

2016-2017 Fifth and Sixth Grade Curriculum Report

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Our Classroom Community

“One can acquire everything in solitude except character.”

-- Stendhal (1783 - 1842)

The first part of the year is always focused on building our community. This year’s group was comprised of 16 students: six girls and ten boys, nine sixth graders and seven fifth graders. Our overnight camp-out at the start of the year is one of the ways that we work to support relationships and build mutual respect. As students spend many hours together away from the familiar Miquon setting, it’s a bit easier to try new things, find successful ways of working with people who are not already close friends, reconnect with classmates from past years, and establish new relationships. In addition to being very important to our students, their social world is the basis for an essential part of our curriculum in many different ways.

One of the ways that we strengthen our students’ sense of belonging to their classroom community is through our overnight camping trips. Year ago, we did just one, at first -- in the fall, to start out with an opportunity to get to know each other better outside of the expectations and constraints of the classroom. After some years, we realized that closure was also important. In the first few years, we camped overnight at school near the creek where we now have monkeybars. (We had graduation there, too, with kids sitting in folding chairs and families sitting on blankets, but that’s a story for another time.) When Tony and I moved to our house and land in Upper Bucks County outside of Quakertown at the end of 1971, we created a campsite on our forested grounds. It’s been relocated over the years (closer to the house to accommodate its aging hosts) but is still where we have gone with the kids more years than not. There is something about spending many hours working and playing together in a natural setting that helps us all get to know each other better. This year’s year-end campout took place in perfect weather. It was a time of saying goodbye, discovering the growth and changes that had happened since we camped at the same site in September, and enjoying our time together in this wild and enormous setting one more time.

Our learning goals for students include things that they will need to use in their lives far more often than knowing how to do long division or where to put commas in a list. We want them to be confident, inclusive, empathetic, peaceful members of their communities, now and in the future. We want them to make good choices about their own behavior and their response to that of others. We want them to have the resources to resolve disagreements and conflicts, and to choose understanding and compromise over revenge and resentment. We want them to take responsibility for both the intended and unintended consequences of their words and actions, to learn how to make and accept an apology, and to let go of past events in order to make a fresh start and allow others (and themselves) to change and grow. We want them to notice when something needs to be done and do it if they can. We want them to take a stand against hurtful behavior when it happens around them, to trust adults to help them solve problems and guide their important decisions, and to remain true to their values in the face of peer pressure.

Obviously, this enormous body of learning must take place outside of school as well as within it, and family guidance is essential. But we give it a lot of classroom time. Sometimes it’s embedded in a history lesson or a story that is extended to point out a parallel within our own society or classroom. It’s easy for students the age of ours to declare a distant war to be “stupid” or respond to accounts of racism, ethnic or religious prejudice, and genocide with scathing disapproval. It’s much harder for them to recognize similar situations on a smaller and more personal scale within their daily lives at school. Excluding a classmate from a lunch table, hitting when angry, challenging a classmate for territory (such as a chair in the room), mocking a child during a team game, saying something hurtful on the bus, changing one’s seat when another child sits down in an adjacent chair . . . none of it is as serious as a war, gang attack, or repressive government policy, but it’s on the same destructive continuum of us

against them. So we take their growth as community members just as seriously as we do their mastery of academic skills. Sometimes a few children eat lunch with an adult or two to discuss a problem that came up during morning choice. We listen, ask questions, offer advice, and try to keep all of the focus on moving forward to better decisions in the future. By the time our children head off to middle school, we hope they will know how to join, include, negotiate, compromise, volunteer, forgive, empathize, speak up, trust, and make a positive contribution to their ever-widening world. It may well be the most valuable curriculum goal that we can achieve together.

We also worked on extending our community beyond our room. We looked for ways to engage with our fifth/sixth grade neighbors in Diane and Jeri's group, many of whom have been classmates in the past. We met together for a sing on Wednesday mornings, sometimes doing songs that related to a classroom focus of study but often just building their familiarity with American folk and iconic music (such as songs from the Beatles and the Coasters). Most Mondays were "mix-it-up" lunchtimes when students from both groups ate together in randomly-chosen table groups..

We continued the occasional Good-of-the-Building meetings that we began last year. These were gatherings of all of our fifth and sixth grade students to address conflicts and unwanted patterns of behavior which were generally (though not always) convened by the students themselves. This year, we spent a lot of time discussing the way our students were playing games at choice time. The topics that the children brought up had largely to do with playing by the rules, especially in the all-campus tag games and -- earlier in the year -- the 4-square game. The issues of rule-breaking, teasing or aggressive language, and unfair play continued to the end. They were never able to get full cooperation from everyone, although things did seem to improve for a while after each discussion.

We also established our connection to our younger buddies. It's important for our children to be mentors and to be mentored. Shared reading, games, and exploration with building materials all bring these two age groups together on common ground. As always, we struggled to find time and schedule flexibility for this and did not do as much as we would have liked.

