

Bree and Rich's Group: First/Second Grade 2016-2017 Curriculum Report

Building a Classroom Community

This year, our learning community consisted of 21 students: 11 first graders and 10 second graders. Some of these children learned together in Nursery a few years ago, but many were new to each other. With all of this change, we thought it was important to devote the first six weeks of our school year to creating a strong classroom community where everyone could feel safe to form bonds, express themselves, and take learning risks throughout the rest of the year.

One way that we started to build our community was through discussions generated from read alouds. We read a variety of books in the fall that focused on how to fit into a new space, form your own identity, express yourself freely, and find the beauty in difference, such as:

- *First Day Jitters*, by Julie Danneberg
- *How to Be a Friend*, by Laurie Brown
- *Spaghetti in a Hot Dog Bun*, by Maria Dismondy
- *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress*, by Christine Baldachinno
- *The Girl Who Never Made Mistakes*, by Gary Rubinstein
- *Stand Tall, Molly Lou Melon*, by Patty Lovell
- *A Bad Case of the Stripes*, by David Shannon
- *The Story of Ferdinand*, by Munro Leaf

These read alouds fostered rich discussion. We asked and answered: *How are these characters acting as good friends to each other? If you were a character in this story, how would you help include this friend? How do we help people who are new? How do we maintain our friendships? How do we resolve conflict? How do we react when we meet someone different from ourselves? How do we celebrate difference? How are we unique? How can we be an upstander instead of a bystander? How do we express ourselves when we feel different emotions?*

With the foundations of our classroom community taking shape, we set classroom expectations through the lens of student hopes and dreams. Students created their own “hope and dream” to accomplish by the end of their year. After presenting our hopes and dreams, we asked ourselves how we could help each other achieve these goals. This started a week-long discussion of our classroom expectations, which culminated with the student-led creation of our classroom constitution, called the Peace Pledge. We took dictation of the students’ many good ideas and categorized them into the following guidelines: (1) Take care of and be kind to yourself, others, and our classroom; (2) Have fun; (3) Make safe choices. Our students signed our Peace Pledge, and it hung proudly in our Peace Loft for the rest of the year.

Theme Study: Homes

In collaboration with Ben and Elisa’s group, the theme that our first and second graders explored this year was homes. In 2015 and 2016, we all did a lot of moving. I moved to a new home and a new school. Rich helped his daughter move across the state to her new home at University of Pittsburgh in late August. Ben recently moved from Allentown and, a year before that, from California. Elisa and Rich both moved classrooms last year. All of this moving had us thinking, *How do we define home? Who lives in a home? What do all homes have in common? How are homes different within our city, state, country, and world? How is our classroom and our school homes? Why are homes different? How do the climate and economics of an area dictate the homes we live in? Why do people move? What are the food, music, and celebrations found in different homes?* These questions were so rich, and could be tied to reading, writing, math, and social studies, so we decided to make it our theme for this year.

Who Are We?

Prior to diving into our home study and starting to think about *where we live*, we completed a three-week unit on *who we are*. Beginning in a way that is developmentally appropriate, we talked about the first thing that first and second graders see: what we look like! We let multiple works guide our discussions, including *It’s Okay to Be Different*, *The Colors of Us*, *All the Colors We Are*, *I Love My Hair*, and *Suki’s Kimono*. We emphasized that we all look different, we are all beautiful, and that all of us together make up the fabric of our classroom. Each day, as we

discussed body shape, skin color, hair, and dress, we added a new addition to our life-sized self-portraits. These portraits proudly hung in our room for the remainder of the year.

After thinking about our external traits, we started to think about and share our internal traits. We focused on our interests, goals, and previous experiences. We emphasized accepting and valuing each other for our own uniqueness. We talked about how our community is stronger when we are all different. To help guide these discussions, we read *Marisol Doesn't Match, Me...Jane, Ira Sleeps Over, and Chrysanthemum*. We journaled and created other art projects to answer questions, such as: *What are your favorite things to do? What makes you happy? When were you brave? What makes you unique? When did you make a mistake?* We continued the exploration of *who we are* well into October as we wrote pattern books in Writers Workshop based on our interests. This focus served as a great bonding experience in the beginning of the year and made us all feel more comfortable in our new group.

Where Do We Live?

