

2018-2019 Fifth and Sixth Grade Curriculum Report

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The Group -

We spent the year as a group of eighteen playful, curious, sensitive, sincere, and energetic children. The sixth graders were on familiar ground, as all had been fifth graders in the group last year; however, this was their first year with Sarah. That arrangement presents the advantage that certain routines and materials were well-known -- and also challenges -- they had established ties and relationships with one another, which meant special care was necessary to support opening to new (or renewed) connections. The sixth graders felt embraced by their classmates on their entry a year before and hoped to carry that forward.

Moving into the fifth/sixth groups at Miquon brings exciting new challenges in the form of responsibilities and privileges. Establishing expanded outdoor boundaries, the expectation that children will self-monitor time, and managing an assignment book are three examples of the leap in expectation. Sixth graders who have found these tasks challenging as fifth graders often take advantage of a “reset” in sixth grade and rise to the occasion. Fifth graders often cherish these new challenges and adapt quickly, and sometimes need more support. We offer support happily, as we see teaching these skills to be every bit as critical as the academic skills we facilitate.

This year, there were children, even sixth graders, who needed a significant amount of support from teachers in establishing and respecting boundaries (physical and behavioral). We met in various configurations, and it was good to see young people who had hesitated to speak up earlier find a stronger voice. Underlying the critically important trust that we extend to children is an assumption of good intention. We endeavored to help them 1) extend that assumption to each other, and 2) to recognize that when they break that trust by disregarding boundaries set by themselves and their peers, one consequence is to have a less content community.

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

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

- 5th/6th Sing - a reliable Wednesday morning sharing of silly, historical, fun, and sometimes culturally and/or curriculum-relevant songs, accompanied by guitar. (Thanks Mike Batchelor!)

- Buddies - We enjoyed a relationship with Ben and Celia's 1st/2nd group this year, which included outdoor play, reading, sharing our work with one another, and art.
- Unicef - At Halloween, our group sponsors a school-wide fundraiser through "Trick or Treat for Unicef." We put on an assembly presentation, collect donations, and count the funds raised, as well as contributing the proceeds from one of our pizza sales. This year we raised about \$1800!!
- Pizza sales - a roughly bi-weekly event that involves determining a menu (by calculating profit and measuring customer preferences), delivering and collecting order forms and money, recording and totaling orders, making brownies, delivering to each class. The children do this independently, and the profit paid for our end-of-year trip in May.
- Spring Fair - by fifth and sixth grade, the children run the class booth (with gentle adult oversight). As has been the long custom, our group sets up and runs the very popular lemon-stick booth.

Other community building activities include: celebrating birthdays (or half-birthdays) with "word presents," a pollyanna exchange right before winter break, and a teacher-made breakfast on the first day back to school in January. The room has often been abuzz with creative play using materials in our "make and play" center, dress up in (and out of) the loft -- especially popular during pizza sales for some reason, and self-directed play and building of all sorts.

Our connections to the other fifth and sixth grade group are also very important. As noted above, we enjoy a weekly Sing. As you will see below, we also served as audience for one another from time to time, and joined for math workshops and for book group. There is a lot of social back-and-forth across the building, and our make-and-play spaces are used by students from both groups. We borrow from and lend to one another with some abandon, and the teachers collaborate in planning, resources, and simply keeping one another afloat. This year, we also kicked off the year with an after-school/evening outdoor event at Miquon. It was an exceedingly hot but fun evening.

Social Studies - Integrated Curriculum

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

- *What factors develop worldview and how is it expressed as group identity?*
- *How do differing worldviews and significant change create conflict?*
- *How have human structures/institutions (and nature) created and resolved conflict?*

Overall Theme

Our overall theme this year was *Sacred Spaces*, and underneath that broad topic, we studied death in the fall, human-constructed sacred places in the winter, and colonization and decolonization in the spring. Death and sacred spaces are intimately connected because so many sacred places serve to honor death and memory. Looking more deeply at human-built sacred spaces in the winter allowed us to study world religions and to visit a handful of religious spaces in the Philadelphia Metropolitan Area. In the Spring, we turned our attention to colonization in order to understand how it involves a clash of worldviews in terms of what is sacred, as well as the desecration of what Indigenous peoples consider sacred, and the death of countless people and nations. We also discussed decolonization,

and made an effort to center good news in our conversations. There is significant healing work and activism happening as you read this!

As the students said, one way to define “sacred” is with the word “important.” Looking at sacred spaces and at each subtopic allowed us to take a deep look at what various peoples consider important, how they go about honoring what they hold sacred, and what has happened (and continues to happen) when violence and desecration occur on sacred land and in other sacred places.

