

**2012-2013**

**Nursery Curriculum Report**

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It was a thrilling year in the nursery as we formed a community, worked and played together, asked big questions, and explored new ideas. Following the model of an emergent curriculum, our inquiries developed out of student interests and wonderings. An emergent curriculum is described by Susan Stacey (2009) in her text *Emergent Curriculum in Early Childhood Settings* in this way:

- While framed by the teacher, it is child initiated, allowing for collaborations between children and teachers, and giving everyone a voice.
- It is responsive to the child, thereby allowing teachers to build upon existing interests.
- In its practice, the teacher takes on the role of facilitator, taking what she sees and hears, and bringing to children the opportunity to discover more, dig deeper, and construct further knowledge.
- It is flexible in that curriculum planning, rather than being done well in advance, is constantly developing. Curriculum is dynamic, neither stagnant nor repetitive.
- It allows children's learning and teacher's thinking to be made visible through varied forms of documentation.
- It builds upon the recognized theorists in our field: the work of Dewey, Piaget and Vygotsky supports the philosophy of emergent curriculum.

Our days were structured to allow ample time for independent play, the generator for all learning, as well as times to gather together to share stories, play games, and explore ideas in greater depth. At the center of our day is inquiry time, in which half of the group explores an idea or concept of interest in greater depth, in a focused and hands-on manner, while the other half of the group is learning with one of our specialists. Learners are presented with meaningful choices that support the development of self-regulation and invite them to discover how they learn best, including choices about whether to work inside or outside, for how long, and when to stop to have snack. Reflecting back on the year we lived, it is amazing to see the thoughtfulness of the work of these children, the excitement with which they pursued discovery, and the many transformations that occurred.

**Literacy**

Our literacy curriculum derives from a collection of best practices in emergent reading and writing that are practiced in the context of the emergent curriculum. Our philosophy of literacy is rooted in the understanding that engaging, rich and inspiring interactions with others and with the surrounding world propel us to listen, speak, read, and write. We aim to provide authentic opportunities to use these skills in work and play, and we model multiple ways to do so. Our approach to texts invited learners to develop critical literacy skills and recognize their ability to question the texts, authors, embedded messages, and explore intertextual relationships.

At the core of our program are daily picturebook read alouds which create opportunities to interpret stories, make predictions and comparisons, immerse ourselves in story language, notice the parts of books, and simply fall in love with stories. During read alouds we practiced echo reading, in which students echo the teacher, shared reading, in which they are responsible for certain parts of reading, and times to "think, pair, share" in which learners pause to talk with a peer about an aspect of the text, and then share back with the whole group. We explored the rhythm and cadence of language through chants and fingerplays, poetry, songs and nursery rhymes. We dramatized texts, as

we paused the story for students to act out different parts while exploring tone and volume. As we read big books we called the learners attention to the directionality of print, the ways that punctuation influences reading, and the idea that the length of a word relates to the length of its sound.

As literacy starts with ourselves, a great deal of letter study happened through exploration of our names. Students looked at each others' names and discovered similar letters, made connections between letters and sounds, and many began to recognize and read the names of their friends. The understanding that words are made of letters develops through name study, and learners were amazed to find the letters from their names inside of other books in our class.

Similarly, our explorations of writing also began with the learners' names. Their names are an expression of their identity and a way to mark something as belonging to them; simply writing the first letter is an important step. We provide many authentic opportunities to use writing including write alouds, in which the teacher models the thinking that happens while composing, shared writing, in which students helped write letters and words in a message, and individual writing, in which teachers took dictation, or supported students in writing their own messages. Daily opportunities to write and draw were available at the art table, in rest journals, at the easels, in booklets, and in clipboards that could go anywhere. Learners were encouraged and supported to use writing in their play, and they created many restaurant menus, signs for their structures, recipes for mud pies, and movie tickets at play over the course of the year. Children learned how to use writing and drawing to represent their experiences. They were also invited to create their own unique fictional tales. They were challenged to extend meaning over multiple pages, and delighted to share their creations with others. At the end of the year, learners looked at the vast collections of writing and drawing they created, and reflected on their five favorite pieces. It was hard to choose just five for many, which is a testament to the quality of their work and their pride in their creations.