We finally felt ready to begin our work on *where we live* after sharing our individual identities. With our first and second graders, we started our discussion of home in a way that was very close to their lives: picking our favorite spot in our homes and writing about it. We used Cynthia Rylant's book, *Let's Go Home*, as a mentor text for this project. Rylant delves into great detail while describing each room in her house using sense words to make readers feel present in her space. We did the same by studying adjectives through the lens of our five senses. Students wound up writing about cozy, plush corners of their couches where they read and hard, wooden benches in their kitchens where they wait for the scent of chocolate chip cookies to grow.

Through fall conference week, Rich approached this same question, "Where do we live?" from a different angle by leading an exploration of the Miquon woodlands. The group began to think about many questions during this study:

- What makes a home?
- What is needed in a home?
- What might people want in a home?
- How do animals' homes help with their survival?

To help answer these questions, we read many works, including *Over in the Forest, Come and Take a Peek, Spy Hops and Belly Flops, A Log's Life, and The Great Paper Caper*. Our friends made lists of things found in human and animal homes and graphed the information on a Venn diagram. The group explored different types of homes for humans and animals and discussed how each home is made. The group hiked through the Bamboo Forest in search of animal homes. We read poems from *A Whiff of Pine, a Hint of Skunk* and wrote our own poetry based on our woodlands. We also created our own Leaf People and Fairy Houses, which was the students' favorite part of the study!

We were also able to answer the question, "Where do we live?" by exploring urban, rural, and suburban areas. We first read Aesop's *The Town Mouse and Country Mouse* as an entry point and compared urban and rural areas on a Venn diagram. We then read *The Little House* to further explore different communities. The group found that this book places great value on rural communities, but we decided to think about the value in *all* communities. Students worked on voicing their opinions about which community they would prefer to live in through writing and respectful dialogue. The most exciting part of this study was our field trip to our teachers' homes. This experience gave the kids a chance to research different communities first-hand. It also gave them the opportunity to walk through a variety of different home structures: a row home, twin home, a stand-alone home in the suburbs, and a stand-alone home in the city. By seeing inside homes that were not theirs, they were able to think about how different people live.

What are the food, music, and celebrations found in different homes?

For many of us, December is a time of year where the traditions surrounding food, music, and celebrations become more prominent in our lives. We thought it made sense to start exploring the question, "What are the food, music, and celebrations found in different homes?" around the holiday season. One way that we explored food in our homes was by creating a group recipe book in our "how to" writing unit. The students carefully wrote recipes (as best as these young chefs could!) and taught us how to make shortbread cookies, almond green beans, and potato latkes.

We were also lucky to have many parent volunteers visit our room and teach “how to” lessons featuring various holiday traditions. Katie taught us to felt yarn to make winter acorn ornaments. We baked drop cookies with Jane, which has been a winter tradition among her friends and their children for many years. We decorated gingerbread cookies that Sarah baked by using an old family recipe. Chin taught us about the meaning of Kwanzaa and how his family celebrates it each year. Marea read *Tree of Cranes*, which is a Christmas book written by Allen Say, Carmen’s great uncle. Sabrina taught us the ballet steps to a scene in *The Nutcracker* after reading a version of the play to us. We learned so much from our group parents, and we were so grateful that they spent time teaching us about the food, music, and celebration in their homes.

Homes Around the World

We began to formally study homes around the world by early spring. We read about yurts, chateaus, mobile homes, chalets, Ndebele painted houses, log cabins and more with *If You Lived Here* guiding our way. Students chose one house to recreate for their dining room placemats project. Then, they researched this international home in partnerships. As this nonfiction text was difficult to read, we partnered second graders with first graders to lead the way. Students practiced finding research question answers in a text, summarizing their finding, and recording facts in their own words. Students created mini research books filled with their findings and hung them on our world map display with a string pointing to the location of their homes. At the end of the year, some students opted to recreate the homes they studied with popsicle sticks, corks, seashells, sticks, and *tons* of hot glue!

End of Year Project

i. Turning our Classroom into a House

Our culminating project for this study was turning our classroom into a home. Leading up to this point, we talked about about the difference between *a house* and *a home*. The class agreed that a house is the framework for a home. It is a bare-boned structure. Once you move all of your belongings and loved ones into that structure, it becomes a home. When this was ironed out, our group knew that our first step to making our classroom into a home was getting rid of all the “school stuff” to make it a house—that empty, structure waiting to become a home.

