

2013-14 Curriculum Report
Sarah and Sara's Group
3rd and 4th Grade

Our Students

I welcomed eight returning "alums" from our group last year and nine new third graders. For their part, they welcomed Maranda Husband to her new position as assistant teacher in the group. The ease with which the fourths returned to our room and asked to use their "old" cubby or commented upon furniture arrangement contrasted sharply with the nervous excitement that some of the thirds felt. In those first weeks, there were several instances in which the older children even cheered (loudly!) about a beloved project, which ignited a spark in all of us.

Thus, the grade groups mixed beautifully from that first day. Though a few students commented about the gender imbalance (5 girls and 12 boys), within a few weeks everyone had adjusted beautifully and found their niche. In general, the friendships and amiable community relationships children formed in the fall lasted throughout the year. Still, Maranda and I knew we needed to nurture these ties, and so we planned many opportunities in those first weeks for cementing communal ties through group games, shares, and get-to-know-you projects. Maranda contributed a great deal to this work, having had a strong background in camps and after-school programs. All of the younger children had opportunities to work with an older "buddy" during this work, which was one of the ways we encouraged the fourths to flex their leadership skills in the coming year.

As in previous years, our group of seventeen spent time each week in our classroom, with the specialist teachers, at Choice, and at Mini Courses (winter and spring). Overlapping Morning and Lunch Choice times with other groups also allowed for cross-group play.

Of course, one of the social highlights of the year for our students, particularly the thirds, was the opportunity to be "big kid" buddies to the kindergarten. The question we heard most frequently in the first weeks of school was, "When are we getting our buddies?!" Once Toni and Sherry set up their own community, our weekly time with the kindergarten commenced, much to our group's delight. Throughout the year, our group read to their buddies, played with them outside, gardened, and created crafts and projects. Our students had the wonderful experience of being looked at with an intoxicating mixture of affection, admiration, and flat-out hero worship. In return, our

children rubbed backs, sat children on their laps at Assembly, searched for books that their buddies would enjoy, and patiently guided them.

We were impressed by this kind of sensitivity, thoughtfulness, and conscientiousness, which our group as a whole also demonstrated in our own classroom. There were disagreements and conflicts, of course, but we were amazed by how few social problems cropped up this year on the whole. Some children in our group possessed very strong personalities, while others were more sensitive and tentative, but, as a group, children were very tolerant of one another and their different approaches. We found that with appropriate guidance fourth grade children blossomed socially in ways we could not have expected; fragility became resiliency, emotions smoothed, and integrity emerged. The fourths really set a lovely tone for the thirds, and the younger children rose to the occasion socially and academically.

Our community experienced a loss and shift in early November, when Maranda unexpectedly needed to leave our community to attend to family matters. Children were, understandably, shaken over this sudden departure, and mourned the loss of her games and vivacious personality. However, good fortune was on our side, as just one week later Sara Slaybaugh, an accomplished teacher in her own right, began to sub with us. Julia and I quickly identified that she was "the one," and after interviewing candidates welcomed her into our community. She proved to be an amazing teacher: caring, artistic, creative, hardworking, and organized. Sara and I bonded deeply, professionally and personally, and I am thrilled to report that she and I will be continuing to work together next year.

The Curriculum

Linking to our conversations about our classroom community was our theme this year, which organized and connected so much of what we did across curricular areas. Beginning with indigenous peoples, specifically the Lenape tribe, we examined these questions: How has the Germantown/Conshohocken area changed over time? How have communities changed (or not)? How has the land changed? Within these and related critical thinking questions, I organized our teaching and curriculum around the development of **skills**, the acquisition of **content knowledge**, and the integration of personal and historical **perspective**. While many think of "skills" in a procedural sense (e.g. the steps involved in addition or subtraction), I view skills as the learning tools that one uses as a vehicle for accessing content. Content knowledge makes up the facts, figures, and events that make up history texts and lectures, and these are

certainly critical. Skills, though, are even more critical, because they can't be so easily jumbled or forgotten. Children's skills form their academic repertoires – the way they approach a task, novel or familiar. They affect whether children are making connections as they read, how they interpret maps or diagrams, or how they phrase a topic sentence. Thus, our social studies theme became a vehicle for us to teach children a variety of academic skills, from how to craft interesting characters to how to use angle measurement to make an accurate map.