Fall Study: Death

In the fall, we studied Death. Our first read loud, *Tuck Everlasting*, gave us a way into the conversation by exploring the question of whether the main character might want to live forever. In the book, death is painted as a good and natural thing. From there, we moved into considering cycles - the moon cycle, tadpoles and frogs, recycling, etc. Students made illustrations of these cycles, which hung on our classroom walls for a number of months. **We then considered the idea of life spans**, looking at how different species on Earth have vastly different lifespans, ranging from twenty-four hours to thousands of years, and even some that seemed to be potentially immortal...?!

After getting grounded with the concept of death, we shifted our attention to human death. Each student picked a person - fictional or “real” - and wrote an obituary about them. We took two field trips to cemeteries, both to Notice and Wonder generally, and also to study the symbolism that covered them. We saw examples of both pet burial and green burial, as well as elaborate mausoleums, obelisks, and the typical gravestones. During this time, we also spent a morning telling stories about our own ancestors. This gave us a chance both to honor and learn about each other’s ancestors, and to try on some version of the practice of honoring ancestors, which is nearly universal in cultures across the globe.

We read a couple of powerful picture books during our death study, including *Duck, Death and the Tulip* by Wolf Erlbruch and *The Dead Bird* by Margaret Wise Brown. These books helped us enter into conversations about specific, tender topics in ways that were still comfortably distant. Similarly, our fall book groups each focused on death, allowing each group to go deep with the particular complexities of the story they read. We also spent an afternoon with Miranda, the school social worker, talking about grief and its many forms.

We also studied Victorian grief customs for honoring and remembering the dead. Much of what we might recognize as mainstream United States grieving culture comes from Victorian England - actually, Queen Victoria herself - so learning about that time period helps us to unpack what we see around us here and now. This led us into a conversation of mementos for the dead, Memento Mori. We talked at some length about the difference between memorials and monuments, too. The subtle distinctions between honoring, celebrating, and remembering dead people and past events, led us to think about famous places like the Washington Monument and Vietnam Memorial, as well as current events like the controversies over confederate monuments.

While we were studying Britain, we took used the high artistry (ahem) of Monty Python to talk about the ways that people use humor, [and various euphemisms](#), to talk about death. We also took a trip to the Woodmere Art Museum, which was conveniently hosting an exhibit called “Dreadful Delights,” highlighting cakes decorated in Victorian, death-themed styles.

During this time, **we also collaborated with Kate and Arielle in science to study decomposition**. Each student created an experiment involving either a fish or a lemon in various control and experimental states, and we observed them breaking down (or not!) for many weeks. The students

made detailed notes and sketches in their observations notebooks, tracking the changes each week. As of this writing, one of the lemons is still sitting in a jar in the breakout room, fully intact on its bed of soil! Kate also helped us to establish a worm compost bin in our room. This held our attention for a little while... luckily, “benign neglect” is apparently good for them.

Autumn as a Time to Honor the Dead:

It is remarkable how many cultures across the Northern Hemisphere honor their ancestors in autumn. As a class, we looked at this phenomenon and considered why that might be the case.

We also studied two ancestor-honoring holidays in particular: Día de los Muertos and Samhain.

Día de los Muertos:

In this group, students began by reviewing their previous impressions about Day of the Dead, which many of them knew at least a little about, and a few knew a lot about. We studied the cultural origins of the holiday, learning that it is a Mestizo holiday: a mix of Indigenous and Spanish culture and religion. Both Christian and nature-based symbolism are present in the *ofrendas*, each symbol or element with particular meanings. After laying this groundwork, this group built an *ofrenda* and cooked some dishes that are traditional to *Día de los Muertos*, learning about them as they went.

Samhain:

In the Samhain research group, students researched the ancient holiday of Samhain, navigating the paucity of resources by regrouping a few times to reframe their searches based on what was available in books and online. They created a play involving a time-traveling group of students who went back to the night of a Samhain festival, observing the festival traditions (many of which are precursors to things people in the United States now do on Halloween), and learning about them along the way. This group also cooked traditional Samhain foods to share during our presentation: Remembrance Cookies and Apple Cider.

Winter Study: Human-Made Sacred Spaces

In the winter, we shifted our focus to studying human-built sacred spaces. As part of this study, we continued our study of symbolism, shifting now to religious symbolism. **We learned about the symbols of numerous religions from around the world, which gave us a chance to understand a bit about each religion and its beliefs. We also studied the physical structure of built sacred spaces, noting the remarkable consistency among the spaces of very different religions.** Using both this symbolism and the structures of the spaces, we learned to “read” the spaces to some extent, looking for clues about the beliefs and values of the people who worship there.

We were lucky to have the chance to visit a handful of religious sites locally: the Cathedral Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul, the Race Street Meeting House, the Bharatiya Temple, and Beth Or Synagogue. We were sad to miss our chance to visit Masjidullah because of snow in the beginning of March. As we visited each site, we looked out for the layouts and features we had studied so that we could come back to school and unpack what we had seen.