Well, we were lucky that our class already had the four exterior walls built, but we had to figure out the interior walls. So, our first task was to decide what kinds of rooms should be in our home. The students started by building models of our future home as proposals to the rest of the group. In small groups, the students created a large rectangular perimeter with blocks or LEGOs to represent the room. Then, they built walls within that perimeter to partition the class into rooms. They added Post-it notes to label each room, which made their models clear to read for others. Before cleaning up, we recorded our buildings as blueprints on grid paper. We took these blueprints and began to analyze them to find common ideas between the groups. We soon graphed the most popular room requests on a bar graph to clearly see which rooms the group should move forward with creating. Our bar graph revealed that we should make walls for a living room, dining room, bedroom, kitchen, playroom, and a closet.

ii. Turning our House into a Home

As Rich and I began to build the walls, the kids considered how to fill these rooms. To give each child a voice in the decision-making process, we conducted a letter-writing mini unit. In this unit, students learned to write persuasive letters that detailed the many ways we should turn each individual room into a home. In their living room letters, for instance, students requested curtains, a fireplace, coffee table, couch, ottoman, “classic” art, and electronic devices. For our dining room letters, students wanted a hutch, table clothes, napkins, utensils, plates, a chandelier, placemats, and wallpaper.

We completed many of these projects in small groups during Tinkering Time each day, but some of their project requests became a larger focus of study. The placemats, as mentioned above, became a part of our “houses around the world” unit. The “classical art” request became a biography study on Andy Warhol that we completed during reading and coupled with an art project. The request for curtains enabled us to teach a measurement unit in math, which culminated in students measuring the height and width of our windows and curtains to match that size. The call for wallpaper allowed us to review complex patterns and have students create wallpaper in groups that showcased a unique pattern design.

By the project’s end, our classroom was truly a home. Students were found independently reading in the bedroom, eating lunch in the dining room, tinkering in the playroom, using supplies in our closet, and circling up for meetings in the living room. Every item in our house stemmed from a student’s great idea that was formally

expressed in writing or during a brainstorm session. This project was truly their own, and it was absolutely, fabulous.

We were happy to celebrate this classroom transformation twice in June. On June 2, our families became houseguests for our end-of-year potluck. We ate outside on the front porch and then embarked on a student-led home tour. Our second celebration took place later that week when our group “lived” in our home for the day. We ate breakfast together, went on a group hike, and had rest time with our stuffies, pillows, and blankets in the living room. After coming back from playing with the neighborhood kids (i.e. Choice), we ate pizza and watched *James and the Giant Peach*, which was one of our favorite read alouds this year. Many of us agreed that this was our favorite day of school and that our room transformation was our favorite project this year.

Our Daily Routine

The remainder of this curriculum report is written in the order of our daily schedule. Though it changed from time to time, especially when we were working on large projects, it stayed consistent throughout most of the year. We believe that stability in schedule provides security and comfort for young learners, which allows them to exclusively focus on learning and play.

Time	Activity
8:25-8:50	Morning Meeting
8:50-9:20	Handwriting or Journaling
9:20-10:00	Math
10:00-10:30	Snack Choice
10:30-10:45	Read Aloud
10:45-12:15	Half group time: Word work and Writers’ Workshop
12:45-1:15	Lunch Choice
1:15-1:30	Quiet Time
1:30-2:15	Readers Workshop
2:15-2:45	Tinkering Time

Morning Meeting

Just as we found comfort in our new friendships and the ability to express ourselves, we found comfort in our daily routine. Students began each day at 8:25 by entering our room at the buzzer, placing their belongings in their cubby, dropping their blue folders in our folder bin, and finding a spot in our circle.

At the sound of the 8:30 Peace Chime, we met in a circle on the carpet for Morning Meeting. Our meeting consisted of a daily greeting, share time, a brain break, and a morning message. Greetings varied from handshakes to “Color Greeting” to our international hello greeting. Students learned to confidently greet in a friendly tone, which made each presence feel significant. Through the fall, our daily share time evolved from teacher-initiated “all shares” to “free share” where four students voluntarily signed up to speak on any topic of their choosing. By winter, though, we found that only some students were volunteering to share. To make every voice feel heard, we assigned every child a day of the week, which led to more widespread sharing among the group.