Finally, we reached beyond our campus periodically to select people who had applied to Kiva for small loans that we could help fund from our lunch sale profits. Selecting those recipients was a rotating job among others on our weekly chart. We talked often about the challenges that such people face -- ignored by banks, most living in remote areas with limited resources and little access to transportation, often as single parents responsible for many family members, often poorly educated -- but still determined to improve their lives, start a business, educate their children, and make their dreams into something real. The fact that our money was a loan and not an outright gift meant that it would circle back to Kiva to be loaned again, a more sustainable approach than a donation. The students' concept of their community can and should be much larger than our classroom or our campus.

Instruction and Instructional Grouping

"I can do things you cannot. You can do things I cannot. Together, we can do great things."

-- Mother Teresa (1910 - 1997)

This year's group, as always, represented a wide range of cognitive and physical maturation, learning styles, interests, working pace, and acquired skills. They spanned more than two full years in age, and the spread was greater than that in other ways. So it was important (as it always is) to take those differences into account as we planned our lessons and projects and made decisions about partners, teams, and half-groups for specialists.

We collected homework at the start of every day, and we tried to get it checked or at least looked at by the time the related classes started. This gave us a chance to modify our plans for the group or for just one student if it turned out that more (or less) had been understood from the previous day's work than we had expected. We tried help students understand that homework was not a test but a kind of communication about their learning achievement and learning needs.

There are several ways that we seek to individualize instruction. One way is through multiple entry points. That is, students can work on the same topic but begin it at a level suited to their own knowledge, experience, and learning style. Another way to individualize is through multiple exit points. Students begin a topic at the same place, but some go more quickly and/or more deeply than others. Some may be reviewing and consolidating while others are exploring new territory. A third way is through teams and partnerships. As students work together on a project, they contribute in different ways, and all learn from the conversations that take place as things are explained and decided. A fourth way is to take advantage of our half-group instructional time and create quarter-groups that might be based on skills or interests. No instructional group remained intact for the entire year. We grouped and regrouped many times for mathematics, language arts, and social studies. No child consistently dominated or trailed behind, and everyone had a chance to demonstrate expertise to all of their classmates.

Working partnerships and teams were usually, but not always, created by the teachers. We defined year-long partnership lists that we used for many things, such as doing our weekly recycling collection for all of the classrooms. We tried to put together pairs and small groups whose skills and styles would complement each other. We looked for balanced combinations of talents: fast typists, good artists, strong readers, detail-managers, creative problem-solvers, and the like. Sometimes we just put together groups that didn't seek each other out socially, in the hope that side conversations would lead to more appreciation of each other and perhaps spark some new friendships.

Whatever decisions we made about instructional grouping, we tried to avoid making assumptions that could restrict a student's growth or choices by believing that there was an upper limit on how much a child could learn or achieve.

Our Curriculum

"Education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world."

-- Nelson Mandela (1918 - 2013)

A lot of this will be familiar to those of you who have read the August newsletters and (especially) the mostly-weekly blog that we have published during the year, where our days were often described in much richer detail. There just isn't enough room here to do more than provide goals, brief lists, and a few examples. Our blog (<http://landm2011.edublogs.org/>) contains photographs, anecdotes, and sometimes children's work. We urge you to go there to get a much clearer sense of our year.

Although our program is presented in this report as separate subject areas, there was extensive cross-curricular instruction that, in our opinion, is one of the essential elements of meaningful education. Daily life is not divided into subject areas, and it would be very dull if it were.

We believe that our curriculum should serve three broad goals. Children need learning tools, values, and self-respect. Learning tools include skills and knowledge. These are acquired and refined over a long period of time. We look for progress rather than perfection. Values form the basis for many important things, including behavior and social judgment. We teach these by examining the behavior (and its consequences) of others in our world, by learning about the social rules and underlying beliefs of cultures including but not limited to our own, and by setting appropriately high standards for our own community. We give public recognition to students who make significant contributions to a positive social tone, generally in the form of praise when we see it occur. Self-respect seems to arise from many sources, including setting and meeting goals, persevering successfully in the face of difficulty, and feeling appreciated and important within one's family and other social groups. We take everyone seriously as a learner and as a community member, and we offer many opportunities for accomplishment. With those three things under construction, a fourth element becomes important – strong interests. A desire to do, learn, create, or improve something provides the impetus that gives those first three goals a purpose.

Social Studies

“Just because I had to go didn’t mean I wanted to leave.”

— Eric Smith (1982 -)

Our thematic studies this year focused on three different overarching topics, all of which relate to the impact of population movement and migration: the westward expansion of the United States in the 19th century, the history of Ireland, and the forced displacement of ethnic Japanese on our west coast after the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Art, music, science, stories, beliefs and traditions, food, games, social rules, influential people, the natural environment, and major events were among the areas that individual children investigated as research projects and that we also explored as a group. We had a large library of print and visual resources to support all three topics, some of which were donated by families in response to the hard work of several board committees.

Driving questions that were an underpinning of all of this work include:

- How can we learn about the past, and how accurate or biased is our information?
- Why do once-thriving civilizations collapse?
- Why do people move – by force or by choice or a combination of the two?
- What happens when two very different cultures encounter each other?
- When people change the environment, what else changes?
- How do communities form, and what sustains, weakens, or divides them?
- How is our current world influenced and shaped by the past?