Additionally, another social curricular goal wove throughout our work this year, part of what we at Miquon call our “Peace and Inclusion” curriculum. In viewing and studying so many different communities, some of whom were quite combative and cruel toward one another, we modeled the importance of being able to adopt another person or group's perspective. Developmentally, children at this age tend to be all-or-nothing thinkers who might declare themselves “horrible artists” on the one hand and “already awesome” at something else. Thus our emphasis on perspective played out in a multitude of ways, such as through encouraging children to formulate their **own** strategies for solving social problems or in asking them to find counter-examples to common stereotypes. This year our two major simulations, one that recreated life in a Lenape community and one that recast colonial Germantown, were crucial toward this learning aim, particularly because children put themselves in what may be considered “opposing” roles.

In the end we stressed the importance of applying this kind of empathy not only toward historical groups, but toward one another and to ourselves. Overall, we sought to empower children as critical thinkers who have a deep confidence in themselves based on who they are, rather than what they can or cannot do in a particular way. We stressed that how one responds when one makes a mistake or even hurts another in some way is critical. We believe that encouraging this type of self-honesty and non-judgmental celebration of mistakes and challenges as part of a communal process empowers children to become bold academicians rather than those who avoid potentially challenging experiences. It also promotes tolerance and a spirit of generosity and forgiveness amongst the group, since children soon realize that, in fact, we really are all still learning.

LANGUAGE ARTS

In our classroom, Language Arts was composed of a potpourri of activities, lessons, and projects that all worked to promote children's familiarity and skill reading, writing, and speaking. Using the “Balanced Literacy” method

of instruction as our base, each week children had time participating in word work, spelling activities, independent reading, shared reading, guided writing, and independent writing experiences. Reading Workshop generally took place in our morning half-group time in order to provide children with the most efficient and targeted small group instruction possible.

From September to February, on most days of the week, we taught the group a particular comprehension strategy that helped children to glean deeper meaning from texts. While children in our group possessed a wide range of reading levels, they all benefited from instruction that encouraged them to read texts closely. We matched short read aloud texts to our mini-lessons and guided the children to apply the given strategy as we read. In literature circles or in their reading response notebook, children would try out the skill on their own. Ultimately, we want children to generalize and internalize these ways of interacting with texts so that the process is fluid and automatic.

Writing Workshop occurred 2-3 times per week in our classroom and was one of many of our students' favorite parts of our schedule. We broke our writing curriculum into units of genre study, and over the course of the year each child had at least one experience publishing poetry, historical fiction, essay/research, and fiction writing. Sara or I taught at least one mini-lesson for the week, such as "How to Add Character Thoughts" or "How to use Dialogue" that enabled children to focus on improving one particular area of their writing as they worked. Publishing parties then offered a chance for our young writers to celebrate their accomplishments with families and friends and to receive feedback on their writing. They were much-loved opportunities for compliments and camaraderie.

Handwriting instruction occurred throughout the year, with third graders learning lower case cursive letters and fourths working with upper case. Touch typing skills, which will be particularly important in the 5/6, were also practiced in the classroom and at home.

MATHEMATICS

This year our math program drew from many different curriculum resources, but the content was planned around the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics' Focal Points. Some of these resources from which we drew include **Investigations** by TERC, **Singapore Math**, the **Key To** series, **Math Mammoth** packets, and Marilyn Burns' books math topics titles. We implemented both homogeneous and heterogeneous grouping structures that shifted depending on our teaching goals. Generally, we began each half-group math session in two smaller $\frac{1}{4}$ groups, each lead by a teacher, and presented

different versions of a given concept or skill. We tweaked the depth, speed, and content of our teaching depending on each group of 4-5 students' needs, making sure that the root of the lesson was the same in each case. Games and projects allowed us to regroup students in more flexible ways, and provided opportunities for children to teach and learn from one another.

