

2016-2017 Fifth and Sixth Grade Curriculum Report

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The Group

We began the year with a group of sixteen playful, curious, sensitive, sincere, and energetic children -- six girls and ten boys. The sixth graders were on familiar ground, as all had been fifth graders in our group last year. That arrangement presented advantages -- certain routines and materials were well-known -- and also challenges -- they had established ties and relationships with one another, which meant special care was necessary to support opening to new (or renewed) connections. While nearly all of the group had been at Miquon since they were young children, we were very lucky to be joined for the first half of the year by Navid Nasserghodsi, a young person with family roots in the area, especially his grandmom with whom he lived for several months, but whose immediate family was in faraway Dubai. Navid's presence in the group -- his openness, friendliness, and willingness to fully involve himself in life at Miquon -- served him well, and incorporating him into our group joined the other children in a common cause as well. We were all sad to see him leave us at winter break and grateful for his time with us, and hope to remain in contact with Navid and his family.

Moving into the fifth/sixth groups at Miquon brings exciting new challenges, both responsibilities and privileges. Establishing expanded outdoor boundaries, the expectation that children will self-monitor time, and an assignment book routine are three key examples of the leap in expectation. Sixth graders who have found these tasks challenging as fifth graders often take advantage of a "reset" in sixth grade and rise to the occasion. Fifth graders often cherish these new challenges and adapt quickly, and sometimes need more support. We offer it happily, as we see teaching these skills to be every bit as critical as the academic skills we facilitate. This year, the fifth and sixth graders on both sides of the building needed an unusually significant amount of support from teachers in making clear their own game rules and boundaries (physical and the less tangible "fair play"). We met several times, and sometimes in conjunction with complaints from younger groups, to facilitate the hammering out of such boundaries, yet never reached full satisfaction, at least as far as the adults and some kids were concerned. Underlying the critically important trust that we extend to children, is an assumption of good intention. We endeavored to help them 1) extend that assumption to each other, and 2) to recognize that when they break that trust by disregarding boundaries set by themselves and their peers, one consequence is to have a less content community.

The staff experimented with a new schedule arrangement for the first week of school this year, and we found it highly satisfying. Rather than rotate to specialists immediately, we spent the first week as a contained classroom and specialists visited us, getting to know the new groupings and their classroom routines. We took advantage of this time to establish routines and to get to know each other and our space. Some activities, like sorting the sixth graders' music folders used in weekly sing and beginning one for each fifth grader, reviewed academic skills like alphabetization and organization of a complex task. Other activities (scavenger hunt, introductory Google slide shows) were more social by nature. In our experience, having the young people do the real work of labeling cubbies, sorting markers, sharpening colored pencils, creating the calendar and marking upcoming events, etc. sets a tone of ownership and clientship that is central to our entire year together. We establish ways of interacting as well. Children and adults in our group are expected to learn "Balanced response" technique -- naming the positive aspects of an activity, presentation, experience, idea (theirs or someone else's) as well as giving constructive suggestions, or "how to's." We practice this kind of response when we are trying to solve sticky problems as well as in response to the work of peers or ourselves.

Some key parts of our week and year that have built our community are:

- 5th/6th Sing - a reliable Wednesday morning sharing of silly, historical, fun, and sometimes culturally and/or curriculum-relevant songs, accompanied by guitar, bass, and others.
- Buddies - We enjoyed a relationship with Ben and Elisa's 1st/2nd group this year, which included outdoor play, reading, sharing our work with one another, and art.

- Unicef - At Halloween, our group sponsors a school-wide fund-raiser through “Trick or Treat for Unicef”. We put on an assembly presentation, collect donations, and count the funds raised, as well as contributing the proceeds from one of our pizza sales. This year we raised more than \$1500.
- Pizza sales - roughly bi-weekly event that involves determining a menu (by calculating profit and measuring customer preferences), delivering and collecting order forms and money, recording and totaling orders, making brownies, delivering to each class. The children do this independently, and the profit paid for the entirety of a live theater performance and luncheon in December and a three day, two night trip in May.

Other community building activities include: accompanying the nursery to hand-dip candles in December, celebrating birthdays (or half-birthdays) with “word presents,” a pollyanna exchange right before winter break, and a teacher-made breakfast on the first day back to school in January. The room has often been abuzz with creative play using materials in our “make and play” center, ping-pong tournaments, and self-directed play of all sorts.

With the possible exception of the culminating trip in May, the most significant community-building activity of the year was the production of a panto, which was finally staged in early April. The group truly came together through this huge endeavor, supporting each other magnificently while they made costumes, designed and created sets, improvised through miscues, and took great pride in their hard work. It has been a lively, lovely year.

Social Studies: Integrating Curriculum

A central principle of Progressive Education, and of my philosophy as a teacher, is that life and learning are inseparable. Following from that ideal, curriculum in a school context is best designed as an integrated whole, rather than as chunks broken into distinct pieces as “subjects.” With that in mind, the thread that we sought to weave into our learning this year, tying elements together and making connections that we returned to in discussion over and over, was the idea of **adversity and adaptation**. We considered what happens when cultures, ideas, or worldviews collide and when adaptation does not result. Is conflict inevitable? Is it always a negative force? Is it a source of growth, change or evolution? We also focused on how we can know what happened in the past, looking at geological, paleontological, and historical records and the role that bias can play in interpretation. Our work also raised questions of how places, organisms, boundaries, events, etc. were decided and named. Does the survivor or victor tell the tale? In the November election (as well as in our study of the American Civil War) we wondered, how is government maintained and changed?

“Life is neither static nor unchanging. With no individuality, there can be no change, no adaptation and, in an inherently changing world, any species unable to adapt is also doomed.”

