



2017-18 Curriculum Report

December 2017 Entry

Diane and Mark's 5th and 6th Grade

The Group

This group of fourteen fifth and sixth graders started the year quite smoothly. The sixth grade students had all been in Diane's group the year before, so had a sense of routine and systems that worked well and how they could be improved. They passed on their insights to their fifth grade peers as the group worked together to establish classroom job systems, transition expectations, boundaries (both physical and behavioral), and the physical space of the classroom. We also established some events particular to our group, like the "word presents" we offer one another to celebrate birthdays or half-birthdays. The group took time to get to know one another, getting reacquainted in many cases, and giving every person in the group a chance for a fresh start. For example, each child created a portfolio cover that reflected their interests and shared that with the group.

We have some school-wide responsibilities and relationships as well. Our buddies are the first and second graders of Celia and Ben's group; we see them weekly on Friday afternoons. On Friday morning, we collect recycling material from the office building and collect trash from the play barn and woodchip field area. Sixth graders in our group are part of the rotation of facilitators for Good of the School, an every five week or so assembly that gathers the whole school community (except nursery) for collective problem-solving around issues brought up by children at the meeting.

We spend a fair amount of time mixing with the other 5th/6th class -- in mixed small math groups, at lunch and choice, at weekly sings on Wednesday mornings, and during collaborative work like the design work we have been doing this fall. The benefits of a larger social and academic context are many, and there are challenges too, of course. Recently, we have been holding and planning agenda for Good of the Building meetings to work out some of those challenges.

We also think intentionally about our own challenges and successes. Every child in our group has evaluated their own strengths and set goals for themselves socially, as learners, and in various academic disciplines. We will revisit those goals through the year and support each other in that growth.

Social Studies

Fall Study

The important questions we address in fifth and sixth grade are:

What gives a person or group of people their worldview, and how are those worldviews revealed in culture and through group identity?

How do big changes in the world affect and challenge worldviews and create conflict, and how do humans try to resolve those conflicts?

We are studying these ideas this year through our theme -- "Work and Play" (in the reverse order). Play, at first glance, suggests non-necessity and frivolousness. Of course, at Miquon, we join those well-versed in child development who see play as central, as the "work" of childhood and a sign of a healthy adulthood. As we took a look at these ideas this fall, we were struck by the number of idioms in which the word "work" could be substituted for "play" and make perfect sense. We also spent time thinking about play and gender identity.

During the early weeks of our study, we read *Galimoto*, which describes a handmade type of toy by that name made from scrap wire and cloth. We made toys of our own, using the scraps and simple materials in our "make and play" area in the breakout room. Then we told ourselves and each other the "story" of our creations -- what we had used, what motivated our choices, etc. We connected this to individual research about the real story behind famous toys, games, and playthings. Those stories were shared via visual presentations and were part of the morning plan when grandparents and other special friends came to visit us in mid-October. The note-taking for this project and throughout the year is one of the key skills children develop at Miquon in fifth and sixth grades.

During this time our storytime was a reading of Carlo Collodi's *Pinocchio*. It is one of the many stories that most children know only through movie adaptations (Disney, in particular). We discovered the original story, in translation from the original Italian, was *very* different from the Disney movie version. The story gave us a context for discussing the idea of metaphor -- what it means to be a "puppet" -- and for inviting Diego to our room to talk about the central role this story plays in childhood in Italy.

After Grandparents Day, our focus moved to the "national pastime" -- baseball. Or as they said in the 1800s, baseball. Baseball was a form of play historically engaged in by so many in this country, across racial, class, gender, language, and occupational lines. (Not to suggest that these people played together, just that they all played.) As such, it became such a key piece of American identity that immigrants to the country saw knowledge of the game as a significant step toward joining the culture.

The American English language is soaked in baseball -- "whole new ball game," "keep your eye on the ball," "batting a thousand," and "rain check" are just a few examples. Our goal in this study is to develop awareness of and appreciation for the role of baseball in American history and identity, eventually thinking about how the game reflects a cultural worldview.

About half of the children in the group were able to attend an Independent League game (Lancaster Barnstormers) and/or a vintage 1864 rules game early in the year. The whole group has learned some history of the game through researching famous people in baseball, writing

reaction essays to well-known quotations that reference the game, and through group activities such as reading 1864 rules and learning how to play Town Ball. (I believe the last could become a more regular activity at choice time!)