We started with a multi-week imaginary journey to Oregon as part of a wagon train in the mid-1840s. In the course of this adventure, which went on from September through December, students became wiser decision-makers, learned new things about the geography and natural environment of the land west of the Mississippi, gained skill as teammates and negotiators, improved their writing skills, and acquired more American history information. They researched and shared with their classmates aspects of the culture and daily life of the Native Americans of the plains and prairie. They learned about the Exodusters, formerly-enslaved people who went west from southern states to Kansas after the end of Reconstruction in the hope of finding a better and safer life for themselves and their descendants.

Students gained some understanding of the conflict some of those migrations caused -- the indigenous peoples’ desire to preserve their way of life while struggling with other people whose hopes and dreams were inextricably tied to moving into Native American lands and displacing those who called it home. We discussed the recent conflict over the Dakota Access Pipeline and the people at the Standing Rock reservation, recognizing that it is really one more chapter in the complicated struggle for Native American rights and self-determination that has spanned centuries and has no end in sight. As our class saw over and over through the year, one group’s benefit from migration almost always leads to a corresponding negative impact on at least one other group. Our goal was for our students to understand that there are always multiple perspectives on migration and to consider them all with an open mind.

Students built dulcimers from kits that we got from a company called Backyard Music and learned to play them. We learned some songs that would have been sung by the pioneers on their journey. Some were sad, some were funny, and some clearly expressed the hopes and fears that would have been on the travelers’ minds.

After winter break, we went back in time to learn about the many peoples who settled in what we now call Ireland. (The mummies’ play that we did in the winter assembly was a lighthearted introduction to some of the traditions that are still part of Irish culture today.) This was a very ambitious topic, as it was not just a portion of Irish history but went from the earliest beginnings to the present time. The main goal of this study was understanding Ireland as an example of ongoing migration, emigration, and change. As waves of different peoples settled in or colonized Ireland through the centuries, there were groups that were pushed out, groups that were subjugated, groups that were assimilated, and groups that prevailed. Language, religion, and laws were affected.

Invasions, rebellions, famine, partition, and their 20th century civil war shaped many aspects of the country as it is today.

We started with the geology of the earth and the movement of tectonic plates that determined the physical environment of the island. Stories from *The Book of Invasions* set the stage for continual migrations in mythology as well as in fact. Students learned to play the pennywhistle and mastered a lot of traditional songs and tunes. We enjoyed folk tales filled with magic, heroes, deities, and fairies. We turned a few of them into skits that we shared with our first/second grade buddies. At the end of the year, we did a play based on *The Táin*, part of the Ulster Cycle. Students did a bit of work with the Irish language and observed how different it is from English. Students enjoyed watching a video of last year's Senior Hurling Championship, a major Gaelic sport. We also watched *Into the West*. This is a delightful film that enabled students to learn a bit about the Irish "travelers" and their nomadic way of life, which has led to some conflict with the demands and expectations of the modern Irish world.

In our third unit, we returned to the United States to learn about the impact of the bombing of Pearl Harbor on a portion of our population. Executive Order 9066 required all people of Japanese ethnicity who were living in specific zones on the west coast to move to concentration camps created by the national government. Our original plan had been to do this when the Irish study ended, but we changed it to a literature-based activity that began and ended while we were still learning about Ireland, as there was not going to be time for it otherwise .

We also learned about the Presidential election – how one gets to be President, the influence of campaign ads and rhetoric, the powers of and limitations on the presidency, and the 3-part structure of the national government. We lightened up the heavy elements by electing the National Doughnut. This activity was an exploration of voting methods and the mathematics behind them. Students in both 5th/6th classrooms ran campaigns for six candidates, led a school-wide election, and celebrated by devouring the winner.

In general, our goals for social studies encompass information, skills, concepts, and attitudes. Children need to know a certain amount of "stuff" in order to be effective members of their society, and that includes but is not limited to history. Things are best learned in a meaningful context and built layer on layer over time.

Skills for social studies at this age include:

- the efficient use of resource materials and their access structures such as indices;
- understanding maps and mastering common geography vocabulary;
- the interpretation of statistical tables and charts;
- strategies for previewing, reading, and skimming informational text;
- basic methods for presenting information in well-organized and content-appropriate ways; and
- methods for note-taking and summarizing.

Concepts and attitudes, along with values, cover a wide range of ideas such as these:

- successful inventions and practices are the result of many people's contributions and effort that have accumulated and blended over time;
- we are not "smarter" than people of the past or present who had/have simpler tools;
- when people trade goods, they are also likely to exchange ideas;
- cultures have different ways of fulfilling basic goals such as housing, education, and social order, but there are many features in common across societies and time periods;
- cultures are often shaped by their environment: location, resources, climate, terrain;
- although cultures and societies have had many different attitudes about such things as genocide and slavery, we should not feel less certain of our own social values and rules as we try to understand theirs; and
- history is usually written by the winners and sometimes edited later to fit current beliefs and values.

Throughout our explorations of history and current events, we worked on many related skills and concepts: map-making and interpretation, basic geography and natural resources of the United States and other regions of the world, how environment can shape culture, what can happen when different cultures collide, the Constitutional basis and structure of the U. S. government, the creation and use of graphs and tables, reading techniques appropriate to information-dense text, and effective use of reference books and other resource materials. Students developed better skills for using print, video, and electronic sources. We did a number of short inquiry projects, ones that gave students repeated experience in using their research and writing skills and applying what they had learned from a previously-completed project. This opportunity for repetition seems to work better than doing one or two large research projects.