- Jean M. Auel

Fall Study

One of the ideas that sparked this year’s theme and the questions underlying it was the realization that Charles Darwin and Abraham Lincoln share a birthday -- February 12, 1809. For several years, I have noted this with children, only to be drawn into lengthy conversations about who this “Charles Darwin” was exactly. He’s a familiar name to many, but it often stops there. With that in the back of my mind, when last year’s group became enthralled by the study of prehistoric migration, and I discovered half of those children would be back in the group this year, an idea was born. However, jumping into a topic as big and as consequential as the ideas published by Charles Darwin seemed too big a leap for September. Instead, we took a lot of time to establish a framework. Darwin grew into a naturalist. He was influenced by other important naturalists of his time and by some who preceded him. His work, and the reaction to it, were affected by the worldview of people of his time. How did the common person, religious institutions, and scientists view nature and its origin? And finally, in order to see the adversity that Darwin met in his life in context, what adversity have other naturalists met -- before and after him? How does he fit into this progression of scientists?

To address these questions we read aloud a number of sophisticated, illustrated biographies about naturalists, including: William Bartram, Luke Howard, John James Audubon, Mary Anning, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Theodore Roosevelt, Kate Sessions, George Washington Carver, Rachel Carson, and finally, Jacques Cousteau. Through both listening closely to the text and reading the illustrations carefully, each person in the group took notes (see more on note-taking under “Language and Literature”). Notes were then combined to create a group summary about each person’s field(s) of specialization, the accomplishment for which they were famous, adversity that was faced and perhaps overcome, and other information of interest to the group. As we worked through this list of naturalists, we drew parallels between them, sometimes noting our favorites and even arguing vigorously about who we thought was more worthy of their fame. Unexpectedly, the group was fascinated by seeing some video footage from the old Jacques Cousteau series, knowing that he had pioneered scuba technology as a naturalist underwater. When they asked to watch more at lunch, I also invited my future son-in-law to visit and show the kids his diving equipment and some of his own video footage.

As we were studying the work of these scientists (and children were independently reading biographies of people in a number of fields -- see “Language and Literature”), we were also practicing our own skills as naturalists. In science, Kate was incorporating our study into observational drawing activities. In the classroom -- or generally, outside of it -- each member of the group was keeping a nature journal, in which children were encouraged to include drawings, descriptive writing, poetry, etc. documenting their observations. We did this on the Miquon campus, at Ashford Farm, in Fairmount Park, at the Philadelphia Zoo, and at the Brandywine River Museum. Several children -- and teachers -- wished it could become a half hour or so part of every day.

In order to understand the impact of the idea of natural selection by evolution, we spent time looking at the prevailing views of the day, particularly in Europe. We looked briefly at the views of the people generally, then more closely at what the scientists of the day were thinking. We read several selected stories from *Creation Stories: Creation Stories from Around the World* (retold by Virginia Hamilton). We also learned about the calculations of Irish Archbishop, James Ussher, the idea of “special creation,” and the far-reaching effects of the Industrial Revolution. We also took a brief look at ideas of the scientists whose work affected Darwin most, and compared and contrasted their ideas with what Darwin came to understand to be the origin of species. It was heady stuff in a fifth and sixth grade group (they loved hearing words like “Diluvialism”) and there was a lot of fascinating discussion. Later in January, we caught up with modern science and how it has built upon Darwin’s ideas with the documentary, *What Darwin Never Knew*.

To make the work more concrete, each child was given brief excerpts from Darwin’s extensive diaries, and using the dates and latitude/longitude information connected to those excerpts, created a map of his journey aboard the HMS Beagle from 1831 - 1836. This geography work was complemented by drawings made on the map’s margin, illustrating several of the stops along the way. After winter break, we connected the concrete to the somewhat philosophical again by reading aloud, *The View from the Oak: The Private Worlds of Other Creatures* by Herbert and Judith Kohl. This lesser-known classic children’s science book won the National Book Award for children’s literature. I know from experience in reading it with children this age, that it spurs pondering and scientific wonder like few other books. Our experience was no exception, and the idea of *umwelt* (the world as it is experienced by a particular organism) became a touchstone for the rest of the year in our group.

We built upon the interest in this idea by launching species studies, through which each child would research the *umwelt* of a particular creature, and relate the information through a first person account (in the view of the creature itself) as well as through artwork -- clay and another medium of the student’s choosing. Thanks to Nicole for collaborating on the artistic portion of the project and to Kate, who lent us a wonderful series of books that included each of the creatures chosen. We shared these projects with our first and second grade buddies as well as at the Art and Science Show.

Writing and producing a panto was the work of the winter months, so rather than launch into a mini-study over the winter, as has been typical, we stuck with our February 12th shared birthday (Darwin and Lincoln) and switched gears to begin our Spring study at that point.

Before the war, it was said 'the United States are'—grammatically it was spoken that way and thought of as a collection of independent states. And after the war it was always 'the United States is,' as we say today without being self-conscious at all. And that sums up what the war accomplished. It made us an 'is.'

- Historian, Shelby Foote

Spring Study

So, in mid-February, our study of the American Civil War began as meaningful learning usually does — with questions. Nearly everyone in the group had only passing knowledge of the war, though all seemed to be aware that Lincoln was somehow connected to it. Below is a sample of the questions they raised, which have been posted around our room throughout the entire course of our study:

- *Were all of the states of the U.S. established by the time of the war?*
- *How many slaves were there?*
- *Was the Underground Railroad before or during the war?*
- *Why did the South want slavery and the North did not?*
- *Were there other things (besides slavery) that caused the Civil War?*
- *Were there leaders in the war and who were they?*
- *Was there a leader of the South?*
- *Where was the North/South boundary?*
- *How far north did the war get?*
- *How long did the war last?*
- *How many people died in the Civil War?*
- *How did the war end?*

These questions guided our work together, particularly the group lessons which began with a study of the institution of racial slavery in the Americas and the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, the abolitionist movement against slavery, the economies of different regions of the early United States, and the tension between state and federal governments.

