

2016-2017 First and Second Grade Curriculum Report

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Creating a Community

Ours was a 23 person community (21 children and 2 adults). All but one of the first graders spent their previous, Kindergarten, year in Toni and Sherry's class and all but one of the second graders spent their previous, first grade, year with Elisa and me. Those who were entering the room for the first time looked to the returning students and the teachers to provide structure and guidance, to model expectations and general deportment. We believe that the classroom should provide a safe and secure environment where the children can grow and learn socially, emotionally, intellectually, and academically. We put much effort into the development of a well operating classroom, one that featured appropriate structure and procedures, and at the same time afforded the flexibility and freedom for children to explore and express themselves within that structure. Once the children had internalized routines and expectations they became true operators of their own space. They learned where in the room to acquire supplies, and how they could and could not use them. All of the children were aware of the responsibility for taking care of themselves, their peers, and their environment.

Layout of the Room

We spent time before the school year began determining how we wanted to lay out the room (It rarely remains the the same year-to-year). We sought to create a warm, open, uncluttered (both physically and visually), inviting space where the children wanted to come and work. We wanted to have both open spaces for group work, and quiet niches in which a partnership or small group could work together, and in that I believe we were largely successful. All of the materials and supplies were readily accessible by the children at any time of the day. The children developed a sense of comfort working in our classroom space, and they used our classroom space to its fullest.

The first six weeks of school were dedicated to building the community within our classroom as well as understanding our role in the larger Miquon community. As the children learned the various routines and procedures of their classroom, they were able to come together as a group and feel safe and comfortable in their environment for the duration of the year.

The School Day

A typical day began with gabbling and laughter as the children assembled on our "grand staircase" to chat and read books as they waited for classmates to arrive. They reviewed the schedule for the day which listed the daily activities and the time of day these activities would take place. The children took comfort from knowing what was planned for the day and from there manage their expectations.

We then ascended the staircase to begin Morning Meeting. Each meeting began with a greeting, or movement such as the butterfly greeting, the ball greeting, the rainbow greeting, the closed-eye greeting, the "language" greeting or the microwave greeting (new this year was the held breath greeting, and the yarn ball greeting). Also included in the Morning Meeting was sharing time, where children could share an experience with the group and then answer questions from their classmates. Morning Meeting also featured a morning message and often a game or activity as well. Children were also frequently paired up. The meeting set the tone for the day and was where we teachers could name a focus for the day--anything from "Let us remember our discussion yesterday about how we let each other know what we want" to "Look for opportunities today to find a more poetic way to describe or think about an ordinary object."

Following this period children would also perform their classroom jobs. Each week, children were assigned a new classroom job with an ever-changing partner, so that every child had the opportunity to play a distinct and

important role in the functioning of the classroom group. Jobs included: Messengers, Weather, Greeters, Calendar, Days of School and Money, Placemat layers, Royal Roustabouts, and Substitutes.

From here we moved to handwriting, the most didactic portion of the day where we fussed over the formation of letters, our goal being teaching the children the most mechanically efficient way to write letters. This took 8-10 minutes in small groups. On the first school day of the week they completed their “News” instead. Here the children wrote about recent news from their own lives. Our expectations grew along with the children. At the outset of the year they strove for a word or two and by the end of the year, three or more punctuated sentences (depending on the child and their grade/experience). On Thursdays the children wrote in their Reading Response Journal, responding to a book they had spent the week reading. This work engaged them in comprehension building activities where they made connections, predictions, and inferences in writing.

In the period that remained before snack and choice time we held Math Workshop with each teacher taking a half group. We would often conduct a mini lesson and then set students off for individual, partner, or group work or games designed to give them practice in the concept being taught.

Next was snack and choice time, a favorite part of the day. During choice time the children were outside in the woods, on play structures, in the sandbox, in the creek, on the basketball or four square courts, in trees, on the woodchip fields or any sundry spaces among these.