Research is challenging. How do we find things? How do we know what to select? How do we organize a lot of stuff collected from several places into a fluent, coherent body of text? We did some work with ways to limit and refine a search, whether it is being done online or in a print resource. We used several different methods to take notes and plan projects. We reviewed and expanded students' understanding of using a print index successfully. We did activities that pointed up the benefits of using more than one source to gather and compare information on the same (sub)topic. We also discussed ways we might determine the reliability and level of scholarship of a website.

Presentation skills were part of our work throughout the year. We made a lot of posters. The core goals for a poster included strong visual appeal, large and readable *brief* text, and a logical layout. We talked about the importance of planning and having the opportunity to make changes. We also emphasized the difference between a poster and a report -- a poster is not a report glued to poster board. It's a much more summarized form of communication. A poster can get you interested, but you'll need to go elsewhere to be more fully informed.

We asked kids to prepare a lot of talks. Talks need to be planned and practiced aloud. Make sure you can pronounce and understand all of the words you are going to say. Try to *know* what you want to say in broad ways, use notes if you have to, but don't read us word-by-word from a full page. Be prepared for questions. "I don't know" is a perfectly good answer. So is a logical conjecture, as long as you say that's what it is.

Slideshows were another focus of instruction. A good slideshow is (like a poster) strongly visual, may contain summarized text, and is accompanied by a talk and/or chance for questions. By the end of the year, most students were able to create an attractive slideshow of images and minimal text while delivering an interesting talk that did not involve reading from the screen. It's quite an accomplishment for students this age.

Mathematics

"Mathematics expresses values that reflect the cosmos, including orderliness, balance, harmony, logic, and abstract beauty." — Deepak Chopra (1947 -)

Our general goals for mathematics instruction are to:

- broaden students' problem-solving strategies and reasoning skills;
- improve and expand computation skills, including mastery of traditional algorithms and number facts;
- increase awareness of the interconnectedness of mathematics topics;
- develop a lively intellectual community, working with partners and exploring ideas as a group;
- make connections among mathematics, mathematicians, and mathematics history;
- enable students to use reference materials to answer their own questions and review prior instruction;
- improve students' communication skills, both written (including diagrams) and spoken;
- find practical uses and applications for abstract concepts and processes, showing that math is a part of everyone's daily life;
- strengthen students' use of tools and technology, including geometric construction tools, measuring equipment, computer software, and calculators;
- establish a distinction between inventions and discoveries in mathematics, along with artificial systems and laws of nature;

- endorse the value of effort, the importance of conjecture and generalization, and the usefulness of an incorrect solution;
- encourage enquiry and curiosity, especially in terms of making cross-topic connections and taking ideas into a deeper and more theoretical domain;
- motivate students to look for reasonableness in their conclusions;
- sustain a strong connection between the visual and the numerical, the concrete and the abstract; and
- present mathematics as a living science, in which new ideas are still being generated, new questions asked, and old ones remain unresolved.

The basis for our program is NCTM’s publication titled *Focal Points*, as it is for the rest of the school,. It is not a curriculum or student text but, rather, is a guide for developing a coherent scope for each grade from pre-K through eighth. NCTM (the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics) has created many influential and groundbreaking documents, including this one. The primary purpose of *Focal Points* is to counteract the mile-wide, inch-deep approach to math education that has been characteristic of the United States -- to encourage schools to identify essential topics at every grade level and go deeper with them. Below are the NCTM Curriculum Focal Points for grades 5 and 6. The authors state: “It is essential that these focal points be addressed in contexts that promote problem solving, reasoning, communication, making connections, and designing and analyzing representations.”

5th grade level	6th grade level
<i>Number and Operations, Algebra</i>	<i>Number and Operations, Algebra</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Develop and fluency with division of whole numbers > Develop fluency with addition and subtraction of fractions (with like and unlike denominators) > Develop fluency with addition and subtraction of decimals 	<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>	<i>Geometry and Measurement</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Identify, describe, and construct 2-dimensional shapes > Analyze their properties, including perimeter, area, and angles <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Identify, describe, and construct 3-dimensional shapes > Develop fluency with the metric system, including its relationship to the base-10 place value system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Identify, describe, and construct 3-dimensional 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.

We reviewed and extended computation skills throughout the year. One of the goals was to make everyone secure with efficient computation methods. The expanded algorithms that are usually taught in the younger groups make good mathematical sense and provide a solid conceptual foundation. However, by this point in school, most people are ready to use less paper and take less time to crunch those numbers. And, for some learners, a more

compact procedure is less visually-confusing and comes as a great relief. We used calculators when we wanted to focus on concepts, problem-solving, and reasoning.

For much of the year, we set up instructional groups that blended students from our room with Diane and Jeri's group. Drawing from a pool of 32 students and having 4 teachers to work with half of that number every day while the other half were at specialists meant that we had a lot of choice about group size and composition. Our core text was *Primary Mathematics* by Singapore Math Inc. This is a version of so-called Singapore Math that has been adapted for American students. It places a lot of emphasis on reasoning and the use of visual strategies for problem-solving. We also used many other resources, such as *Connected Mathematics* and *Geometer's Sketchpad*. Students used a free online program called "Xtra Math" to help build fluency with math facts, and our end-of-day bingo games were often based on rote mastery, such as fraction/percent equivalencies.