## **Math**

Math is a way of seeing the world, of noticing particular qualities of the things around you, and trying to make sense of them. We observed many things through this lens, from the trees on the cover of a book that had to be counted, to the depth of the creek after rain that needed to be measured. Throughout the year we practiced a number of math skills to answer authentic questions raised by the learners. We practiced counting with one-to-one correspondence to figure out how many children are at school and how many steps it took each person to get to circle. We used cubes to represent quantities so that we could compare them, as we did when voting to decide which book to read or keeping track of who was eating more bird seed: squirrels or birds. When looking at images of snowflakes and bowls of rocks we developed the understanding that it is important to count each object in a group only once to know the total. Math was a fascinating tool for comparison, as we compared the weights of rocks, the heights of dolls, our ages and the numbers of fingers and toes we have. Learners were eager to solve problems and explain their reasoning. There was so much we could explain about the world using the language of math.

## **Starting at the Beginning:**

The start of the year is always a time to get to know each other, to learn the flow of our days at school, and to learn how to be a member of a learning community. We started by discussion what it means to be a friend and different ways we can take care of each other. The three rules we emphasize in the nursery are: take care of yourself, take care of each other, and take care of the world. These rules form the basis for understanding how our actions affect others, and support children in the development of empathy and caring. We also learned how to resolve conflicts through conversation, acknowledging one's own actions, and making apologies of action by asking "what can I do to help you feel better?" We developed the language and skills that support peacemaking and being generous, as children were never forced to share, but to instead to be mindful of the needs of others

and responsive when someone asks “May I have a turn with that when you’re done?” We read many books about friends including *Will I have a Friend?* by Miriam Cohen and Lillian Hoban, *Wemberly Worried* by Kevin Henkes, *May I Bring a Friend* by Beatrice Schenck de Regniers and Beni Montessor, as well as many Frog and Toad stories by Arnold Lobel. These stories provided opportunities for learners to think about how it feels to have a friend.

To continue our exploration of friendship we embarked on a study of the Elephant and Piggie books by Mo Willems. These joyful and often hilarious texts warmly invited us to get to know the two characters and laugh along with them. Many students were familiar with the texts, but no matter how many times they had heard the stories, they always wanted to hear them again; we read one on the first day of school, and a student requested another one on our last. We frequently paused the action of the story and invited students to practice problem solving by making suggestions for how Elephant and Piggie could solve a problem or an alternate version of what should happen. We were mindful to gather multiple suggestions during each conversation so that students developed the understanding that there are many potential solutions to a problem, an understanding they could then bring to their own problem solving. We also had many Elephant and Piggie puppet shows throughout the year, which we used as an opportunity to model conflicts and invite student help with resolution. Because of the discourse of multiple possibilities that we created, these stories of these characters were endlessly open to interpretation and reinvention.

As we read all of Mo Willems’ books, we learned about the art of the picturebook and how different parts of the book support the story. Learners examined covers of texts and came to understand the purpose of the title and what authors and illustrators do, they looked at the end pages to search for clues about the coming story or deeper significance after reading, explored how speech bubbles work, and ways to use illustrations to support reasoning about a text. As learners wrote their own texts we observed them experimenting with the different parts of a book, from creating titles and covers, to drawing their own barcodes and prices on the backs of the books.