We then moved on to half groups, where we held quarter group phonics activities (each teacher with roughly 5 children for 15-20 minutes), and Writers Workshop. (Both of these explained in detail below). After choice and lunch, we settled down with siesta, which involved the students reading, writing, or drawing. From 1:30-2:00 was Reader’s Workshop followed by tinkering time in which the children went off to create with a wide variety of materials. Children were able to: build in the block area or create in the project studio using reclaimed junk as well as a curated selection of tongue depressors, aluminum foil, tape, string, yarn, corks, bottle caps, pipe cleaners, etc. Many worked with Legos, Tinkertoys, and Lincoln Logs; created pattern block designs; constructed marble and domino runs; read, wrote, or drew; selected an activity from our shelves, which included tangram puzzles, a microscope, puzzles, games, beads, and word puzzles. Tinkering time allowed children a chance to figure out how something worked and provided them with an opportunity to always have a self-designed, self-directed project in the works. They could begin work on something, store it in one of their cubbies and then continue from where they left off the next day. Tinkering time was also a period in which the children were able to practice sharing materials, space, and ideas with others.

We ended each day with a closing circle. Children might share something from the day or we might hold an appreciation circle wherein everyone has a chance to give an appreciation to anyone else in the classroom. The last thing we did was sing the goodbye song, which was always the same song but was subject to infinite permutations as the children could suggest alternate ways of singing it. Throughout the year we must have sung 200 variations.

Language Arts

Reader’s Workshop

In Reader’s Workshop, the children read texts at their instructional reading level (in other words, reading texts that could be read with some teacher guidance and support). The instructional focus varied according to the individual child’s needs. Some readers focused on building sight word vocabulary and phonics skills while reading. Others would focus more on comprehension, and learned how to get information from the text and connect with the text more deeply. And still other readers would be concentrating on fluency, learning how to read smoothly and evenly at a reasonable pace.

Throughout the year we taught various strategies to help the children become readers, and for those children already reading, to become stronger readers. For instance, with picture walks children previewed the book to access prior knowledge while becoming familiar with new vocabulary. Other strategies included echo reading, where the teacher reads a sentence first then the child repeats the same sentence; tracking, where the child tracks with their finger while reading a passage to stay focused and read more easily; using context clues, where the child

thinks about what word would make sense in a particular sentence; and decoding, where the child utilizes the skills we develop with our phonics work.

During Reader's Workshop, the children would choose up to five books from their instructional reading level basket. While the children were waiting to conference with a teacher, they would read their books, trying to figure out words on their own, or getting help from a friend. A typical reading conference included the child reading one of their books to the teacher, with the teacher providing guidance for how to figure out words, how to read more fluently, or highlighting the information that could be gotten from the book. The teacher would then give the child one concrete thing to work on before moving on to another child. We had Reader's Workshop at least four days each week which gave us a lot of opportunity for individual conferences. We also held small group guided reading sessions in which the teacher led a group of 3 to 5 children, who each have their own text. In general the members of the groups were reading at roughly the same level but a teacher might also group children based on shared interest in a book topic, or work with children across reading levels on a shared area of need (e.g., how and when do we make inferences in a text).

Writing Workshop

Children wrote during Writing Workshop, in their News binders in the morning, and in various other projects across the curriculum. Throughout the year we emphasized that writing conveys meaning. We helped the children learn to generate writing topics independently, to demonstrate a growing knowledge of the concepts of print (left to right, top to bottom, margins, etc.), and to see themselves as authors.

Our writing program is built around the following enduring understandings – those ideas we would like the children to take away from their Writing Workshop experience. Children begin to understand, *“What I think or say can be written down. What I write can be read and understood by someone else. People communicate through writing. I can develop skills that let people clearly understand my writing. Writers use strategies to develop and organize their thinking. Writers craft their writing to make it engaging and memorable. I can use other writers as mentors for my own developing writing ability.”* This year we focused most intently on three Genres – pattern books, how-to-books, and books following a home-to-world-back-to-home structure. In each case we studied these genres using mentor texts (published books following these formats).

During the school year we also practiced our handwriting, with the Handwriting Without Tears program. By the end of the year the whole group had largely transitioned to writing in lowercase letters. There are various types of letters that we cover: the descending letters (the letters that go below the line) are g, j, y, p, and q; the magic c letters (starting with a c) are a, d, g, o, and q; and the diver letters (dive down, swim up, and over) are b, m, n, p, r, and h. We practiced handwriting two to four times each week during the first two thirds of the year and then reinforced what we had learned during the latter third.