Both groups began the year investigating place value and our base ten number system, with the fourths being asked to read, write, and decompose numbers into the billions. Thirds reviewed basic math facts and were then introduced to addition and subtraction with regrouping, while fourths reviewed these skills and again were asked to use these algorithms accurately with very large numbers. Rounding, working with money, and expanded notation were all concepts both groups worked with in some capacity. We also completed a graphing project in which children polled their classmates about a particular question, such as their favorite food. This fun, hands-on activity introduced the skills involved in graphing while also allowing us to get to know one another better.

In the winter, the thirds were introduced to making groups of equal numbers using multiplication and then reversing the process with division. Fourths built on their knowledge and developed automaticity with their facts through the 12's. In this chapter, we also worked a great deal with word problems and modeled strategies for tackling them efficiently and effectively. I also introduced a form of assessments I called the "Mad Minute," which was a sheet of multiplication (or division, subtraction, etc.) problems that children solved while being timed. Each week, children logged the number of problems they solved correctly as well as their time. The following week, they took the assessment again and shared any increase in accuracy and/or decrease in time. We emphasized that children should look for broad, overall progress, and, in fact, every child noted some element of significant growth for himself/herself.

In the spring we moved to fractions and, for the fourths and several third graders, decimal concepts, using manipulatives and diagrams frequently to illustrate problems and/or solutions. Children worked through various workbooks in the **Key to Fractions** and **Key to Decimals** sets, some mastering the basic principles and others moving into multiplying and dividing fractions. I then worked with fourths to master two of the "big" skills we all remember from elementary school: short/long division and multi-digit multiplication. We rolled our sleeves up and got to work.

In the last months of school, we completed a hands-on study of measurement and geometry. The projects we planned, building a "dream room" and glider planes from wood, both also required children to practice and apply skills from other units, including addition/subtraction (keeping a budget) and multiplication/division (calculating room area to buy flooring).

SOCIAL STUDIES

This year, I organized our Theme study around two broad themes: children's *sense of time* and *sense of place*. We focused on how the Philadelphia area has changed over time, beginning with the landscape of early humans and moving through pre-Revolutionary colonial era. We began our work by investigating what the area surrounding Miquon might have looked like 500+ years ago, during the time in which the Lenape people called this area home. We took hikes in the woods and pretended we were time travelers, and I gave them guided tours about what they would (and wouldn't) see during this period of history. We built sense of place by building upon children's familiarity and deep love of the Miquon campus and then contrasted that with images we depicted (verbally and visually) of the Pre-Contact Philadelphia.

Our read aloud, **Dickon Among the Lenape**, also introduced children to these concepts. The book traces the fateful shipwreck of a boy bound for indentured servitude in Jamestown who finds himself taken in by a Lenape tribe in the New Jersey area. The text is meticulously researched and historically accurate in its content, and is in fact is one of only two books for youngsters that The Lenape Nation currently endorses.

We built upon children's understanding of environmental change over time through a variety of hands-on projects. Children constructed shelter models using natural materials and then compared their efforts to the types crafted by the Lenape. (Interestingly, many bore a striking resemblance!) We researched native species of plants and animals and recreated images of early Pennsylvania. We explored Lenape entertainment and tried our hand at a variety of games and activities.

Simulation was perhaps the crux of our study. Children developed Lenape personas and wrote journal entries from the perspective of their characters. As we moved into our colonial study, children again created characters that they imbued with historical accuracy and wrote entries from these perspectives. Each table became a "colony" voyaging to the new world for various reasons.

Trips also provided an important piece of our study. Our expedition to Churchville allowed us to walk in recreated wigwams and experience some

aspects of Lenape daily life, our trip to the Seaport Museum gave us a visual journey into Philadelphia harbor's past, and our visit to Stenton allowed children to touch and feel genuine colonial artifacts.

As our colonial study moved along and we planned for our culminating celebration, children planned exhibits based around the businesses of colonial Germantown. They researched these jobs with care and then planned interactive activities for visitors to try. Groups also penned short skits about the fate of their simulated colonies. It was an amazing night!

IN CLOSING

Sara and I both feel grateful to have taught this group of children! Thank you, families, for all the support, time, and energy you have given us and to Miquon this year. We appreciate it so much. Have a lovely summer, everyone!
Sarah Aghajanian