For our daily group activity, we played a five-minute game to get students energized, reinforce a learning skill, and/or navigate working together as a team. Sometimes these games were as simple as trying a new yoga pose. Other times, students practiced math facts by shouting out answers while jumping up and down. The group’s favorite activities, though, were popular ones from my own childhood: Detective and 7UP. Finally, every meeting ended with a morning message, which served as an interactive mini-lesson on a skill we wanted to introduce that day or reinforce. The intention of these messages varied from finding words of a particular vowel pattern to solving a math story problem.

Handwriting and Journal Time

Our group practiced print writing three times per week in the beginning of the year. For our first graders, this practice marked their introduction to lowercase letters. For our second graders, it was a reinforcement year to practice all of the skills they learned in first grade before moving onto cursive in third grade. We used the

developmentally appropriate *Handwriting Without Tears* program to teach. The program actively engages students by not simply having students write, but also use body spelling, arm spelling, and finger stretches. The writing instruction focuses on the formation of letters rather than teaching in an alphabetical sequence. For instance, a, c, d, g, o, and q all start with the same stroke, so they are taught together.

By winter, as second graders began to secure their strokes, we moved to journal writing during this block of the day. Students used *Handwriting Without Tears* journals with the same lines as their handwriting books to continue practicing their print. They were able to explore free writing, or answer opinion-based or persuasive writing prompts, such as “If you were president, what would you do to help America?” or “What do you want for your birthday this year? Write your best persuasive argument for why you should get this.”

Mathematics

After the calm of Morning Meeting and handwriting, our energy started to build, so we scheduled exciting math games to play at this time of day. We began each math lesson with a warm up. Many days this meant that we started with calendar math. This allowed us to review the month, day of the week, and the number of days we were in school. This last number was the daily number that we analyzed. If we were on our 50th day of school, for instance, we would skip count to 50; count backwards from 50; determine whether 50 was odd or even; make 50 cents; draw 50 with tally marks; and break 50 into tens and ones. On days that we did not play calendar math, we would warm up with a group word problem or play Guess My Number.

After our whole group warm up, we split into math groups. Each group followed the same working format: start with a brief mini-lesson, separate into math games, and meet back to discuss what we learned. The material in our math group time was rooted in the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics Focal Points. The Focal Points are the topics central to mathematics education at each grade level. We used *Investigations*, *Singapore Math*, *Marcy Cook Math Centers*, and the many works of Marilyn Burns to assist in creating lessons, activities, games, and projects that met the Focal Points standards.

In September and October, our first and second graders explored numbers. Most first graders started with numbers within 20, whereas second graders (and some first graders with more advanced number sense) worked with numbers within 50. Our first graders were busy exploring Mystery Bags, accurately counting piles of objects inside. They were comparing the amounts in bags and ordering each bag from the bag with the least amount to the bag with the most amount. Our second graders explored ordering larger numbers with the hundred chart and place value blocks. Students compared numbers, ordered numbers, created number lines, skip counted, and played many games, such as Compare (similar to the card game “war”).

Once students acquired greater number sense, we manipulated these numbers by adding and subtracting them through November and December. We started in a concrete way by adding and subtracting with blocks only. We constantly emphasized the conceptual meaning of addition and subtraction while students worked. Students focused on “make 10” facts (e.g., 1+9, 2+8, 3+7, etc.) by playing dice games and Make 10 Go Fish. They also worked to master “plus 1” and “plus 2” facts through varying Bingo games. A main focus during these two months was also solving story problems that required addition, subtraction, or use of both operations. We stressed the importance of finding multiple ways to solve a problem and gave students the space to explain their thinking each day. We praised the ability to discuss the computation method and use more than one method to solve over quickly finding the correct answer.

In January, we explored geometry. We were able to blend literacy with math in this unit by reading *The Greedy Triangle* and *Three Pigs, One Wolf, and Seven Magic Shapes*. These books illustrated many real life examples of shapes and also served as the basis for reading response assignments, such as, “If you could be any shape in the world, what would you be and why?” The first graders focused on naming two-dimensional figures and analyzing their sides, vertices, and angles. Some favorite activities were using pattern blocks to compose and decompose shapes, playing Guess My Rule, and conducting shape hunts around the room to find real examples of shapes around the room and campus. We also explored patterns and tessellations. We celebrated the end of this unit by creating a class quilt. Our second graders reviewed polygons, explored three-dimensional figures, symmetry, and arrays. A favorite group activity was creating Symmetrical Aliens and creating our Geometric Junk bins, which remained a favorite Tinkering Time activity for the remainder of the year.