More geography work helped us to understand the idea of The Middle Passage and in our book groups (see “Language and Literature”) we investigated the experience of slavery, slaveholding, escape, and abolitionists in considerable detail. The children did brief research on an individual involved in the abolition of slavery, which they shared with the group, and we also read an issue of Junior Scholastic from a year or two ago that focused on modern day slavery. Finally, in preparation for what we already knew would be a stop at Harpers Ferry on our spring trip, we studied the cause and actions of John Brown. (One of the book groups focused on his life more directly.)

After spring break, we moved into a study of the war itself, preparing ourselves by activities with maps of the US in 1820 (The Missouri Compromise) and after the Compromise of 1850. It was evident to the children that a crisis was building, and the election of Lincoln in 1860 made war imminent. We also created a bulletin board introduction to the war, including faces of a few key leaders, a sample of flags from the Union and the Confederacy, and key expressions and names for the war. We went outside to do some marching and drills along the lines of what soldiers of the time would have learned, and Rich and I brought in artifacts from the war for the kids to handle and ask questions about -- which they did at length. At the same time, we began reading a Gary Paulsen novella of the war called *Soldier's Heart*. This story is vivid and honest, and presented us with some sobering (but not gratuitously violent) portrayals of the reality of war.

We moved through the war itself a year at a time, from April, 1861 through April, 1865. In July, 1861, the First Battle of Bull Run happened at Manassas, Virginia. To study the battle, we did a reader's theater-style read aloud of Paul Fleischman's novel in voices, *Bull Run*. Each of us read aloud the sections of a particular character — northerners, southerners, soldiers, slaves, journalists, bystanders, commanders, enlisted, etc. We also listened to the very moving letter by Sullivan Ballou, famous to historians and made known to the public by Ken Burns' series, *Civil War*. As we have repeatedly told the children, we do recommend taking the time to watch that PBS series, even

though we do not have enough time for it in school. Consider watching it together this summer, perhaps. The children were struck by the tragically incorrect assumption by both sides that this would be a war quickly fought and won, an impression supported by the events at Fort Sumter, during which one horse was the only life lost. They also began to appreciate the huge cost of the mismatch between the rapidly evolving technology of the day and more dated, Napoleonic battle plans, as they combined to create tremendous brutality and high casualties. We paused to learn some terms of military organization (i.e. company, regiment, brigade, corps, etc.), which proved valuable knowledge through the rest of the study).

While the Battle of Bull Run (Manassas) marked a change in mood and set expectation for a longer, more protracted war, the next major battle, Antietam, became the bloodiest single day ever faced by this country — a fact that holds true to this day. The strategic victory of the Union encouraged Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1st of 1863. We studied maps of the land (which was evident on our visit to the battlefield in May) and watched a brief video that outlined the strategy and events of the battle very clearly. The first photographs of the aftermath of war came from this battle as well. We looked at a number of photographs from Mathew Brady, Alexander Gardner, and others. The public was confronted by these images as well, and the romantic idea of battle was challenged while the horrors of war were made much more clear.

Soon after, we entered 1863, and after reading the text of the Emancipation Proclamation, turned our attention to the Battle of Gettysburg. Our primary approach to this was the viewing of the 1993 film, *Gettysburg*, adapted from the historical novel, *The Killer Angels*, by Michael Shaara. This more than four-hour long movie was viewed in chunks, and we stopped for discussion and looked at other resources as we watched. We were also joined for a conversation about the battle by Rich, who read to us from *The Killer Angels* the scene in which the 20th Maine holds onto Little Round Top, so that we could compare the movie, the book, and then that section of Ken Burns' *Civil War*.

By this time, each child had already begun organizing independent research on a Civil War topic of their choosing. They formed lists of resources, did preliminary reading, and created a structure of topics and subtopics. Note-taking took place over more than two weeks. Then, on return from our mid-May trip, each child created a (typically) visual project to use when sharing their information with the rest of the group in the last week of May.

We learned some music and poetry connected to the war throughout our study, but no words were more moving to us than those of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. It was a bittersweet experience to go to Soldier's Cemetery in Gettysburg and to see the place where those words were delivered. We spent a while there, walking along rows of unmarked graves and also taking note of the numbers of bodies listed on each state's marker.

Sherman's March to the Sea, the surrender at Appomattox Court House, and Lincoln's assassination so shortly afterward rounded out our study. A picture book we read, called *The Silent Witness* by Robin Friedman described the ironic coincidence of the McLean family home's role in both the First Battle of Bull Run and the end of the war. The final read-aloud of the study (and the year), *Lincoln Through the Lens: How Photography Revealed and Shaped an Extraordinary Life* (Martin W. Sandler) provided a helpful review of our entire study as well as a closer look at Lincoln himself.

Current Events

We have subscriptions to a news magazine for young people called Junior Scholastic. Although we sometimes use the issues to support particular lessons, the children's favorite approach is to take the magazines for a week and read over them lightly, diving fully into articles, editorial cartoons, or panels that pull their attention -- much the way adults read news magazines. (There is also a significant number of kids in the group who read every issue cover to cover.) After a week, the children suggest five to seven topics from the issue for conversation and we break up into small groups voluntarily to have those discussions. We remind ourselves and each other what makes for good (and bad) conversation, and we debrief afterward about the ideas raised and the quality of our talking.