Our mathematics topics varied from one group to another. In general, students expanded their knowledge of integers, orders of magnitude, fractions and decimals, percentage, ratio and proportion, plane and solid geometry, measurement in metric as well as "common" units, and introductory algebra. The history of mathematics and the contributions of individuals and of cultures were a recurring part of our mathematics lessons. Math is a human construct, and it requires a human face.

Several times during the year, we stepped away from the small blended groups to explore a single math topic within each of our own classrooms. One of our whole- group explorations involved GroBeasts. These are little alligators made from a water-absorbing polymer. Students placed them in individual plastic shoeboxes and measured their growth every day in several ways: mass, girth, and area. We made tables and line graphs from our data, interpolated measurements for the days we were not at school, and used Pick's theorem to find the approximate area of the outline traced on graph paper. We calculated means and medians and discussed which one better represented the full data set. The alligators did not grow as large or as quickly as they had in the past, apparently because the supplier had changed their manufacturer and did not get as good a product, which was disappointing. However, we were still able to meet the learning goals that were part of all that measuring and record-keeping. Students also wrote short stories about their 'gators, some of which were very funny.

We assessed children's understanding of mathematics in several ways. Formal testing in October (as part of the *Terra Nova* standardized testing) added our growing body of information about each child, as did the SSAT in November for those 6th grade students whose families chose to do it. We used assessment materials *Primary Mathematics* as well as test pages from the end of the various *Key To . . .* workbooks. Classroom observation and evaluation of homework were ongoing and, we think, gave us the most valid information because we could ask children about their reasoning, choice of strategies, and understanding of the task. Often, we discovered that accurate reading of and attention to directions where where mistakes began, not in the child's understanding of the actual mathematics required.

Language Arts

"Reading, writing, and personal introspection will not protect us from hardship and suffering, but they might introduce us to critical thinking and expose us to what is good in humankind and beautiful in the world that we share with all of nature. " -- Kilroy J. Oldster (? -)

It's our intention that all students will end their Miquon years being able to:

- read well enough to enjoy literature at a level commensurate with their interests and maturity;
- find lots of books and authors that please them;
- have an open mind about exploring an unfamiliar genre;
- comprehend independently most written material that they encounter in other curricular areas, such as social studies, science, and mathematics;
- write legibly, using standard punctuation that supports their syntax;
- convey their ideas in well-organized paragraphs whose levels of detail and elaboration are appropriate to

their purpose;

- speak clearly in a confident and organized manner;
- listen with full engagement in order to understand the purpose, content, and structure of what they are hearing;
- use basic word processing features independently; and
- type fast enough to keep up with their flow of ideas and use keyboard-related software efficiently.

By the time most students reach the fifth or sixth grade, they are ready to benefit from varied opportunities to apply their language skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. They still need instruction in specific topics, and some are continuing to work on some foundation areas. Activities that use of all of their prior years' learning are the way that we consolidate their skills and motivate them to strengthen areas in need of more work. As a result, development of these language skill areas was not only a part of direct instruction but was also embedded in all kinds of classroom work, particularly in social studies activities.

Vocabulary

There are about 650,000 words in American English. Literate high school graduates need to know approximately 60,000 words. The average student enters kindergarten with only 5,000 words, so s/he needs to learn an average of 4000 words a year, or 70 words a week, to reach 60,000 by the end of high school. Most researchers agree that the best strategy for learning this number of words is to read a large amount of narrative and informational text. Students should be reading 25 - 35 books a year from late first grade on. The average child needs to read and/or hear a new word about 15 times before it is truly learned. Spending time in conversation with adults is one way that children are exposed to new words, phrases, and idiomatic expressions. Reading seems to be the most effective route to a strong vocabulary, however. (Principal source of that data: www.literacyfirst.com)

We did vocabulary-building work throughout the year. We often paused in the reading of our chapter book to make sure that new words and phrases were being noticed and their meanings correctly inferred or, when necessary, explained by the teacher. We had a number of students in the group with excellent vocabularies, so teachers rarely had to supply a meaning or explain a reference. We previewed essential vocabulary in the context of social studies, usually by distributing and discussing word lists before starting research, reading text, or viewing videos. We noted that many written sources include a glossary in the back of the book.

Reading

Skilled reading requires much more than the decoding of individual words. A successful reader maintains an inner monologue. This may include self-checking for comprehension, recalling and comparing related information, making predictions, sorting information from the reading into a hierarchy of major ideas, and recognizing causal relationships. Many children who are strong in word analysis skills (“sounding out” or “decoding” single words) may need extra instruction and more time to mature in this metacognitive domain. In contrast, some children who are still putting out a lot of effort to decode words may be doing extremely sophisticated thinking to help them infer meaning from context, using their recognition of main ideas to help them bridge the gaps created by the single words they cannot yet read.