By February and March, we returned to number work. As our numbers got larger, the work became a bit more challenging. This was an exciting time for the first grade group, as they started their formal work with addition and subtraction. Students work on combining two small quantities of objects and subtracting one small quantity from another. They work on their own story problems and create matching illustrations. They were also welcomed

to the exciting world of addition and subtraction games with dice, dominoes, and dot cards! Meanwhile, second graders were in math workshop, working in small groups with their teacher and exploring a variety of activities with partners or on their own. While working with a teacher, students explored place value of two-digit numbers. They practiced building each number with blocks and dissecting each number into tens and ones. In their workshop stations, they continued to practice these skills, as well as, explore coin counting, telling time to the nearest five minutes, and memorizing their “fast facts” (i.e. basic single digit addition and subtraction problems).

By spring, we continued to play addition and subtraction games, but began to integrate new math concepts into our home study. The first new topic that students explored was measurement. We started by reading *How Tall, How Short, How Faraway?*, which taught us how to measure with our bodies in the ancient Egyptian way. Students measured many objects around campus and the classroom with cubits (i.e., distance from the tip of your middle finger to your elbow), palms, and digits. Next, we read *How Big is a Foot?* to help us explore the problems with measuring with our bodies. Similar to the story, we measured our classroom carpet with our feet to find that all the measurements were different. Eventually, the students realized that the standard measurement of a ruler was the best way to measure. Once we became comfortable measuring with rulers, we measured many items around our room, challenging ourselves to find objects of various lengths, widths, and heights. Finally, we measured the height and width of our windows and kraft paper to create curtains for our home transformation.

We also explored graphing in the spring. We used our students’ persuasive letters on how to turn our classroom into a home as data. We didn’t use all of the many suggestions in the letters, but we picked the most frequently named ones. From analyzing our living room letters, for example, we found that eight students wanted a coffee table, 16 students wanted a couch, six students wanted lamps, and all 21 students wanted some sort of technology. We were able to take this data, create tally charts, draw bar graphs with it, and answer data analysis questions. We repeated this with several other rooms throughout the unit.

Overall, it was an exciting game-based year of discovery in math where students found joy in learning more about addition, subtraction, graphing, geometry, time, money, and measurement!

Snack Choice

Snack Choice started at 10:00 am and if we were even 30 seconds late, our students kindly reminded us of the time, as they all learned to read the analog clock to the nearest hour this year! They ate a quick snack on their way out the door and then, they were off. In fall and winter, our friends built and maintained Monkeyland forts, played tag on the Upper Playground, and Four Square. By spring, they became interested in the sandbox, the creek, and the new basketball court outside of the room. They often played basketball, but frequently used the space to play kickball or football, as well.

Choice Time was not a break from our learning. Instead, it was a time of rich learning that was completely child-led and initiated. Through daily, unstructured play, students formed close cross-grade bonds, took on leadership roles, and learned to make safe, independent choices. In the spirit of wanting to have fun, students quickly gained the important social skills of how to include others in a game, start their own game, or ask to join an existing game. Most days were filled with joy, but when there was conflict, we learned to negotiate those moments as well. Students grew in their ability to calmly state their feelings, listen to the perspective of others, and brainstorm to find a solution. These discussions often ended with a handshake, a pat on the back, or someone asking to do a “redo” and begin again. When conflicts were too big to solve independently, students appropriately sought out teacher support. Sometimes, they asked if they could present their problem in a “Good of the Class” meeting, which consisted of the students presenting their problem to the whole group and allowing others’ to voice possible solutions.

Read Aloud

After Snack Choice, students gathered on the carpet to listen to a chapter book read aloud. These texts were well above most students’ reading levels, but were of high interest to the students, exposed them to advanced vocabulary, and fostered enthusiasm for the rich stories that books can provide for readers. Students built their listening endurance and learned to visualize without the presence of pictures. They made predictions and monitored them. They used context to understand unknown words and inferences to make sense of what was happening in the plot. Some of our favorite chapter book read alouds this year were *Rickshaw Girl* and *James and the Giant Peach*.

Half Group Time: Word Work and Writers’ Workshop

After our read aloud, half of our group went to specialists while the other half remained in the room. During half group time, we engaged in phonics work and explored writing genres.