Among the too many to mention events and questions raised by the news this year and brought into our classroom, the presidential election and its aftermath had the single greatest impact on the group. Having written the outline for a letter to the President-elect without knowing who would win the election, we completed and sent those

letters. After the election, as we dealt with the strong backlash from what was clearly feeling like an increasingly divided country on a number of issues, we were happy to be able to turn to the Election of the National Doughnut, a 5th/6th building tradition. To quote Lynn: “The outcome of the election was an excellent illustration of the ways that predictions can go wrong and that probabilities are not certainties. We worked hard to keep the discussions respectful, reminding everyone that people are not ‘stupid’ because their opinions are different than your own, and that Miquon is a community that not only values and seeks but also contains a range of views. Not every Miquon community member supported Hillary Clinton or Bernie Sanders. No one should feel a need to hide their preference because it is a minority view. Our school-wide campaign for and election of the National Doughnut that followed helped to lighten some of the strong feelings that students were experiencing and seeing at home.”

Throughout the spring, knowing which of the daily stories to discuss in detail with the children has been a challenge. Increasingly, I have been aware of the value of the safe space that Miquon can be for all of us, children and adults. We can have challenging conversations and can also be intentional in protecting our own mental and emotional well-being, which sometimes means choosing not to address every potentially alarming event in the world around us.

Life Skills and Personal Projects

Increasing independence and developing tangible problem-solving skills is a core goal in fifth and sixth grade. Twice a year, first in the fall and again in the spring, we ask students to take three or four weeks to explore a topic, develop a skill, or pursue an interest of their choosing outside of school, and then to present and celebrate their learning with the group as a whole. In the fall, we call this “Life Skills 101.” We ask that the project be practical in nature, and that it be of help or fill a need for someone aside from the child themselves. Each child keeps a journal that includes the project plan and a written reflection on the project as it develops, as well as a calendar of time spent on the project. Afterward, projects are shared with classmates. This year’s projects included: cooking, making an instrument, cleaning, earning and managing money, laundry, learning first aid and babysitting, car and bike repair, and setting up a nail business. In the spring, we lengthen the project to four weeks, and the “practical and helpful” boundary was removed, broadening the possibilities even further. This time, while there was still some cooking going on, we also saw such projects as: yoga, mechanics of hitting and pitching, butterfly knife fanning, writing and performing music, and designing and building a model house.

Changes and Choices

This year in mid-February, the entire fifth and sixth grade took a four-day break from its regularly scheduled activities and curriculum, including work with specialists, and focused on personal development, or “The Story of You.” The week had four components:

1. Digital Citizenship: the place of digital media in a balanced life, cyberbullying, safe online talk, presenting yourself to a bigger world, being an upstander, the idea of a digital footprint
2. Healthy Choices: healthy eating and exercise, body image, substance use and abuse, recognizing pressure from peers and from media (positive and negative), the nature of healthy relationships
3. Human Development (Part I): Human development from conception through puberty to include physical, emotional, cognitive, and social growth.
4. Human Development (Part II): Human development from adolescence through old age, including some work about death and dying

We enjoyed guest speakers, a relevant film, lots of discussion, writing, and some responsive art work. The timing seemed just right; we had been together long enough to be comfortable with one another and still had enough school year left for topics that were raised to resurface later in the year.

Mathematical Thinking

The basis for our mathematics curriculum comes from two places. One is the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) publication, *Focal Points*. It is this document, rather than any particular published program, that informs our goals for each level. The goals listed by the document lend cohesion across the years and emphasize the importance of not “covering” a lot in very little depth -- but instead, of carefully building deeper understanding. The second source is the closely observed developmental readiness of the children themselves. We work very hard to teach them “where they are” when they come to us in fifth and sixth grade. Ideally, each young person is working with us in math close to (and not too far over or under) the edge of what he or she understands. Assumptions are being challenged and new skills or new approaches to developed skills are being learned. This is challenging to maintain, but we do so by being flexible in our use of materials, by using varied grouping structures, and by offering a high degree of individual attention.

Most of our explicit math work is done through small groups which, this year, met Monday through Thursday mornings. The change from the past afternoon schedule to a morning meeting time was appreciated by students and teachers immediately. We felt alert and that we could easily accomplish in four mornings what took five afternoons. These groups were mixed across the building, including all four teachers as group leaders and allowing for groups of learning peers and for smaller groups, where helpful. “Learning peer” is defined as 1) a person whose understanding and skill level is similar, and b) someone whose style and pace is similar. Most often, it’s a bit of both. In these groups, Jeri, Lynn, Mark, and I worked with students using “Primary Mathematics,” other Singapore Math based materials, “Key To...” books by Key Curriculum Press, “Hands-on Equations,” the “Investigations in Number, Data, and Space” curriculum, and a variety of games and activities -- online, teacher created, and in response to the specific questions or struggles of children. In early March, groups were reconfigured, often connecting students with different peers and generally changing teachers.

The year also included intervals during which each classroom worked separately on math -related projects -- this year in September and again in February. In September, we worked on number sense, especially focusing on large numbers, place value, scientific notation, and orders of magnitude. This made lots of sense when connected to our thematic work, because we used the framework of the origin and nature of the cosmos. We also began each math session with a “number of the day,” a several digit number which the children used to review number patterns and computation. This allowed Jeri and I an assessment of those skills as well. In February, we used our growing collection of foreign currency to kick off a mini-unit on money. We were torn between extending it to focus on the history of money or the stock market, and the group chose the latter. We divided the group into four investment teams, and each team chose four publicly traded companies in which to invest a hypothetical \$5000. There was paperwork to be filed, a broker to be paid, and charts to create and complete that recorded the weekly tracking of stocks on the market. Of course, this presented opportunities to learn and practice calculating percentages, creating line graphs, and work with decimals (the stock market no longer works in fractions). The team decision-making process and organization of roles and materials were also important skills.