So much of learning about each other is the process of making the invisible visible. We pursued this challenging goal through the creation of identity boxes. Early in the year each child received an empty, open front box, with directions to fill it with things that are important to your identity. We had many conversations about what identity is, supported by a collection of picturebooks that helped refine the idea, including: *Bein’ With You This Way* by W. Nikola-Lisa, *The Colors of Us* by Karen Katz, *My Nose, Your Nose* by Melanie Walsh, and *The Skin You Live In* by Michael Tyler and David Lee Csicsko. In our year-long conversations about identity we unraveled ideas about gender, family constellations, skin color, hair, age, friendships, interests, and heritage. Each child shared about their box with the group of children and took questions from the group about their box. The boxes generated many questions about the craft of making them, like “how did you get that in there?” and many more about the content therein. On many occasions children discovered similarities between themselves and their peers and were amazed that they could feel the same about something. The boxes also created a safe and nurturing space for conversations about our differences. The learners developed the understanding that their identities are much bigger than a box, as one student said “I am so many things all at once.” The boxes remained a touchstone for conversations throughout the entire year, and sometimes the images and special things displayed in the boxes became the inspiration for play. Questions about what is inside us also came up in these discussions and led us to explore stories and books about our bodies and skeletons.

### **Cooking and Ice Cream**

While the days were still warm in September, learners began to serve invisible ice cream cones through our classroom windows, and soon ice cream shops began to open up all around the playground. The ice cream stands were the first of many restaurants and kitchens to open in the nursery, and the learners demonstrated a deep and enthusiastic passion for cooking and baking, both

real and pretend, throughout the year. Through our study of ice cream learners developed phenomenal descriptive language to talk about flavors of ice cream. In dramatic play they explored the special language and vocabulary needed to talk about recipes, ingredients, measurements, and working in an ice cream shop. We graphed our favorite ice cream flavors to have a visual understanding of our differences and similarities, as well as a visual representation of the quantities so they could engage in comparison. We read many non-fiction texts that explained the process of making ice cream, and we took a phenomenal trip to Reading Terminal Market to eat ice cream at Bassett's, the oldest ice cream shop in Philadelphia.

The exploration of baking and cooking was also an integral part of our year together. Learners started transforming wheelbarrows into wheat grinders out on the playground early in the year, which led us to work with real wheat grown at Miquon, separating the wheat berries from the chaff and grinding them with our wheat grinder. As 'dirt chef's' started baking bread outside using sand, water, onion grass and leaves, children also began baking inside using flour, water and yeast. We loved reading stories about baking to further inspire our work, including *Betty Bunny Loves Chocolate Cake* by Michael Kaplan and Stephane Jorsch and *Gladys Goes Out to Lunch* by Derek Anderson. We explored materials connected to baking including oatmeal in the sensory table, and homemade play dough. Cooking was a major theme in both work and play this year, as it captured the learners' love of transformation and their proclivity for experimentation. We read many variants of the ultimate tale of transformation through baking, *The Gingerbread Man*, in which learners made intertextual comparisons, and collectively grappled with ideas about right and wrong to try and determine a fitting ending. Food is an essential part of life; it captured the imagination and attention of the nursery children all year long.

### **Transformation**

The bottom shelf in our art area is dedicated to beautiful stuff: found objects that could be considered trash, but which are treasure in the hands of our nursery students. Children are drawn to transformation and invention, and beautiful materials respond to this pull as they provide open ended opportunities to be seen anew and re-imagined. Inspired by their own imagination and the cardboard and styrofoam pieces, bottle caps and corks, old magazines, bottles and boxes, learners made sleds, ships, monsters, necklaces, blasters, contraptions, and machines of all kinds. The materials themselves formed a language of expression, and at the same time, the work provided rich opportunities to explain the inventions themselves as well as the process of creating them. This year we also practiced drawing to plan before building, and drawing to remember after construction; as children learned to represent their thinking in multiple ways, they practiced holding images in their mind and transferring them to a new medium, a huge cognitive task. We had multiple discussions throughout the year about what inventions are, and through these conversations we refined our ideas about what inventions can be and how they get made. During our fall conference week we explored transformation in relation to art and music with our music specialist Diego. We expanded our thinking through read alouds including *Henry's Amazing Machine* by Dayle Ann Dodds and Kyrsten Brooker, *Architect of the Moon* by Tim Wynne Jones and Ian Wallace, and *The Squiggle* by Carole Lexa Shaefer. As the year drew to a close we also experimented with transformation at the work bench, hammering wood into new configurations.