Word Work

Our group participated in word work activities four days per week. Each Monday, we introduced the group to new sight words. These are those pesky words that break phonics rules and must be memorized, so we worked with them in many different ways. Rich led the group in sight word cheers. Some group favorites were the roller coaster cheer and the glass-breaking opera cheer. We played interactive games with the Word Wall, such as Word Train and Word Hunt. We also read these words in our Morning Message, built them with clay or blocks, or drew them in Rainbow Words or Ghost Writing. Some students worked on their sight words at home on word rings to meet their end of first grade goal of acquiring 100 sight words, or their end of second grade goal of 200 sight words.

Our friends also learned specific phonics skills. We used the *Foundations* program to guide the sequence of our teaching and target the needs of the four, leveled phonics groups in the room. Some groups began with learning the sounds of individual letters, while others were working on the sounds of digraphs, trigraphs, vowel teams, and affixes. Students used magnet boards, pocket charts, and dry erase boards to build and chunk words in a highly interactive, individualized way. We also played games, such as word Bingo, Memory, and Go Fish. Students who needed additional practice participated in small group word study sessions twice per week with Rossana.

Writers Workshop

We explored writing genres through the Lucy Calkins Writers' Workshop model. It allowed us to connect our writing with our reading and explore five genres throughout the year: pattern books, how to books, small moment stories, letters, and poetry. Though our units changed through the year, the structure of the units was constant. In each unit, students were able to:

- Explore mentor texts to understand and implement what professional writers do well in our own writing
- Discuss sample work written by a teacher or a professional author
- Engage in interactive, whole group writing to successfully write in the comfort of a whole group before writing on their own
- Independently work through the entire writing process of idea generation, prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing
- Share work with peers and accept feedback

At the conclusion of our units, students celebrated by having an in-class publishing party where they could read their friends' work. We also had three parent publishing parties where parents could read work and sit as audience members while authors read their work from the author's chair.

Our first unit was our pattern book unit. Pattern books, as the name suggests, are simple books filled with sentences that follow a pattern. Entry-level pattern books have the same sentence on each page, such as, "At the park, I saw a _____." These books typically end with a pattern breaker, such as "I saw so many things at the park!" More complex pattern books have an opposite pattern, a question/answer pattern, or a passage through time pattern (e.g., a book that travels through the seasons or birthdays of different years). These books were a great entry point into writing this year, because they mirrored the books that many of our children were reading in the fall and their simplicity helped build confidence in *all* of our young writers. We relied on many mentor texts to help lead the way in this unit, including *Water*, *The Peace Book*, *It's Okay to be Different*, *This Train*, *When I Was Five*, *The Quiet Book*, and *Birthday Presents*. By the end of the unit, students created beautifully written pattern books about trips to the beach, animals around the world, and details of the many dreams we have each night.

By winter, we entered into our how to unit. Students were able to teach their peers how to successfully complete a certain skill. The mentor texts we read included: *How to Make a Friend*, *Growing Vegetable Soup*, *Time to Pee!*, *Gloria and Officer Buckle*, *How a House is Built*, *How to Take Care of Your Pet*, and *How to Make Apple Pie and See the World*. Students were able to quickly draft each how to book and pushed themselves to revise each step by adding more detail and really explaining "how" to accomplish each part of the process. By the time our unit was over, students taught each other how to build a fort, fold origami, make candles, how to make a friend, and even how to get away with *not* cleaning your room! This unit was particularly special, because we had so many parent volunteers teach us "how to lessons" as described in the theme section above.

After our how to unit, we began writing small moment stories, or stories that stretch out a very small experience in the author's life. The brief nature of each story made it an accessible first story-writing unit for our writers. In addition, as we had each story focus on a moment in one's home, it allowed us to connect with our home study. In this unit, we read the mentor small moment stories, *Joshua's Night Whispers*, *Fireflies*, *Knuffle Bunny*, *Roller Coaster*, and *My Dog is Lost*. With help from these professional authors and watching their teacher write her own small moment story, our writers worked on crafting a memory with a beginning, middle, and end; replacing bland words with juicy words; adding sound words to create action; and starting stories with an attention-grabbing hook. By unit's end, we learned each other's personal stories about moving to new houses, falling off bikes, and getting new pets.