What follows are the key points of the goals described for 5th and 6th grade programs by NCTM’s *Focal Points*. Reading individual reports, you will find that aspects of the 6th grade list might be studied by your 5th grader, and that some things on the fifth grade list were not fully explored by all fifth graders. We teach the children where they are. Likewise, children who are in a position to move beyond the topics addressed below do so as well, often exploring connections between ideas and the history of mathematical concepts as well as material more commonly taught in later grades.

5th Grade
<i>Number and Operations, Algebra</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Develop understanding and fluency with division, using understanding of place value and the relationship of multiplication to division > Use the context of the problem to determine the most appropriate form for the quotient (including the remainder) > Develop understanding and fluency with addition and subtraction of fractions and decimals, including problems involving measurement
<i>Geometry, Measurement, and Algebra</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Develop understanding of 2dimensional shapes, including formulae for perimeter and area > Develop understanding of 3dimensional shapes, including concepts of volume and surface area > Explore data analysis, including graphing and ordered pairs on coordinate grids

6th Grade
<i>Number and Operations, Algebra</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Develop fluency with multiplication and division of decimals, multiplication and division of mixed numbers and fractions, and addition and subtraction of mixed numbers and fractions with unlike denominators > Understand the proportional nature of ratio and rate > Write, understand, and use mathematical expressions and equations
<i>Geometry and Measurement</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Identify, describe, and construct 3dimensional shapes, extending the 5th grade work in this area > Analyze their properties, including surface area and volume > Find and justify formulae for area, perimeter of 2D shapes, and surface area and volume of polyhedra and prisms.

Language and Literature

Storytime

Sharing literature aloud together is a high priority in our classroom and a central component of curriculum. At least three mornings a week we aim to have storytime (read-aloud) from 8:30 - 9:00, sometimes sneaking it into other cracks in the day that become available. The books we choose often, but not necessarily, tie into our thematic studies, at least to the big questions or ideas involved, if not to a particular period of time or place. Storytime is when unfamiliar words and expressions are met most meaningfully, when we focus on the intent and technique of an author, when we are quite naturally taken deeply into conversations about important questions in life. They are, quite possibly, my favorite time of the teaching day.

Our storytime this year was a bit unusual. Rather than beginning the year with a novel — typically a classic — the material was tied more specifically to our thematic study, and we read a significant number of biographies of naturalists. They were from the picture book genre, which is not to say simple, but brief enough to complete in a few sittings. We studied the illustrations as well as the text, as a focal point of our literature work this year was reading images. We met naturalists who were unfamiliar to both the teachers and the students, as in Luke Howard, the

chemist and amateur meteorologist of Julie Hannah's, *The Man Who Named the Clouds*. We also taught context to names familiar to the children, but not really known, such as John James Audubon, and gave particular attention to important heroes in this work, like George Washington Carver, John Muir, and Rachel Carson.

When we finished the biographies, we read aloud stories from *In the Beginning: Creation Stories from Around the World*, again connected to our theme. This well-regarded collection of stories, retold by Virginia Hamilton, presents the stories *and* their cultural contexts. This complemented well the learning we were doing about worldview prior to the work of Charles Darwin, helping us to develop context for that work.

Our next read-aloud, *The View from the Oak* by Herbert and Judith Kohl, turned out to be a central text for the entire first half of the year. This is a work of ethology. Ethology is the scientific and objective study of animal behavior, with a focus on behavior under natural conditions, and viewing behavior as an evolutionarily adaptive trait. It explores the ways in which creatures experience space and time and the ways in which they communicate with each other. In short, and to use the term in the book — it describes their *umwelts*. *The View from the Oak* describes just one fascinating mini-experiment or experience after another, and we kept a list of those that interested us and tossed around the idea of having an “Umwelt Day” — a day of carrying out those experiments. This idea fizzled by the time we finished, but we had many, many fascinating conversations, some of which extended into conversations at other points in the day, about the *big ideas* presented in the book, ideas that would not typically be found in 5th or 6th curriculum guides, but that engaged this group thoroughly.

There were a few other brief forays into topical literature -- on coins, snowflakes, and even *Dia's Cloth* (a book about Hmong story-cloths which we read to explore images telling stories). However, nothing felt like a read-aloud to us again -- and we missed it! -- until we began reading Gary Paulsen's *Soldier's Heart* after spring break. I found this book after rereading *Red Badge of Courage*, thinking it could be the next choice and finding it powerful, but its language far too arcane. Paulsen wrote *Soldier's Heart* in connection to Stephen Crane's famous novella. The group found the book sobering, compelling, and a useful touchstone for understanding the soldier's perspective and experience in the Civil War.

As noted earlier, we finished the year by reading *Lincoln Through the Lens: How Photography Revealed and Shaped an Extraordinary Life* (Martin W. Sandler). This tied into our year-long conversation about the power and meaning of images, as well as to our Civil War study, also bringing the Darwin-Lincoln connection full circle.

Book Groups

Book groups are a much-anticipated piece of our literature program. Usually, several times a year we present a number of books to the group by “book talking” them -- introducing the plot, setting, genre, and theme, and inviting the children to choose between them, ranking their first three or four choices. Sometimes the books offered have been suggested to us by children, sometimes chosen by teachers, and sometimes selected for connections to our theme. We try to give children their first choices, while being sure that each group has at least three members, but not too many. The groups then meet weekly, first to be introduced to the book more fully, then for conversation, further exploration of ideas or questions, and to negotiate the next week's reading assignment. We include Amy Vaccarella, and Jen Curyto in our groups, depending on their availability.