For that reason, we develop both kinds of reading skills throughout the year. We work on syllabication, the sounds of vowels and common blends, and other word attack skills at the same time as we are making sense of the reading and using that context to figure out what that troublesome word could be.

This year's class contained many passionate readers who always had books in their backpacks and loved having time to enjoy them. As part of our planned work, students read books independently and in discussion groups. Titles included *Un Lun Dun* by China Mieville, *Fourth World* by Kate Thompson, *Mockingbird* by Kathryn Erskine, and *The Wordsmith* by Patricia Forde. Thanks go to our librarian, Amy, and our reading/writing coordinator, Jen, for helping with these book groups.

Near the end of the year, we connected our literature work to our study of the internment of ethnic Japanese

people during World War II.

Students were asked to read at least two books from our collection of fiction and nonfiction, which included:

- *Japanese Roses* by Theresa Lorella
- *The Moved-Outers* by Florence Crannell Means
- *Desert Exile* by Yoshiko Uchida
- *Baseball Saved Us* by Ken Mochizuki
- *Farewell to Manzanar* by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston
- *Citizen 13660* by Mine Okubo and Christine Hong
- *The No-No Boys* by Theresa Funke
- *I Am An American* by Jerry Stanley

Instead of meeting in small groups to discuss a single book, we had weekly meetings of the whole class to explore themes and events that were present in most of those titles. What were your main characters doing for a living before they were interned? How did they react when they heard about the attack on Pearl Harbor? How were they affected by years of living in an internment camp? What did they do when the war ended and they were released? What do you think about the government's decision to intern people on the basis of their ethnicity? Students' responses to that last question were empathetic, indignant, and heartfelt.

We were able to link internment to other topics, including the forced migration of Irish Catholics to the west of Ireland in the 17th and 18th centuries, the uprooting of many of those people during the famine in the mid-19th century, and the heated rhetoric against Muslims and general immigration that was so often in the news throughout the year.

We read aloud to students throughout the year. As a connection to our year-long exploration of migration, we read *Watership Down* by Richard Adams. This very long novel was about a group of rabbits who left their endangered warren and set off to create one in a safer place. Students enjoyed it very much and expressed some regret when we completed it close to the end of the year and we were not reading a chapter book anymore.

Nonfiction reading activities were important. We worked specifically on previewing, setting purposes, summarizing, and seeking causal relationships. "Read the directions" was our constant litany, whether it was to work with a new piece of recreational software or to complete an assignment. We helped students learn to underline key instructional words, to refer often to written task descriptions, and to bolster their understanding by predicting and by making note-maps.

Writing

Our essential writing goals for all of the students include:

- spelling correctly most of the basic bank of high-frequency words;
- making punctuation and capitalization automatic in their writing, not something to be "fixed up" later;
- knowing how to apply the relatively few consistent spelling rules that exist in English;
- writing all words with every sound present, even if misspelled;
- writing complete sentences instead of comma-spliced or fragmented ones;
- understanding the basic structure of a paragraph and employing topic sentences in expository writing;
- developing a handwriting style that is legible and fluid;
- learning to type well enough to keep up with their own ideas and make revision less arduous;
- and acquiring an awareness of their own personal error tendencies to support independent proofreading and revising of their own work.

Writing was an instructional topic in itself and a presence in all curricular areas. Children in fifth and sixth

grade are at many different places in terms of mechanics, elaboration, and fluency. We worked on increasing students' mastery of high-frequency words. This was done in part through directed study, in which we presented some of the relatively-consistent rules in English, including forming the past tense and plurals. We tried to make a stronger connection between rules for reading and rules for spelling in the hope of strengthening both. We also worked in a context-based way, focusing on common words that individual students were writing often in journals and other project-related work. We emphasized the correct spelling in our written feedback, insisted on attention to that particular word, and saw some of the most durable learning come from that repeated need to write the troublesome word correctly. We also observed that, when students were writing on computers, the immediate underlining of misspelled words by our software led most of them to be more attentive to the spelling of those words as they continued writing.

We did a lot of writing, much of which was non-fiction. Students wrote about trips we took, films we watched together, opinions about current events, short research topics, favorite places, how they solved a math puzzle, and more.

We spent time on grammar in speech as well as in writing. "Me and . . ." almost always elicited a cry of pain and distress from the teacher who heard it and a swift self-correction from the speaker. The mystery of nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs was at least exposed, if not resolved. One of the more elusive parts of grammar is learning that a word must be seen in a context before it can be labeled confidently as a particular part of speech: That's a tree; she is a tree surgeon; my dog loves to tree raccoons. A student needs to understand these labels in order to make sense out of an observation such as "You're mixing up past and present tense with your verbs in this paragraph" or "Some adjectives might make this narrative a lot more exciting."

We worked throughout the year on paragraph construction for all sorts of writing: selecting a topic, starting with a topic sentence, adding supporting details, and creating smooth transitions. We used the students' increased awareness of this structure to help them get more out of their reading of informational material. We worked hard on punctuation, especially the use of commas for many purposes and the use of apostrophes to show possession. We also reviewed and extended students' understanding of punctuating dialogue.

Our major writing project was the keeping of a diary during our imaginary journey to Oregon. Students wrote from the perspective of their self-chosen identity within their family and team. They reported on the events of the day while adding personal information and elaborated descriptions of the terrain, their feelings about the journey, their family relationships, and more. Some art work and some final editing completed the project. Many students observed that they had become better writers as their diary-writing experience deepened.