Spring Study: Colonization and Decolonization

As we came into spring, we shifted our focus to colonization and decolonization by first considering the question, “Where are we?” This led us into conventional geography work first: learning the locations of the fifty states as well as various facts about them. After spending a few days on this, we complicated our understanding of “where are we?” by diving into the map at native-land.ca.

Knowing that many of the students had studied the Lenape during their 3rd or 4th grade years, we began by gathering our previous impressions about the Lenape, about the first Europeans who came to the Philadelphia area, and about first contact.

We then turned to creation stories. With Sacred Spaces as our year long theme, and having just transitioned from a study of built sacred places, this was a natural way to begin to unpack the worldviews of the Lenape and of the European Christians who colonized Lenapehoking (the Lenape name for this land, which encompasses parts of Delaware, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, New York, Connecticut. We read a telling of the Lenape creation story by Chief Robert Red Hawk Ruth, which was recorded and translated by Swarthmore College students and is available online. We also read “Elohim the Creator,” from *In the Beginning: Creation Stories from Around the World* by Virginia Hamilton and Barry Moser. **After reading these stories, we talked about their differences and similarities, revealing some core differences in worldview: In particular, are humans caretakers of the Earth alongside other animals, or do we have “dominion” over the Earth?**

We talked about how the settlers who came to Turtle Island (North America, in the worldview of some Indigenous peoples) used Christianity to justify the violence and entitlement of their actions. This, of course, does not mean that Christianity is itself bad. The harm done has been by European colonizers who used a narrative of Christianity to justify violence.

In mid-April, we prepared for our visit to Delaware to spend time with Chief White Otter, Debbie (a Lenape teenager), and RuthAnn Purchase (a woman who works closely with Chief White Otter, currently stewarding a project called Friends of Lenape Everywhere).

During our day in Delaware, Chief White Otter, RuthAnn, and Debbie talked with us about how colonization has affected the Lenape and what the Lenape are up to now, including efforts towards decolonization. Chief White Otter told us about how some Lenape left Lenapehoking in order to maintain their language and culture, which the settlers made illegal here, while others stayed to maintain a relationship with the land, but lost their language and much of their culture. These groups of Lenape -- those who maintained relationship with the language and culture and those who maintained relationship with the land -- are now meeting and sharing with each other in order to restore their culture as much as possible.

During the spring, it became clear that our big trip would take us to Plymouth, Massachusetts. For this reason, we focused the last part of our study on the Wampanoag, *the Peoples of First Light*, because we would be visiting their land. We began by reading the picture book, *The Legend of Katama*, and learning the Wampanoag names for the places many of us know as Cape Cod and Martha’s Vineyard. After that, the students did guided independent research, learning about notable people from Wampanoag history, the Wampanoag language, and Wampanoag villages. We also watched the documentary, *We Still Live Here*, to learn about the Wampanoags’ current attempt to revitalize their language. All of this work prepared us for our trip to Massachusetts, and especially for our visit to Plimoth Plantation. When we returned, we also watched *We Shall Remain: After the Mayflower*, which tells the story of first contact between the Wampanoag and the first Europeans who settled there (often

referred to as “Pilgrims”). This documentary tells the complex story of how diseases from Europe wiped out huge numbers of the Wampanoag people, of the early friendship between the remaining Wampanoag and the European settlers, and of the brutal betrayal by Europeans during King Philip’s War. After watching this documentary, which included some graphic depictions, we talked as a group about the study overall.

As we mentioned above, we had spent a significant amount of time learning about hopeful events, like the Lenape and Wampanoags’ attempts to revitalize their languages. We felt it was important to also go back and get specific about why such attempts were necessary -- they are working to revitalize their language because it was almost erased by colonial violence. *We Shall Remain: After the Mayflower* gets specific about this history in a way that is both humanizing to all characters and starkly clear about violence.

Indian Residential Schools Study Groups:

A major component of our spring study of colonization and decolonization was our study of Indian Residential Schools. These schools existed across the British empire until the late twentieth century with the purpose of aggressively assimilating Indigenous children into Anglo-Saxon culture. Their purpose was to “kill the Indian in the child.” We split into two groups to study these schools, one group focusing on Australia while the other focused on Canada.

In our Canada study group, we looked at picture books, at a historical article, at photographs, and at video interviews to build our understanding of what happened in Canadian Indian Residential Schools. We learned about how school staff forcibly cut children’s long hair, forbid them from speaking their language, forbid them from spending time with their other-gender, other-age family members, and made them wear culturally inappropriate uniforms. Many students were particularly struck by the video interview we watched -- the intensity of the survivor’s testimonial made the schools real to them. We concluded our study by making iMovies to convey the experiences of students in the Canadian Indian Residential Schools to the half of our class that studied Australia.