Since we had spent extended periods of time on individual reading of biographies, for species study, and of independent research topics about the Civil War, this year we had two book group sessions. The first session's choices were connected by their references to ancient history, science, and/or discovery:

- *The Evolution of Calpurnia Tate* by Jacqueline Kelly
- *My Side of the Mountain* by Jean Craighead George
- *Same Stuff as Stars* by Katherine Paterson
- *A Bone from a Dry Sea* by Peter Dickinson

Afterward, two of the groups prepared skits to share their stories, one made a “newspaper” of the day, and used it to tell about the book. The fourth group built a diorama of the physical environment which was central to the story (*A Bone from a Dry Sea*) -- complete with rocks, dirt, and water -- and used it as a basis for a retelling of key points.

Later, book groups reformed, this time around the idea of slavery. It made more sense to take a deeper dive into the topic with small groups of children, and then invite them to share their insights with the whole class. This time, groups read:

- *Nightjohn* and *Sarney*, both by Gary Paulsen

This pair of books (the original and sequel) -- as any of the children in the group would attest -- powerfully reveals the physical and emotional pain that a slave master could subject his slaves to, and how much control slaves did not have over their lives. *Sarney* takes a risk to enrich her own life through education, and Gary Paulsen shows how a young person has the potential to change the course of her future, which is explored much further in *Sarney*. *Nightjohn* also shows how one man's bravery to teach and his loyalty to others can make a difference against a powerful institution, such as slavery.

- *Jayhawker* by Patricia Beatty

I found copies of this book in Lynn's collection. The characters here take a back seat to the excitement of skillfully reconstructed historical events; "Bloody Kansas" emerges in a story complemented by real events and people (carefully differentiated from the fictional characters in a lengthy author's note, and in the group's presentation by making some characters in their re-telling photographs and others pencil drawings). A gripping story that also led the group to learn far more about John Brown.

- *Elijah of Buxton* by Christopher Paul Curtis

Eleven-year-old Elijah Freeman lives in Canada's Buxton settlement, also known as the Elgin Settlement, a refuge for freed slaves and their families. As the first free-born child, Elijah has heard about, but never experienced, slavery. He enjoys a peaceful life attending church and school with wise, loving parents and kind community members. He also works with Mr. Leroy, a man saving to buy his wife and children out of slavery. Elijah struggles to prove himself, so this is a coming-of-age story as well as a look beyond the stereotypes at the culture of escaped slaves and free blacks.

- *Day of Tears* by Julius Lester

This is a novel told in dialogue, and affecting as perhaps only Julius Lester can be. The largest slave auction ever to occur on American soil is also sometimes known as "The Weeping Time," and it took place in Savannah, Georgia, on March 2nd and 3rd, 1859. This short novel tells the tale of several families' (and one plantation's) participation, enslaved and slaveholder. It paints a picture of complex relationships, heartache, cruelty, and humanity that bears reading by all.

Word Study

Word study, or "word work" as we generally called it, was a part of our learning together for the last couple months of the year. While we attended to word structure all year (i.e. prefixes and suffixes) and to a good deal of new vocabulary, especially that tied to our thematic work, more formal word study groups, which were led by me, Jeri, and Jen Curyto, began this spring. Two groups worked primarily with Greek and Latin roots, using *Vocabulary from Classical Roots - Level 6* as a primary text. Some of their time was spent in word conversation -- the kind of talk that often takes one down the roads of history, culture, science, etc. The groups did short writing games and exercises, and particularly enjoyed learning the "challenge" words in each section of the text. Another group tackled roots, prefixes, and suffixes, as well, using *Megawords 5*, but at a different pace and attending more to word and spelling patterns, and playing more vocabulary games. The fourth group, working with Jen, spent the two months looking at mentor texts and creating their own short written pieces, aiming to read more like writers. Spelling lists for study were pulled from their own writing, and they also took the opportunity to work with each other around issues of punctuation and writing skills such as varying sentence length.

Writing

Writing is a strand of the language and literature curriculum that crosses disciplines readily, and includes practical as well as creative tasks. Children explain their mathematical thinking; they wrote balanced responses

about events and work in the classroom; they created blog entries about recent events in our classroom and with specialists are written for publication.

One of the most important new areas of focus for writing in fifth and sixth grade is note-taking. In math activities, thematic work, and in literature activities, we emphasize taking notes *not* by “copying” what the teacher says or writes on a topic, but by recording the gist of an idea and any examples that will make the information memorable and meaningful. I remind children to note the date as well as title their notes, and also to glance at their notes with this question in mind: “If I read these a couple of months from now, would I remember what this means?” One sign of the success of this approach that math groups regularly asked me to pause between activities so that they could record some notes for remembering what we had been doing later on. Note-taking, particular around social studies, was done when listening, when viewing media, in discussions, and especially when reading for research.

The group also wrote pieces in nature journals, did descriptive and sensory writing, wrote letters to the President-elect (which turned out to be an important review of the letter form for many). At the group’s request, we got a cursive alphabet for display in our room and did some cursive practice as well. They also asked me to write on the board in cursive when possible, so that they could improve at reading it.

The species study, completed late this winter, was the largest individual writing project of the year. The group created a scaffold of subtopics for study, then each child took notes -- some on computer documents and others with paper and pencil. These notes were organized into paragraphs, after first being transformed into creative nonfiction by adding a first person perspective.

The largest collaborative writing piece was our panto. This enormous undertaking began with attending a performance of the panto, *Sleeping Beauty*, at People’s Light Theatre in Malvern. We prepared for that theater experience by studying the elements of a panto, and afterward, noted how each element was present in what we had seen. Then, using those same elements as well as a kind of flow chart written by an experienced panto writer as our guide, we set out to choose a familiar story around which to base ours, and we got down to work. Once we had chosen “Hansel and Gretel” as our story -- to be complemented by characters from a variety of other stories -- we divided into small committees, each tasked with writing one of the 12 loosely outlined scenes. The writing involved reworking song lyrics, writing both visual and verbal jokes, and creating action cues. Once we believed we had the first half of the script drafted, we did a read through and the group members suggested revisions. This involved significant debate about humor and timing, character consistency, and tone. We then moved on to the second half of the script, repeating the process. Finally, we casted the play and began rehearsing. Even then, small revisions were suggested and implemented along the way.

