, she fosters support and collaboration. Mark must have sensed my increasing blood pressure and panic, for I remember him turning to me and saying not to worry; it would all come together for me, as it was for him. He reassured me that while it wasn't easy it was worth it, and

there was a community supporting me along the way. The peer relationships and guidance in the writing support group meetings soon became integral parts of my doctoral studies, creating lifelong friendships and academic collaborations.

RECE Collaborations

From my first introduction to the Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Education (RECE) conference in 2005, Beth made sure I met and had opportunities to interact with scholars and activists from around the globe. These interactions may be brief introductions in corridors or an invitation to join her and others for dinner (and oh! the research fangirl crushing I've had during some of those dinners!). It's one thing to read an article or a chapter by someone whose ideas excite and challenge you, but it's another to hear them talk with passion about these ideas over a plate of risotto or a glass of wine. Sometimes, there are scholars whose written work I have had a hard time deciphering on my own. But once I'm seated with them over a cup of tea or whiskey, learning the cadence of their voice and their subtle side comments, I suddenly understand their written words completely.

I have taken my emerging research to RECE conferences because I know I will get an honest appraisal of this work in a manner that is both critical and nurturing. I will be challenged, provoked, and supported, and will do the same for others. Some presentations will encourage my thinking and meld easily to my perspectives; others will challenge my thinking and provoke me to think differently or push back. Yet, at the end of the day, I know that at its core this is a similar and like-minded group where we are all working to reconceptualize early childhood education towards more equitable, just, and better lives for children, their families, and the world.

An entire article (or more!) could be written about Beth's engagement with RECE throughout the years, but I want to highlight a few of the coming-together aspects of it. Beth has always advocated for RECE to hold its meetings where reconceptualizing work is happening or needs to happen. This has included support for conferences in non-traditional conference locations (e.g., Dar Annadwa Adduwaliyya, the International Center of Bethlehem in 2009), and supporting those who have not hosted conferences before. When concerns were raised about the financial ability for some scholars, teachers, and advocates to attend these conferences, Beth was instrumental in creating and distributing travel awards. I have been privileged to be a part of disseminating these awards. While they do not cover all participant expenses, the vision is to make the conference more inclusive, drawing together more people their divergent perspectives.

I can honestly say that my most heartfelt, deepest, and most enduring friendships, both personally and professionally, are with those who I have met through these RECE conferences. These connections have led to further academic collaborations, such as our 2017 panel on early childhood conceptualizations of *home*, which is leading to my first turn as co-editor of a book. It has resulted in my move to my new life in Aotearoa New Zealand, and a confirmed (similar but different to tenured) position as a researcher, teacher educator, and advocate. RECE and my RECE colleagues have taken me to places around the world I could only ever dream of experiencing before making these connections.

Inspiring Activist Collaborations

I cannot talk about how Beth brings people together without discussing her community activism. This is yet another aspect of her work that can only be touched upon briefly here, though I'm sure will be presented elsewhere. Here, I must mention two of her community activist projects. Beth was one of the founding members of what was first known as the Local to Global Justice Teach-In, now expanded as the Local to Global Justice (LTGJ) Organization, Forum, and Festival (Faragó et al., 2018). If there was a community project perhaps most closely tucked next to Beth's heart, it may be the Jirani Project. Based in Kenya, this project connects orphaned

children and children in other vulnerable circumstances with local community and globally-based supports, so these children can have the support necessary to further their education and, ultimately, to thrive.

My own advocacy work pales in comparison, but Beth's work serves as an inspiration, sustaining me. I am inspired by her advocacy focus of standing alongside others to *support* but not to *do for* others, and her rejection of thinking we know what is best or being some great (white) savior. As mentioned previously, when I came to Aotearoa New Zealand, I was driven to do what I could to support the integration of Māori principles and values, throughout both early childhood education and the community. The histories of Māori oppression and marginalization are beyond the scope of this writing and are frankly not my stories to tell, but it is the ongoing, ever-present results of those oppressions that I hope to address and push against in my work here, alongside and guided by those for whom these histories and oppressions are their daily lives and stories. I am attempting to do my part in decolonizing efforts, while knowing that my being here as a non-Māori, white person is a part of the problem.