By May, we began to explore letter writing and poetry. In our poetry unit, our mentor texts included: *If Pigs Could Fly*, *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, *Honey*, *I Love You*, and many other individual poems. Throughout this unit, we worked on reading and performing poetry in small groups. We emphasized that poetry should be read multiple times to help develop the rhythm the poet intended and find meaning. We started by studying list poetry and created our own list poem based off of Eloise Greenfield's work, *Riding on the Train*. Greenfield lists all of the things that she sees from her train window. We tried to do the same in our *Sitting in the Living Room* poems. For two days, we sat at our "living room" window to observe and record what we saw, heard, and felt in our natural setting. We tried to take these observations through a poet's eye and record them in a more lyrical way. Many of our young poets were able to include the same type of alliteration that Greenfield did in her poetry. We also wrote everyday object poems based on the work of Zoe Ryder White and Valerie Worth. As these poets did with pencil sharpeners, clocks, and safety pins, we looked at objects in the room and described them through a poet's eye. We later used these poems to hang on our home's closet to describe all of the supplies stowed away inside. (For more information on our letter writing unit, please see the theme section above.)

Lunch Choice

At 12:15 each day, we were ready for our second half hour Choice Time. Students explored in many of the same ways that they did during Snack Choice, but were also able to visit specialists. Some favorite activities were to visit library to read or draw; venture to science to make goo or build with wood and saws; or go to the art room to work on the community weaving project or personal pursuits. Lunch Choice also gave students an opportunity to play with older students. You could find our students on the basketball court playing with fifth and sixth graders, maintaining forts with third graders, or engaging in all-school tag games. Our children frequently asked to visit the Nursery and Kindergarten playgrounds to assist and play with our youngest Miquon students.

Quiet Time

Quiet Time was a silent fifteen-minute period inspired by the Responsive Classroom program where students were able to read, write, or draw. Quiet Time was the only time of day when we asked for silence, because it enables young students to find calm after the high-energy period of Choice and Lunch; reflect on what happened in the morning; and refocus for the afternoon ahead. It also served as a flexible time where students could return to unfinished work, teachers could help mediate any lingering Choice Time conflicts, or we could review work with those who needed extra assistance. You may be left wondering if the room was actually silent. In truth, it actually was fairly silent each day—with some extra reminders, of course!

Reading

After quiet time, we were all in a calm mood to transition into reading. Rich and I taught reading through the balanced literacy approach, which engaged students with text in a multitude of ways. Students were given the chance to read text in partners, alone, and in a whole group each day. They were not only encouraged to read text, but listen, question, and discuss it with others. The ultimate goal was to create a community of readers who felt secure enough in reading that they could use it in their lives outside the confines of a reading block, to explore interests, acquire knowledge, and have fun!

Interactive Read Alouds

We engaged in many *interactive* read alouds at the start of the reading block this year. This is a different experience from chapter book read alouds, as it features a teacher reading a picture book just a few levels above most readers' levels in the class. As we read these picture books, we stopped much more often and modeled how good readers think as they read. We often paused to make predictions or summarize what we just read. Also

different from our chapter book read alouds, was that we read these books in small groups, because we wanted to hear more voices answering the questions we prepared to ask throughout the story. The questions were scaled up and down Bloom's Taxonomy to reach all learning levels. If we were studying characters, for example, questions might build in this order:

- Who are the main characters?
- What are the characters' traits?
- Compare and contrast the two main characters.
- Explain how the character felt at this point in the story.
- Can you justify why the character acted in this way?
- Can you propose an alternative action the character could have taken?
- Do you agree or disagree with the characters' actions?

In read aloud time this year, we studied story elements (*i.e.*, characters, setting, plot); we practiced retelling stories; made predictions and inferences; and, most importantly, we learned to make connections with our lives, other texts, and the world. We also studied words by discussing tenses, affixes, synonyms, antonyms, homophones, rhyming words, adjectives, verbs, and tips for how to decode polysyllabic words. In nonfiction read alouds, we learned about text and graphic features; found text evidence; and named the main idea and relevant details. Interactive read aloud time was not a time for students to zone out, but a time for them to tune in and engage with stories in a meaningful way.