At the same time, we've been using storytime to read *We Are the Ship: The Story of Negro League Baseball* by Kadir Nelson. This beautifully illustrated book brings the people, the social circumstances, and the magnificent play brilliantly to life. The book mentions "shadow ball," and to clarify that idea, we watched an award-winning twelve minute student film called, *Shadow Ball*.

American literature reflects the essential role of baseball, too, and together we've read the poem, "Casey at the Bat" and read and watched a version of Laurel and Hardy's "Who's on First?" Songs inspired by the game are coming soon.

Most recently, we've been using baseball cards to set up a team roster, then learning how to score a game (and by extension, how to play, for those less familiar) via Finger Baseball. If you haven't had the pleasure, ask your child to show you the game. It's a great way to pass time.

Current Events

This fall we have been walking a tightrope when it comes to discussing current events, wanting to acknowledge and think intentionally about the seemingly countless events in the world (political upheaval, natural disaster, shocking and often appalling news from our own government, and acts of violence difficult for adults to contemplate) and also to maintain safe space for these children, emotional as well as physical.

One way in which we do this is maintaining a subscription to *Junior Scholastic*. Typically, children bring an issue home for about a week, and read through it the way many adults read a newspaper or news magazine. In school, we then ask the children to name the stories they would like to discuss and they break into those discussion groups. The groups report back salient aspects of their conversation. As the year continues, we will have more experience with this format, and discussion times will allow every child to participate in multiple discussions. Other times, we hang onto an issue of *Junior Scholastic* for group work.

We have also had a series of conversations about symbols, specifically symbols of America. Not only has this segued into our study of baseball, it has given us a space to talk about issues like "taking a knee" in professional sports, and both sides of incidents that have flared into violence over the ideas behind symbols (i.e. July in Charlottesville, VA). I expect this conversation will soon extend to discussion about Jerusalem.

In my approximate thirty years of teaching (Diane), this has been the most difficult period of time I have ever had the privilege and challenge of living through with the care of children on my mind. I suspect many feel this way as teachers, parents, and adults who care about children.

Conference Week

The 5th/6th classes worked together as one large group again during conference week this November. Jeri and Mark were joined by art teacher, Nicole, and parent and teacher sub, Mariama Koroma O'Brian. The theme for the week was *Art, Community and Change*. After what seemed like a hectic fall, we intentionally incorporated a slower pace for this week. We took time

each morning to “chill and notice” the beauty and wonder of the surroundings just outside our building and throughout the campus. Throughout the week, the group explored a variety of arts and artists: street art, poetry, their own drawings, and murals. They had a visit from woodworking artist and custom furniture creator, Jay Cox, heard the amazing neighborhood stories of ‘Big Man,’ and saw multiple mosaics at the Village of Art and Humanities. They also danced to rhythms and rhymes with Mariama, exploring why these rhythms are such important tools in the creative process of our lives. We also took a look at our world from a geographic perspective. We also read the book “*Seedfolks*” by Paul Fleishman, a story of a collection of isolated neighbors who, initiated by a child, come together to create a neighborhood garden in an empty lot -- a true example of community.

In the art room, we began by settling minds and bodies with the intention of pausing to notice a bit more of the world. While gentle music played, each person collected images that resonated in a positive way. Every artist was given a wooden box to paint and decorate with their collected images, and this box became a special place in which they might store some of the little things that bring them peace. We also took time to reflect on where we find peace, talking about colors, symbols, and words that might help us feel at peace. From there, each person created a special flag, and they were strung together in order to share messages of peace with the Miquon community. The flags were hung on the play barn for all to see.

Inspired by the hectic pace of the fall, Mark led the group in rethinking the daily schedule, using design thinking. They needed to define time and discuss what they collectively understood about time. They created a conversion table, and using that, listed all the activities done in one typical day. They assigned the activities an agreed upon “average” amount of time, and then mapped out days to see how time is spent. The group discussed and challenged Malcolm Gladwell’s “10,000-hour rule” (*The Story of Success*), and did some simple calculations to convert and compare time, like how many days equate to 10,000 hours. (It’s about 417 days.) They also researched some statistics about daily routines in America and compared it with their own data. The group members even chose, somewhat morbidly, dates of their own demise to figure out approximately how much time is left in their lives. The conversation then focused on how people could plan to use their time more wisely and efficiently, perhaps to become “experts” in their personal endeavors.