### **The Natural World**

Learners in the nursery were constant explorers and observers of the natural world. They spent many hours outdoors looking at the creatures living under stumps, searching for macro invertebrates in the creek, scanning the sky for birds, and greeting the squirrels and birds that visit us on the playground. Ever attentive to the changes of the seasons, we explored leaves changing in autumn and went on color hikes, looked carefully for freezing water and waited for snow. In the winter we

hopefully planted bulbs, and in spring we celebrated their arrival. We planted many seedlings indoors in the beautiful vermicompost we harvested from our worm bin, and we watched them grow and thrive until they were ready to be planted outdoors. We learned to care for our worms by giving them food and newspaper scraps. We watched the worm cycle come to life as we searched for worms with bands full of eggs, the eggs laid in the soil, baby worms wriggling and fully grown worms starting the cycle all over again. On the playground we watched for hawks overhead and on many days, we transformed into a family of red tailed hawks and baby hawklings. We could write a whole book about our experiences outdoors, but for now we will simply say that the outdoor space is our true classroom, the inspiration for much of our work, and the generator of many questions. Any other learning that is described in this report happened because of our dialogue with the natural world.

## **Water**

Of our many explorations inspired by work and play outdoors, our study of water, which stretched over many months, was perhaps the most powerful. Water is endlessly fascinating to young children, and while we had explored it in the sensory table before, it wasn't until a group of children began to dig a large interconnected moat on the playground that our study really took off. The moat was created and refined over many months, and while it was under construction, the learners used many combinations of outdoor blocks and pipes to create intricate waterworks on the playground. Thousands of buckets of water were carried up the hill from the creek, only to flow down the hill again after moving through the moat or waterworks. Indoors we explored the flow of water using plastic tubes, pipettes, pumps, and funnels, and we hypothesized about the many ways water can be moved. We conducted experiments related to freezing and melting, sinking and floating, overflowing and dissolving, and we learned how to create and test hypotheses, and generate new questions in the process. Our work with water and flow inspired a study of courses, paths, and flow during our spring conference week; we read *Snail Trail* by Ruth Brown and created an enormous snail trail obstacle course in the gym with our P.E. teacher Lisa. Throughout the year the learners also studied pathways through the construction of maps, they learned to take perspective as they drew various ways to get to Miquon and back home again.

## **Camping**

One day a group of children built a new structure on the playground with the outdoor blocks and declared that it was a tent for camping at Miquon at night. They invited their teachers to join them for the sleepover with a nature movie, "that means you just watch nature" and suddenly the whole class was planning to sleep at school at night. After some clarification that "no one has an overnight schedule" we explored camping in earnest, putting up a tent in our classroom, building other tents out of fabric, chairs and clothespins, and building campfires out of blocks. We imagined giant pieces of paper were our backpacks and we filled them to the brim with food, flashlights, supplies, and many sets of the ingredients for s'mores. We told campfire tales with the lights out and lanterns and candles in the middle of the rug, including *Abiyoyo* by Pete Seeger and Michael Hays, and stories about camping like *Pig Pig Goes to Camp* by David McPhail and *Lucille Goes to Camp* by Marilyn Hafner. Though we never slept at school overnight, we spent many hours snuggled in sleeping bags in our tent, and at our end of the year celebration, we made sure to build a fire and roast marshmallows in the moonlight.