I am and will forever be a strong advocate for the "due consideration" of children's values and perspectives, working so they are perceived as strong, powerful humans (United Nations, 1989). My children's rights research and work around ethical research with children is part of that work. We can never assume we have children's consent to talk about or make decisions for them. I could not work with or on behalf of young children in Aotearoa New Zealand, without first learning more about them.

This is one of the primary reasons why I undertook research seeking children's perspectives on how and where they learn, how they are engaged in the community, and what their thoughts are for the future (Gaches, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022). It was a small sample of tamariki who taught me many things, but it was a beginning point upon which I am now expanding my work. This advocacy for children's perspectives and seeing all children as at-promise brings me back to when I first met Beth.

At that time, I didn't know that my advocacy work as a classroom teacher would be considered children's rights work, but that's exactly what I was doing and felt empowered to continue. Teachers have incredible insights into teaching and learning relationships, and how other systems impact these relationships (Gaches, 2017). My current research is working with teachers of infants and toddlers, seeking their experiences and stories of teaching/learning relationships impacted by aspects of their setting.

The impetus behind my research is advocacy for these teachers, since they and the work they do is often perceived as less important, less valued, and less professionally acknowledged compared to other early childhood educators, and educators in general (Davis & Dunn, 2019; Page, 2017). In Aotearoa New Zealand, teachers of infants and toddlers are fighting for pay parity with educators who possess the same qualifications but teach other age groups. This research is privileging these teachers' voices and experiences so that their stories can guide better, more supportive, and more equitable conditions for them and the children with whom they care for and learn.

Further Lessons Learned and Concluding Thoughts

There are many things I've learned from Beth through the years that reinforce an at-promise perspective. First, Beth often has said to me, "I know I'm misquoting the Dalai Lama, but everything is happening perfectly." I've heard Beth state this when research plans go awry. I've heard Beth state this when I didn't get an academic position for which I was a finalist. I've heard her state this so many times and— dang it! —she was always right. This statement holds the promise that something different is in the works. There may be disappointment or frustration in that moment, but there is promise.

I have also learned the power and promise of dark chocolate (see Richter et al., this issue). As mentioned previously, at the end of our first meeting I'm certain Beth handed me a piece of Dove dark chocolate. When you are stressed, Beth offers you dark chocolate. When you are celebrating, Beth offers you dark chocolate. She has told me that dark chocolate is good for you, that it raises your endorphins and makes you feel happier. I don't know if dark chocolate itself actually does that. However, I know that when I eat a small piece of dark chocolate, I feel Beth's presence and her support, and *that* makes me happy. As a result, I have carried that tradition forward. In my university office there is a wooden bowl in which I keep small Whittaker's dark chocolates. It's placed right at the entrance to my office so students and staff have easy access to it when they are feeling stressed or tired, or celebrating, or just need a moment. Many know this is a tradition from Beth, that I carry forward, along with so much else.

Beth is one of the busiest people I have ever met. She is the original "Energizer bunny" who will keep beating her drum and working, day after day, meeting after meeting, project after project.[1] I have often marveled at her stamina, and invariably, when I am feeling like I just can't fit another meeting or project into my day, I think of Beth and somehow find a way. At the same time, Beth has taught me the value of escaping to nature and finding those moments of beauty and wonder all around us. Even now, I look forward to her social media posts of daily walks, and the birds and flowers she finds. Just as she and Daniel's (her partner in life) trips around the countryside via motorcycle or car, I relish a drive through the countryside, or walks along paths filled with plants, birds, and scenic vistas. There is a lot of work to be done in our world, but the work is filled with promise and possibilities, too.

There will be more time for Beth to spend surrounded by nature, now as she moves into her version of retirement. However, that work ethic is still in full force as she continues to blend her travels with advocacy, academic collaborations, and, always, her mentoring. Those of us who she has mentored carry her legacy forward in all we do, and likely with a bowl or baggie of dark chocolates of our own to disperse.

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Footnotes

[1] Editors' note: While in Kenya, Flóra heard children call Beth "mama haraka" and "mama harakisha," loosely translated as "mama urgent" or "in a rush."