Of course, for the sixth graders, speech writing in preparation for graduation also looms large. This process, also, is heavily scaffolded, as each child chooses a quotation and then develops what amounts to a three paragraph essay. The speeches are planned to speak directly to particular segments of the audience and from a specific time focus. I never fail to be impressed by the self-knowledge on full display. These pieces are generally minimally edited with a teacher; the children speak powerfully from their hearts, and with just a little structure, the rest takes care of itself.

Speaking

Early in the year, we played games like “Extemporaneous Speaking” during which children addressed the group for one minute on a nearly nonsensical topic, focusing on eliminating “fillers” and maintaining eye contact all while trying to think of something reasonable to say after less than a minute of preparation. We extended this with minor speaking opportunities, such as weekly whole group check-ins, and impromptu presentations of one’s thinking or problem-solving ideas.

In the first weeks of school, each child prepared a slide introduction of themselves to the class using Google. (These slides also became portfolio covers.) It was a chance to review or learn some Google tools use as well as a first oral presentation to the class. Book groups prepare and present to the class in a variety of formats. Research projects are presented, sometimes formally, sometimes to audiences of one or two as people circulate

through the room. Children are encouraged to answer the class phone and to make phone calls to businesses and organizations as needed. Feedback (positive and suggestions) is offered by adults and by peers so that the larger experiences -- presenting the Life Skills 101 Projects, Personal Projects, facilitating Good of the School meetings, etc. -- are just parts of a much bigger lesson.

Graduation speeches also present a major speaking opportunity for sixth graders. We see it as a culmination of years of work in this important, yet sometimes less considered, strand of language and literature education. Even reluctant speakers, nervous about this final, very public presentation have to agree that they are prepared for it.

Conference Weeks

Thanks to Jeri and Mark for the wonderful, interesting conference weeks they have organized twice this year, which Jeri describes below.

As we often choose to do, we combined the two 5th/6th classes for both conference weeks this year. Our theme in the Fall was *Inventions and Inventors*. Science teacher Kate and retired Miquon teacher, Diana Saraga, joined us for a week of exploration and critical thinking about problem solving, creativity and inventing.

But first, we spent Monday morning at the SHARE food bank. The children were very productive relabeling, folding and stuffing envelopes, and weighing and packing three pound bags of potatoes for families in need. The children worked for about an hour and a half, and we had to tear them away to get back to school. Once we returned, we worked on the math involved in their SHARE activities. From calculating just how many total pounds of potatoes they packed (3,500), how many 3lb. bags of potatoes they packed (1,167) and how many envelopes they manipulated and stuffed (436), to the 'real-world math' of determining how they might feed a family of five for one week with just \$60 and an itemized price list of common household foods and goods. We were all totally impressed by their numbers.

Then we turned to our theme for the week. We looked at unfamiliar and curious items and asking questions like 'What is that?', 'What did we do before....?', 'How did people think of that?'. We also tackled ideas about inventions - 'Inventing is for everyone', 'Invention and design are ongoing processes that require collaboration between creators and users', 'Changing and improving existing designs', and 'Inventing to address today's needs'. In addition to working on problem solving, challenging projects ("Can your team make a sustained standing structure out of newspaper?"), playing games, we thoroughly enjoyed a visit from Chris Kinka, co-inventor of The Game of STONES, on Wednesday afternoon. "STONES is a ball toss game played through a defined course with obstacles and boundaries. Teams throw their stones at a target ball with the closest ones scoring points. With each round, the target ball advances on the course, and when the end of the course is reached, the team with the most points wins." We had a great Q&A session with Chris, and then we went outside and had a lot of fun playing it.

In the spring, we launched a week of discovery as we explored the Harlem Renaissance. We welcomed two substitute teachers, Annmarie Budniak and Jacqueline Weaver Jonas, to work with us and the children. Together they brought unique perspectives on creative writing, storytelling and cooking, respectively. We started the week talking about the Great Migration to give us contextual continuity with studies both groups have done. We connected what we learned from the Civil War study in Diane and Jeri's group and the Exodusters study in Lynn and Mark's group. Hopefully, our learners walked away understanding the significance of the Great Migration to broad cultural changes in this country during the twentieth century. We unpacked mobility, communities, movements, and the reasons and process of migration, connecting its impact on African Americans, as well as the social and political impact on the country overall.

With a solid foundation, we delved into the cultural, social and artistic explosion that took place in Harlem. Writers, actors, scholars, historians, musicians, photographers, dancers and visual artists, along with 175,000 other black people flocked to one neighborhood between the end of WWI and the middle of the 1930s and we took a close look at what this era was like. We read many biographies of Harlem Renaissance personalities, explored *David's Jar* and the poetry embedded in his pottery, studied and imitated visual artist Romare Bearden's "The Block," looked at a variety of poets and writers, and musicians and music, had a chance to 'Choose Your Own Adventure in the

Harlem Renaissance”, and work through a comparison of poems - Walt Whitman's, “I Hear America Singing” with Langston Hughes’s response, “I, too Sing America. ”

We ended the week working together to create a feast of Southern cooking that made it’s way up to Harlem during this transformative period. We made “hoppin’ John” (black eyed peas and rice), collard greens and from-scratch cornbread. These recipes have been shared with all of the children on their Google accounts. Be sure to download a copy before the year ends. It was definitely the highlight of the week, with some children having up to three servings!