Life Skills 101

Twice a year, each child has a home-based assignment, structured and planned in school, carried out outside of school, and then presented to the class (and in the spring, to a larger audience). The fall project is Life Skills 101, and involves learning or further developing practical skills that are helpful to others in the family or community as well as oneself. Children plan three weeks of skill building in the same area. They keep track of the time spent as well as successes and challenges. For many children, it is a key experience for learning time management. This fall, projects included topics like: car maintenance, gardening, grocery shopping, cooking, bread baking, and laundry.

Collaborative Design

Every Friday afternoon this fall, both 5th and 6th grade groups met to explore the processes of collaborative design. Design thinking is useful for solving problems of all kinds, including but not limited to those with concrete solutions. One key lesson was the idea that good design comes from real problems -- defining the problem fully, understanding various points of view when relevant, and thinking expansively and loosely about solutions (rather than editing away possibilities). For several weeks, we explored a design activity from the Stanford D.School, in which children interviewed a partner about gift giving problems and designed solutions. It was a source of rich work and conversation.

Our work in collaborative design seems to have inspired a number of children across the building to initiate projects and has also moved us further in our work around productive Good of the Building meetings. It will be interesting to look back on the year in June and see the ways in which our focus on design thinking this fall influenced the whole year.

Mathematical Thinking

In Our Classroom

September Study

As the year gets underway and routines are established, mathematical work is contained within our individual classrooms. This fall, we focused on some of the underlying skills that are critical to mathematical thinking. The children read the directions to unfamiliar games, for example, to become well-versed enough in the game to teach others. Success in mathematics learning is tied to reading and to reading directions. Math in context (you may know it as "word problems") is dependent upon clear reading.

We also played games and explored activities that develop number sense, especially rounding and estimating. Sixth graders did some more specific work with the order of operations while fifth graders explored the idea of factors and multiples, useful to many for scraping the rust off of multiplication and division "facts" as well as putting that information in a larger context.

Pizza Sales

The real work we do around our pizza lunch sales provides context for so much mathematical thinking. As we set the menu, we needed to consider cost, price, and profit. Mental calculation is a big part of every sale week when we tally orders and check the math on each. Our proceeds are going toward a trip this spring, so we've opened an account to build toward that goal, which has meant learning about deposits and withdrawals, and perhaps even a few cents of interest down the line.

UNICEF

By tradition, the 5th/6th group on our side of the building has coordinated the school's UNICEF fundraiser every year, "Trick or Treat for Unicef." Each year we prepare an assembly presentation, coordinate collection of donations from across the school, and donate the entire proceeds of one of our pizza sales. We also count the money -- every penny of it. Our goal this

year \$2017.00, and ambitious goal set by the children, given that our previous high water mark was not quite \$1600.00. This year we raised \$1903.36, not quite the goal but very impressive!

Small Math Groups

The bulk of our math curriculum occurs in the context of small math groups that are mixed from children in both 5th/6th groups and facilitated by one of the four teachers in the building. The groups began in the beginning of October and were decided by pace and learning style as well as skill level. Such groups are not always strictly separated by grade, though thus far the groups have been this year.

Fifth grade groups have tackled a wide range of topics. Some have been continuing to develop and solidify a conceptual understanding of multiplication and division, while others are applying these operations to solve complex problems in context. Fifth grade math groups also spent time working to draw conceptual connections between division and fractions with some groups progressing to completing more complex functions with fractions and to work in perimeter, area, and angles as fractions of circles.

In sixth grade, students applied their understanding of multiplication and division to solve multi-step problems following the order of operations, were introduced to exponential notation, and in some groups, had the opportunity to compare the difference between graphing linear versus exponential equations to help build their conceptual understanding of exponential growth. Sixth graders also spent time working with multiplying and dividing fractions and mixed numbers with many groups baking delicious treats for the building (the best real world application of this skill!). Others did a deep dive into the relationship between fractions, division, and ratios. Regardless of grade level or math range, all students spent a great deal of time playing math games and examining fun and challenging problems that extended their mathematical reasoning abilities.