Graduation provides an important language opportunity for the sixth graders each year. Every graduating student writes and delivers a short speech. They begin the work in May, first choosing a quotation and deciding on a central message or theme, then writing an essay that is uniquely their own. They are asked to avoid making a lengthy list of favorite activities from each Miquon year and, instead, to create a speech that is focused more narrowly and is truly personal. They might decide to talk about their growth in a particular area, such as how they became a reader, writer, potter, or naturalist. They might share their philosophical views on such things as friendship, perseverance, or leadership. Whatever the message, students are coached to keep their content narrow but deep, to stay on topic, and to wrap up in a way that is meaningful and sounds like a conclusion. Individual conferencing with the teacher includes explanations of why punctuation needs to be changed, how a sentence might be strengthened by adding or removing adjectives, and advice for organizing the content. Sharing their speeches as works-in-progress with classmates elicits support and useful feedback from peers. And then they practice . . . and practice. Eye contact with the audience, a clear and expressive voice, proper use of a microphone, standing at rest onstage without writhing or rocking – it's all part of the experience and imparts some skills that will be of value to them in their adult lives. Not every child is comfortable with this kind of public performance, but every child can learn to feel competent while doing it.

Changes and Choices

“Mistakes are the growing pains of wisdom.”
— William Jordan (1864 - 1928)

This topic includes making healthy choices of many different kinds (including diet, drug and alcohol use, smoking, and peer pressure); navigating the social and informational world online; and understanding the changes that are a part of puberty. These explorations have usually spanned several weeks and have been done along with the rest of our program. This year, at Diane’s suggestion, we decided to try a different format, one that was similar to what often happens during Conference Week. We put all of our other topics on hold (including those of the specialists) and spent a single four-day week entirely on *Changes and Choices*.

We divided the topics into three major parts:

- Digital Citizenship (1 day) — led by Mark and assisted by Jeri
- Healthy Choices (1 day) — led by Jeri and assisted by Mark
- Human Development (2 days) — led by Diane and Lynn

We blended and then divided our 31 students into four groups. Two pairs of groups stayed together throughout the week, rotating through those three topics. During the week before, students had the 3-part program explained to them. Then they were asked to write on a slip of paper any topics or questions that they hoped we would explore. Teachers later looked at those papers and made adjustments to their plans in order to incorporate as many of those wishes as possible.

Although the first two topics listed above were done in ways similar to our past practice, Human Development was initially intended to take us from conception to death. As we planned our time and activities, however, it became clear that we were not going to have enough time to explore death and dying, although it was a subject that interested many of our students. All four teachers wrote a summary of each day’s activities and included some general notes about students’ engagement with them. Those summaries were shared with parents at the end of each day. Parents were urged to continue the topics in conversations at home. When the teachers met to evaluate this new format after we had finished, we agreed that the intensity and continuity it provided were effective, but doing it for five days instead of four would have been better.

Life Skills 101

“Like many highly educated people, I didn't have much in the way of actual skills.”
— J. Maarten Troost (1969 -)

Life Skills 101 is a multi-week activity. Students are asked to consult with their family and come up with a three-week plan in which they will learn a new skill that is likely to be useful in their later lives when they are living independently. Sometimes they already have the beginnings of that skill but plan to improve it significantly. They keep a weekly journal of their activities and also a chart on which they record the time spent each day. Some students choose a task that they work on several days each week; others may work only on weekends. At the end of the time, we ask them to give us a brief presentation — a talk, a slide show, a demonstration, or whatever seems appropriate and interesting.

This year, as in previous years, students selected many different things as their life skill. Five students worked on house-cleaning in some form. Bathroom cleaning was decidedly unpopular but acknowledged as necessary. One chose to clean and de-clutter his room in anticipation of having his house go up for sale, and he also worked on designing the room he hopes to have in his new home. Six students chose cooking. One of those noted that he was specializing in learning the kinds of things he will want to eat when he is away at college “because my father won’t be able to drive there and cook for me every day.” One student painted her young cousin’s bedroom,

working with her grandfather as her mentor. Another student decided to learn to travel independently to several useful destinations, taking on the challenges of dealing with buses and trains as well as using an app to track the schedules of both. A couple of students learned to do the laundry. One remarked that he not only learned to fold carefully but also had put his own clothing away for the first time. One learned to plan meals, set a spending limit, make a shopping list, and go to the store for what was needed.

When students made their presentations, we talked about some of their insights and opinions as well as their skills. Several spoke of enjoying time spent with family members as they learned from them. Several expressed new-found appreciation for the time and effort that their parents spent when they were tackling these jobs. Many thought they would go on doing these things because they could see how important they were to family life.

Personal Projects

“If you want to be happy, be a person who likes to do things.”

— Marty Rubin (1930 - 1964)

While our students were working on skits or speeches during the month of May, we gave them time at home to pursue a personal interest. These projects were intended to occupy a large part of each child’s homework time during the month. A personal project is a true test of each child as an independent, organized, self-disciplined learner. It’s an opportunity for each child to make a major decision about what and how to learn.