## **Cinderella**

Fairy tales are perpetually fascinating to children, and when a version of Cinderella made its way into our classroom, there was no stopping the excitement generated by this tale. Learners engaged in dramatic play around this story and made it come to life on the playground and in the classroom. They understood the permeability of these stories as they changed the number of Cinderellas in a

tale, introduced nice and mean pets, added of dragons and a mean aunt, and changed roles in the middle of the tale. There was even a Cinderella Hawk, also known as Hawkarella. To support and extend their thinking about the Cinderella tales, and to provide a counterbalance to the familiarity of the typical version, we read many Cinderella variants in which the setting, culture, gender, and even species of the characters varied. This collection of stories engaged the learners in making intertextual connections and comparisons, interrogating the fairness of the story, practicing taking the perspective of characters, exploring the language used to tell the story, and empowering them to create their own version. They also refined their understanding of how to use evidence from the text and illustrations to support predictions. As a class we told and drew our own version of Cinderella, and in the process the learners uncovered what they believed to be the essential elements of a Cinderella tale: a girl living with stepsisters, a ball, a lost shoe, a search for the girl, and a wedding at the end. However, everything else in the story shifted: it was set in New York City, Cinderella had to scuba dive through pipes to get to the ball, she cut herself on her broken shoe and had to canoe to the hospital, she lived on the 14th floor of an apartment building, and after the wedding they go from their castle on vacation to Colorado. In this study the learners really explored ideas of fairness, kindness, and found their own authority in relation to this text.

## **Rocks**

As the weather grew warm once more, the learners began examining the rocks in our creek more closely, turning them over, and searching for clay in the mud of the banks. Children brought in special rocks that they had found at home, in the woods, and on vacation. In the sandbox volcanoes emerged out of sand, and suddenly water became the lava. As students wondered about how volcanoes are formed and what kinds of rocks they were finding, we embarked on a study of rocks. We learned the terms igneous, metamorphick, and sedimentary and explored the layers of the earth through books including: *Rocks: Hard, Soft, Smooth and Rough* by Natalie Rosinsky, *The Magic Schoolbus: Inside the Earth* by Joanna Cole and Bruce Degen and *Eyewitness Books: Rocks and Minerals*. Learners used a variety of field guides to identify rocks they had found, and we explored the qualities of mica schist, the rock we found most frequently, by hammering it and washing in in water. We were inspired to write rock stories by the text *If You Find a Rock* by Peggy Christian and Barbara Hirsch Lember, and we were thrilled to hear the biography *Rocks in His Head* by Carol Otis Hurst, written about her father's life as a rock collector. We went on field trips to the Wissahickon and to Harriet Wetherill Park to search for rocks. We hammered a geode and discovered sparkling crystals inside, and we created our own crystals by making rock candy. Learners carefully watched the crystals form and documented their discoveries in their rock candy journals. At the close of the school year we read *On My Beach There are Many Pebbles* by Leo Lionni and we were inspired to create our own rock designs using paint, tape, markers, buttons, and glue. One student suggested that it would be a good idea to go mining for rocks, and so the teachers hid these special rocks in the sandbox and we all went mining. Rocks were an incredibly exciting inquiry because they are all around us and they presented us with constant opportunities to explore, describe, and inquire.

## **Reflection**

At the end of the year learners were invited to reflect on what transpired this year and share their favorite moments. It was helpful to hear what stood out in their reflections, as it was a challenge to distill the curriculum that emerged this year because every moment was rich. To close, we'll leave you with their comments, which point to the depth and excitement of our time together: When me and Juliet made the book, when I punched holes out of one page at the bottom, I liked when the kindergarten visited, I liked it when I was getting air when I was running, I liked when my Nonna came to make zeppoles, when Lisa was here, the snail obstacle course, when my mommy cooks things, I liked outside lunch, when Theo's mom came and told a story, when we were at the pond

looking at the fish, way a long time ago when we used the dinosaur sand, when we went to get ice cream, I remember dancing with balloons at P.E, I remember our walks to the Monkeyland creek and how we watched the water flow.