Wilson Foundations

This year we continued using *Foundations*, which is part of the Wilson Literacy program. This is a phonics-based program that helped the children with the building blocks of reading. Even our more experienced readers benefited from this instruction by filling in any blanks that may have existed in the child's skill set.

The key areas we worked in this year began with phonological awareness – the understanding that spoken language consists of parts: a spoken sentence consists of words, a spoken word consists of separate syllables, and a syllable consists of separate sounds, or phonemes. We learned to blend, segment, and manipulate sounds in words with up to six sounds in a syllable. There are six main syllable types that are included in most words – closed (cat), vowel-consonant-e (lake), open (me), r-controlled, (car), vowel digraph/diphthong (town), and consonant-le (table). We covered the first syllable types, the closed syllables, in first grade Foundations and the others in second grade Foundations.

The words that the children learned to decode became more complex as we added different types of sounds. We became very adept at recognizing and distinguishing between digraphs (ch, sh, th, wh, ck), and blends (bl, pr, st, etc.). Our main method for helping us decode was our finger tapping procedure – one tap for each phoneme or sound

in a syllable. We worked with several tools including magnetic letter boards, wipe-off boards for dictation of words and sentences, and letter/sound cards for blending sounds. This program is designed to employ explicit and systematic instruction in these areas, with a lot of repetition of the skill we are learning, and quick feedback for both correct responses, as well as errors, during lessons.

Word Wall

The goal of the word wall was to introduce a variety of words to support and supplement the other spelling and word building strategies. Through these words we explored phonological awareness, spelling patterns, spelling sound relationships and sight vocabulary.

Each week five new high frequency words were introduced. After the words were introduced and cheered, the children wrote the new words outside on the sidewalk in chalk. We would also play a variation on musical chairs with the words; play Word Wall Detective, where the teacher has a mystery word in mind. The children chose a word and then had to refine their choice after being given clues about the features of the word in the teacher's head. Another favorite was Word Wall Train where children attempted to string together the longest "train" of words they could. It gave them practice reading words but also in thinking logically and mathematically as they, in their heads, walked through the non-deterministic algorithm that would make the longest train. We encouraged the children to use the word wall as a resource for spelling throughout the week.

Mathematics

Our mathematics program is based on Focal Points from the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. It is implemented through the use of many different published materials, teacher-created materials, games, and projects (both explicitly mathematical, such as our inventory; and cross disciplinary). We worked to provide contexts that promote problem solving, reasoning, communication, making connections, and designing and analyzing representations.

The main thrust of our instruction this year involved building the children's number sense, essentially, developing the child's fluidity and flexibility with numbers. The first graders spent the year working through what numbers mean and their relationship to one another, the ability to perform mental math, an understanding of symbolic representations, and using those numbers in real world situations.

In terms of skills, we addressed the following: comparing numbers; skip counting by 2's, 5's and 10's; place value to ones, tens, and hundreds; determining whether a number is even or odd and why; addition and subtraction strategies (and developing greater automaticity in basic addition facts); geometry (recognizing symmetry, naming shapes and polygons, characteristics such as number of sides or corners.); measurement (measuring distance with non-standard and standard units, measuring time on an analog clock, and on a calendar – days, weeks, and months.); and collection and manipulation of data. We were largely supported by the Investigations curriculum but drew one assorted "best practices" resources we have gathered over the years.

Several times each month we worked with clocks. The teacher usually wrote a morning message listing several parts of our day alongside the time at which each happened, e.g. 10:00, 2:30. Children then used their own small, analog clocks to show the times as we moved through the message. We also displayed data from time to time. We started with a blank graph and a question with several possible choices for answers. A question might be what is your favorite choice time activity? Choose two. Another, following our home project, was what kind of house would you most want to live in? We built the graph from our collected data and then analyzed the results. We talked about which choices had most, or which choices had the least, how many more did one choice have over another, and how many choices were made in total.