Language and Literature

Book Groups

Several times a year, children are presented with a variety of choices for book group reading, sometimes on a theme, sometimes of a particular genre, and sometimes a wide mix. This fall, the book group choices were tied to the theme of play, and each book explored the idea of the line between real and imaginary, but in very different ways. The three books that were selected by the group were: A.A. Milne's *Winnie the Pooh*, *Hitty: Her First Hundred Years* by Rachel Field, and *The Indian in the Cupboard*, by Lynne Reid Banks. The groups met weekly, discussing their reading in depth and previewing the next week's reading. The meetings provide scaffolding for some children and much anticipated opportunity to bat around ideas and interpretations of text for many. They allow for new vocabulary to be explored and for issues and history raised by the book to be discussed. After meeting for several weeks, discussing about a fourth of the book each time, the groups plan a presentation of the book for the rest of the class.

A number of the children in the group also participate voluntarily in a monthly book club run by our librarian, Amy, for fifth and sixth graders. So far this year they have read *The Apothecary* by Maile Meloy, and are finishing up *The London Eye Mystery* by Siobhan Dowd.

Storytime

Even fluent readers, as most children are in fifth and sixth grade, find real value in hearing stories read aloud. It is also a wonderful way to explore big ideas and hard questions in order to build community. Because we value all of those things, we have storytime consistently at least three times a week in addition to books we might read aloud that tie into curricular pieces, be it math, language arts, or social studies. As mentioned above, so far this year our storytimes have included *Pinocchio* and *We Are the Ship*.

Writer's Workshops

In response to the wishes of last year's group (which is now half of this year's group) for more creative writing time, we are offering writer's workshops as part of our writing curriculum. Indeed, much of fifth and sixth grade revolve around nonfiction reading and writing, and this gives children much desired time with a wider variety of genres. So far this year, we have offered workshops in Suspense (led by Diane), Poetry (led by Mark), and Creative Nonfiction (led by Jen). As with book groups, children rank their choices and then we form groups, and we try to give as many children as possible their first choice while balancing the groups.

The point of these groups is not to produce a finished piece necessarily, but to observe mentor texts, learn specific techniques, and improve and expand writing skills. This is an opportunity to risk and try ideas without the pressure of finished product.

Other Writing and Language Work

The children have had other writing opportunities, also. Periodically, each child writes a brief piece for a class blog that we post (dianeandmarksgroup.com). In writing for the blog on topics the whole group has agreed upon, like all good journalists, they need to consider *who, what, where, when, why, and how*.

The group is just putting finishing touches on reaction essays, written in response to baseball-related quotations that have been posted around the room. These are the first more formally structured essays of the year. They have also provided an opportunity for each child to be a peer editor and responder for classmates.

We have just begun vocabulary work as well using *Vocabulary from Classical Roots*, work which will be further developed on return from winter break. This work provides word study in addition to the work through book groups and focuses on root words, prefixes, and suffixes.

Speaking

This is an oft overlooked and critically important part of language learning in many environments, and an important focus in fifth and sixth grade. Informally, we have a weekly check-in time, during which everyone in the group is asked to share highlights from their recent lives in succinct, meaningful ways. Sometimes we even challenge ourselves to a six word limit. We are surprised and delighted to find those to be more informative! We play games (like

Extemporaneous Speaking) to explicitly practice voice volume, eliminating filler words, and body position when speaking. We offer critiques (via balanced responses) to each other's presentations. And we have been using (nearly) textless slides to practice using visual displays without falling into the bad habit of reading off of notes.

Looking Ahead

We are heading to the Mercer Museum in Doylestown on December 13th to see two special exhibits, both on childhood and play, and to preview our spring study on work by viewing the many exhibits on occupations that existed pre-Industrial Revolution. We'll be wrapping up our baseball study as well, and the children are pushing for an assembly presentation of our work, so that may be in the offing. On return from winter break, we will also begin discussing and planning our spring trip.

We'll introduce some handwork -- knitting and needlework -- as great winter activities, storytime choices, and great fine motor development tasks. In a similar vein, we'll have each child working explicitly on either keyboarding or cursive writing skills. We will also be doing more specific skill development as needed around paragraph structure, punctuation, capitalization, and other points of grammar. We'll use a variety of mentor texts, and read pieces of *Woe is I*, *The Young Grammarphobe's Guide to Better English in Plain English*.

Small math groups will be suspended for a month while we return to our own groups for some math work -- our work will combine a study of time with some geography work. Finally, a new set of book groups (this time across the building) will begin. It looks to be a busy and interesting winter!