Overall, we had two fun conference weeks of exploration, big ideas, art, science and great food. We packed in a lot and learned a lot in both weeks.

Culminating Trip

A student-planned trip has become a highly anticipated part of a year in Diane and Jeri’s group. This year, the goal of a significant collaborative project -- and the time required to complete it -- was filled by our panto, so the teachers put together the details of the trip. We use the profit raised by our pizza lunch sales to completely finance the trip. We are able to pay for a full three day, two night adventure!

The trip was built primarily around Civil War sites. We began early in the morning of Wednesday, May 17th, with a drive to Gettysburg National Military Park. We headed out right away with two wonderful guides, Kavin and Bob. Each van had a somewhat different two hour tour experience, guided by the interest and expertise of the guides as well as our own questions and the requests we had made in advance to highlight particular pieces of the second day of battle. After these active tours, we returned to the visitor center for our picnic lunch and then a visit to the orientation film, cyclorama, and museum. The group enjoyed those pieces of the trip. Those of us who happened to be near a museum docent who showed us a couple of special artifacts in his personal possession were especially excited. He had one of only 24 gold medals made to honor Ulysses S. Grant and let those near him see it quite up close! The children were delighted by the inexpensive and plentiful dinner they were able to find at Ott’s House in Emmitsburg, Maryland. It was across the street from the place where we had intended to eat, but like in all travel -- you make plans, then adjust.

After swimming in the hotel pool that night and a hotel breakfast in the morning, we headed to Antietam National Battlefield, where after a brief orientation film, our tour was more self-guided. The group had studied the landscape of the site fairly closely in class, so this made a lot of sense to them. We were moved by the Dunker Church and the Sunken Road, in particular, and thrilled with the smaller scale and reasonable prices of the gift shop. We spent just a few hours in historic, nearby Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, completing a scavenger hunt that required we read maps, infer information from signs, cross the Potomac River on a footbridge, and climb a hill to the top of town. Whew! A bit of rain was a relief, and when our planned restaurant decided to close early...we adjusted once again and stopped to eat on the way to our hotel in Gaithersburg, Maryland, much closer to Washington, D.C.

The kids, pretty worn out from two days’ activity, stayed in their separate rooms that evening, playing and performing skits together. After a hearty breakfast, we spent Friday, May 19th in the D.C. area. The temperature was in the low 90s all three days, but the third day was also more humid, making the visit to Arlington National Cemetery, then the walk across a bridge over the river to the Lincoln Memorial quite taxing. We stopped often for brief breaks and reminded ourselves what soldiers wore and carried as they marched and fought in the Civil War. Finally, we arrived for lunch and a visit to the National Museum of Natural History. Nearly everyone spent an extended time in the Hall of Human Origins (a nod to our fall study), and most visited other exhibits as well.

Every child and adult was happy for the Metro ride back to Arlington Cemetery and for climbing back aboard our vans. Except for a torrential hail storm, pretty well-timed to match our dinner stop, it was a safe, uneventful ride back to Miquon.

Thanks to every child in the group for being flexible, open-minded, and enthusiastic travelers. Special thanks to our third chaperone, Rich Murray, who may have enjoyed the trip most of all, as he got to learn more about a favorite topic of his (the Civil War). Jeri and I have come to expect the independence and resourcefulness

and all-for-one attitude we see in this group. It was fun to see Rich enjoy and appreciate it, and helped us to see it more clearly as well.

Before the war, it was said 'the United States are'—grammatically it was spoken that way and thought of as a collection of independent states. And after the war it was always 'the United States is,' as we say today without being self-conscious at all. And that sums up what the war accomplished. It made us an 'is.'

- Historian, Shelby Foote

In Closing

What a year it has been! Personal Project presentations in the last full week of school offer a glimpse into that development as the children -- poised and demonstrating growth in maturity, skill, and confidence -- address and take questions from an audience. We were enormously proud of and impressed by every child in the group, and it is clear that the diversity of interests and personal styles is a key element to the strength of the group (and the school). Graduation and skit night -- fun, poignant, and well-executed -- provided similar views and we marvel at the good fortune we have to work with such children every day.

Thank you, first and foremost, to the children in this group. You are an enthusiastic, fun-loving, kind, and deeply curious group of young people. You are consistently the best part of every day I spend at Miquon. I appreciate your love of puns, the barely-controlled chaos left in your wake as you move from one incredibly creative project to another, and your earnest concern for each other and for the people and problems of the world.

Sixth graders, we really do anticipate your return visit(s) and care excited to hear all your news about your next steps -- good news, bad news, funny news -- bring it all when you visit us! We know your next schools are lucky for getting the gift of your talents. We will miss you as well. It was a special joy to know all of the sixth graders in the group for two years, and to feel such strong connections with all of them. We stand in wonder of the growth that is evident in these wonderful young people and in the loving care they show one another and the rest of the community.

Thank you, also, to the families of our group. Your partnership is key to everything we do. You are your children's first and most important educators, and we rely on your insights and knowledge of your own child as well as your willingness to assume good intention.

Lynn and Mark, you have been wonderful neighbors, collaborators and team members. Lynn, to say your retirement is the epitome of understatement. We will miss you in more ways than we can comprehend. Mark, it is exciting to work with you in a new capacity as assistant teacher in my room next year. I look forward to having the energy you bring to the whole building in my classroom as well.

Thanks so much to Jeri, in particular, whose ability to embrace the not-quite-formed vision of all of the group, including me, gets us through our ambitious ideas without too much collateral damage. Your talents as a director have been even more important than usual this year. I look forward to our continued relationship next year from across the building.

Have a summer of learning, adventure, and hopefully, some relaxing change of pace!

Diane