Students chose a topic that was of interest to them, did some preliminary research on it to help them set their goals, made a written plan for working at it outside of school for three or four weeks, found mentors and advisors as needed, and maintained a journal that contained observations about their learning and their process as well as questions and descriptions of success and frustration. Shortly before school ended, students shared their work with classmates. Some projects were expressions of interests that children will continue to develop and to which they will return over the years to come. Students chose many different things, including some that were a continuation of what they did for Life Skills 101. Cooking was popular. Others did such things as photography, music composition, sports history, and several kinds of art projects. Not everything was as easy as expected, and that was an important learning experience. What mattered most was that children made good choices, committed themselves to the work, and came out of it knowing they had accomplished something of value.

Our Conference Weeks (Thank you, Jeri, for providing this text.)

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 asked questions like *What is that?* and *What did we do before....?* and *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?*”), and 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 & Jeri’s group and from the Exodusters study in Lynn & Mark group. Hopefully, our learners walked away understanding the significance of the Great Migration in terms of broad cultural changes in this country during the twentieth century. We unpacked mobility, communities, movements, and the reasons and process of migration, seeing 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 1930’s 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* and looked at a variety of poets & writers and musicians & music; had a chance to “Choose Your Own Adventure in the Harlem Renaissance,” and work through a comparison of Walt Whitman’s “*I Hear America Singing*” with Langston Hughes’ response, “*I, too Sing America.*”

We ended the week working together to create a feast of Southern cooking that made its 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 Drive 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.

In Closing

“There is no real ending. It’s just the place where you stop the story.”

— *Frank Herbert (1920 - 1986)*

As long as this document is, it can’t convey the full picture of our year. A Miquon experience is both wide and deep. As we have already noted, there is an extensive illustrated archive of our year and of many prior years on our [classroom blog](#).

First, as always, my thanks go to all of our students. We laughed, played, argued, explored, and learned together. Your individuality was a constant influence on what we did and how we did it. Your physical energy was amazing. The joy you took in leaping to reach higher and higher places in the classroom -- physically, artistically, and intellectually -- was delightful to observe. You graduates will be missed very much – by your classmates, your teachers, and your many younger friends. Please come back to visit in the fall. And for the fifths, who are now sixths, everyone will be delighted to welcome you back after your summer break. You are ready to be inclusive friends and mentors to your new classmates.

Second, we thank the parents in our group. You found time to drive, camp out, give advice, read our blog and respond to emails, watch performances and presentations, assist with homework and projects, and drop by for a chat when there was something on your mind or just to say hello. Our families' ongoing support and communication are essential to the success of everything we attempt to do at school.

Third, tremendous thanks go to our assistant, Mark. Your growing number of years at Miquon, your evolving perspective as a parent, and your experiences with the world beyond the United States brought balance and wise counsel to our classroom. You located the stuff I constantly misplaced, scoured the internet for answers to all kinds of questions that came up during class, oversaw our children's care of the chickens, arranged for class trips, kept the computers running, checked homework, took photos, and brought your love of music (and your huge upright bass) into everything we did that involved a song or a tune. You taught mathematics, good manners, card games, computer skills, personal responsibility, literature, and much more to our kids. You were an exemplary model for our students as a learner – taking on new skills with optimism, curiosity, perseverance, intense commitment, and delight.

Fourth, I thank Diane and Jeri for being our stalwart neighbors next door. We shared classroom resources, discussed books that each of us thought the other one should read or bring into the program, made suggestions about how to better meet the needs of a specific student, arranged and rearranged our schedules continually and with good humor, collaborated on math and reading instruction and choosing songs for our Wednesday morning sing, and much more.

Graduation Day meant that everyone moved one place further along, just like the Mad Hatter's tea party. The weather was perfect, and the stage was beautifully decorated by parents. Our sixth graders delivered their very personal speeches with great clarity and confidence, performed their music well, and received their diplomas with heartfelt appreciation. Our fifth graders saluted them with our traditional kazoo rendition of *Pomp and Circumstance* and became next year's graduating class. I hope that all of our students have a wonderful summer and feel good about the new landscape of experiences waiting for them in the fall, whether it's their final year at Miquon or their entry into the world of middle school.

As I embark on my retirement from teaching, I suspect it may seem a little strange to have next September arrive without my feeling the excitement of starting a new school year and enjoying the daily company of students and colleagues. Also, for those of you who don't know about this, most of us teachers have lack-of-preparedness nightmares in the weeks that precede the first day of school . . . every year . . . no matter how many years it has been. (Diane has speculated that I may still have those as a residual expression of an habituated brain. Thanks, Diane.)

On the other hand, I take a lot of comfort from feeling certain that Louis Herbst, the teacher who is taking my place, will be a wonderful addition to our staff. We thrive when there is a balance between people who are well-established in the Miquon Way (whatever that is, has been, and will be) and people who bring new ideas, different experiences, and a fresh perspective to our community. I know that Jeri, Diane, and Mark will be there to support him, along with everyone else on staff, who will ease his transition. I am counting on our parents to know that a Miquon teacher is not built overnight. I'll look forward to hearing about the wonderful things that the students in Louis and Jeri's group and in our building are doing as the years go on.