In addition to a great many games which promoted discrete skills as well as a higher level analysis of mathematics, we introduced math centers to help reinforce and extend children's thinking. These math centers were developed by Marcy Cook, an accomplished math educator. Each set includes 20 activity cards in each center covering a wide range of math concepts including addition, subtraction, missing addends, fact families, and basic number sense. Each child had number tiles from 0 to 9. The children surveyed the activity card and then began

placing their tiles. Each number could only be placed once and but some cards were open-ended and tiles could go in multiple spots. Children loved using the accompanying progress sheets to track their progress through a set of cards.

Besides the basic math skills, children were learning logic skills including trial and error and using known information to figure out a problem at hand. One of our abiding circle activities was the Slap Game which developed social skills, emotional regulation, perspective taking and a whole lot more, but is at its heart a logic game which requires experimentation and a willingness to make mistakes and accept others' mistakes.

Self Portraits

Every month or so children made self portraits. We would sometimes frontload this activity with a reading related to identity, discussing what these self-portraits can say about ourselves. Over the course of the year the children explored a variety of media and worked at a number of different levels of representation as they depicted themselves in visual artistic form.

Home Project

We explored the concept of "home" in many ways and to varying degrees of specificity throughout the year. We began by reading *The Boxcar Children* and thought about what makes a home and how could you make a home. The children then drew their own boxcars, filling them with object they might find at a dump or construct from materials found at a dump, as the boxcar children did.

In the Spring we commenced a more intensive inquiry into Homes. We attempted to answer the question, "What Makes a Home a Home?" Within this framework we considered those elements essential to "home" and drew on personal exposure and experience as well as literature which aided us. We studied children's literature where characters leave home and then come back and then wrote stories of our own. We found that in literature, a home can be depicted many ways -- some of them antithetical. We read stories where homes are boring and others where they offer endless excitement and adventure; homes often provide safety and security, but can also be dangerous spaces (e.g., Hansel and Gretel); homes can stay the same and homes can change; homes and the people in them can be misunderstood.

We then endeavored to create our own home. To this end we thought about what is required in a home and what is nice to have (needs and wants). One thing that came out was the fact that a home is never done. As much as you like your home you can always imagine some way to make it better or more suited to you. And there was questions, even tensions, that arose. Some thought a disco ball (or in our case a styrofoam human head the children glued mirrors onto) was not particularly homey, didn't connote "home," but there were strong feelings from many others that a dance floor and disco ball would make a home a better home. These were worthwhile discussions.

Tasks were divided and children set to work building our new space. From measuring pvc pipe and large reams of butcher paper; to designing a large cardboard door for the "basement;" to handmade toys for the toy room; to a fireplace that flickered and crackled due to a motor with a hot glued propellor flicking a tab of tape; to a TV screen that played a movie by the use of dowels winding a long scroll of paper across the front of a converted box; to countless other details and delights. The act of large-scale, coordinated creation was exciting for everyone and not something the children are likely to soon forget.

We finished the year by creating small model homes of our own. Using mostly popsicle sticks, hot glue, and balsa wood, children measured and assembled structures that needed to bear weight. All were at least partially inspired by homes from across the world that we found during our book research.

In Closing

Within the safe interactive space of our classroom, we learned to question and challenge assumptions, to be sensitive to the needs and differences of one another, to value new and alternative ideas, and to understand that there are many ways of looking at the world. The children learned to value and understand multiple perspectives and to apply the idea of looking through different lenses when encountering and resolving conflicts.

This past year marked a time of growth for all of our learners in diverse and countless ways. The children surprised, delighted, and impressed us at every turn-- independent thinking, invention, singing and dancing, deep concentration, rich exchanges, tenacity, sensitivity, perspective taking, forgiveness, friendship, and play were the hallmarks of this year. The children worked hard and found fun in all things. Thanks to all of the families for celebrating your children's work during our publishing parties, assisting when you could as chaperones, dropping in on Free Fridays, joining us for birthday parties, and for all the work you did with your children at home in supporting their learning journeys, as well as mine and Elisa's. It was an honor to teach, learn and play with your incredibly special children.