Shared Reading

Our daily shared reading experiences provided a middle ground between read alouds and independent reading. In shared reading, everyone is able to read from the same text. Students participate more in the actual reading of a text at this time, but there is still a lot of teacher involvement. One example of shared reading is when the teacher rewrites portions of books or poems on chart paper. With all students able to see the text, we could read it together to decode large words and reread it to work on fluency and expression. We could also read portions of text to use context to find the meaning of an unknown word, finding vowel patterns, or noting descriptive adjectives a professional author uses. The goal of these lessons was to develop good reader skills in the comfort of a group in the hopes that students would use them when reading independently.

Shared reading experiences also happened in small, guided reading groups in the afternoon. Groups of four or five students met with Rich or me to read from the same text. These groups were built based on student need. Some groups read through texts to practice decoding or building sight word vocabulary. Others met for Readers Theater to practice fluency and expression. Others met for book club time to read through and discuss chapter books with one another.

Shared reading experiences also happened with partner reading. During our nonfiction homes study, for example, students worked in pairs to help each other confidently decode the many proper nouns they encountered. In our poetry unit, student pairs read together to find the rhythm of each poem and performed the poems multiple times to increase fluency. We often read through Big Books for fun in partnership to practicing "chunking" multisyllabic words and read for fluency. Overall, the comfort that shared reading experiences provides granted our students confidence to develop good reading skills that they could use when they read independently.

Independent Reading and Conferencing

Independent reading time was many students' favorite academic time of day. We often had to pry our students away from their books to transition to the next activity. Luckily for them, there were three independent reading opportunities scheduled into our daily routine. During the morning's "read, write, or draw" time and immediately following lunch, students independently chose books to read based on interest.

The more structured time that our group read independently was during Readers' Workshop. During workshop time, Rich or I started by teaching a brief mini-lesson of what we wanted our readers to think about as they read. Immediately following this lesson, students read on their "just right" levels, so they could practice the daily "reading and thinking" skill. It was important to read on our level at this time to be able to implement the thinking skill rather than focus on decoding the words. As students read, Rich and I conferenced with readers to talk about their books and assess which skills each reader needed to work on in.

Tinkering Time

Tinkering Time is a magical time of day to follow your own curiosities—to think up your own project ideas and pursue them. It is an opportunity to enter the valuable creation process of trying an idea, succeeding, and building on that idea. Just as often, it serves as an opportunity to take part in the *even more valuable* process of trying an idea, NOT finding success, and figuring out another way to make their idea work. The process strengthens our critical thinking and problem-solving skills, our ability to collaborate, and grants us quite a bit of confidence in the end.

This year, students turned our Geometric Junk pile into terrariums, purses, fairy houses, and light sabers. They wrote their own newspapers, were the architects of their own skyscrapers and train stations, and learned how to fold *Darth Papers* and *Origami Yodas*. They wrote, directed, and starred in their own plays. They built LEGO worlds and designer plastic airplanes. They explored magnets and examined objects under the microscope. They made beaded necklaces and learned how to finger weave. They experimented with creating dye and painting. Regardless of the project, we found joy in experimentation and hands-on learning every day.

We were so engaged during Tinkering Time that as we rung the cleanup chime at 2:45 pm each day, it was difficult to leave our projects. Within 10 minutes, though, most of our blue folders made it into our backpacks and most of our scraps made it into the recycling bin. By 2:55, we said our final goodbyes and we were out the Cubby Room door, adding another successful day to our growing tally on the classroom calendar.

Special Weeks Throughout the Year

Though we were consistent in keeping to our daily schedule this year, we deviated from it during two very special weeks of school: fall and spring conference weeks. During the fall, Rich led the kids through the woodlands as described in detail above. In the spring, he took them to the circus! This was a week filled with exciting read alouds, a study of circuses through time, writing and art projects, midway games, and practicing our very own circus acts. To read Rich's wonderfully written blog entry detailing the week by following this link: <https://miquon.org/circus/>

In Closing

During the last few days of school, we swam in the pool, watched *James and the Giant Peach* on the classroom projector, had a phenomenal potluck filled with family, hiked with our 5/6 buddies along the Schuylkill River, and built model homes. We were happy to have all of these fun activities planned, because we all felt a bit of sadness as we started to take down the walls of our classroom home. When the final buzzer rang, we were sad to say goodbye. However, we find solace in the fact that this group of unique, inventive, hard-working, positive, and caring individuals is ready to explore in their new groups next year. We hope that everyone has a wonderful summer!