In our Australia study group, we began by looking at John Marsden and Shaun Tan’s *The Rabbits*. Students returned to this book numerous times during the study, both to understand how colonization happened in Australia and, later, as the basis for our play. We also looked at various maps of Australia and the Torres Strait Islands, and learned the respectful naming practices for talking about Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islanders. Finally, we read *The Burnt Stick* and watched *The Rabbit Proof Fence*. All of this prepared us to create a play (with a puppet show embedded in it!) in order to share our work with the other group.

Current Events

Throughout the year, we have occasionally taken time to talk about current events. Unfortunately, this year gave us many opportunities to respond to traumatic news in real time. In these moments, we paused to give space to these events, honoring their emotional impact while also unpacking them intellectually as appropriate. In the winter, we had a conversation about how to navigate intense news like this, and the students brainstormed a long list of ways to cope and get support when they need it.

Junior Scholastic magazine was very helpful in facilitating these conversations. There were articles in the magazine about numerous pertinent topics, ranging from an article on sports teams using Native American images as mascots to an article about the anniversary of Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico.

We also ordered Scholastic Scope for this year, a Language Arts focused publication by Scholastic, although we found that Junior Scholastic is more interesting and more often relevant to our studies.

One of the ways we engaged with current events, was to make a colonization and decolonization-focused bulletin board. Surrounding the maps of Turtle Island (one naming Native American nations and the other showing the U.S. states), are headlines that we have dubbed “good news.” These headlines range from generous acts by and for Indigenous tribes to legal victories that protect Indigenous rights and the Earth.

Oskar’s Visit:

In the spring, we were lucky to have a visit from Oskar Castro, who shared with us about his Taíno heritage and about U.S. colonialism in Puerto Rico. He gave us a rich history of United States relations with Puerto Rico, talked about the current state of things, and shared personal stories about growing up in a Black neighborhood in New Jersey as the child of immigrants.

Indigenous Author Book Groups:

Our colonization and decolonization study this spring was undergirded by our Indigenous Author Book Groups. **Every book we presented for spring book groups was written by an Indigenous author.** We were delighted by how students repeatedly brought stories and ideas from their books into our Indian Residential Schools discussions and other Theme conversations. (More on book groups later in this report.)

Life Skills and Personal Projects

Increasing independence and tangible problem-solving skills is a core goal in fifth and sixth grade. Twice a year, first in the fall and again in the spring, we ask students to take three or four weeks to explore a topic, develop a skill, or pursue an interest of their choosing outside of school, and then to present and celebrate their learning with the group as a whole. In the fall, we call this “Life Skills 101.” We ask that the project be practical in nature, and that it be of help or fill a need for someone aside from the child themselves. Each child keeps a journal that includes the project plan and a written reflection on the project as it develops, as well as a calendar of time spent on the project. Afterward, projects are shared with classmates. This year’s projects included: making breakfast and packing lunch, pet care, organizational projects, party planning, painting, cooking, grocery shopping, babysitting, and first aid training.

In the spring, we lengthen the project to four weeks, and the “practical and helpful” boundary is removed, broadening the possibilities even further. This time, while there was still some cooking going on, we also saw such projects as: building a board game, preparing a travel presentation, creating a website, trying to launch an online sale business, several language learning adventures, and music, writing, and research projects. It’s very exciting to watch projects develop and to see them presented at the end of the four weeks.

Changes and Choices

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

Healthy Choices: healthy eating and exercise, body image, substance use and abuse, recognizing pressure from peers and from media (positive and negative), the nature of healthy relationships, presenting yourself to a bigger world, and being an upstander

AND

Human Development: Rather than looking at the entire human lifespan each year, with a particular focus on puberty, we have shifted into a two-year rotation, one focusing on development from conception through puberty, and the other focusing on puberty, aging and some work about death and dying. This year was the second piece of the rotation.

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

Mathematical Thinking

The basis for our mathematics curriculum comes from two places. One is the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) publication, *Focal Points*. It is this document, that informs our goals for each level. The goals listed by the document lend cohesion across the years and emphasize the importance of not “covering” a lot in very little depth -- but instead, of carefully building deeper understanding. The second source is the closely observed developmental readiness of the children themselves. **We work to teach young people “where they are” when they come to us in fifth and sixth grade. Ideally, each young person is working with us in math close to (and not too far over or under) the edge of what he or she understands.** This year the fifth grade work came primarily from the series, *Investigations*, which is used in earlier years as well. The sixth graders worked primarily with material from an online resource called *Illustrative Mathematics*, and some also used materials built from that program by *Open Up Resources*. When the sixth graders worked with balancing equations this spring, it was primarily based on a program called, Hands-on Equations. Each child’s narrative, end of year report lists topics of focus in their group this year.

From NCTM’s *Focal Points*

5th Grade
<i>Number and Operations, Algebra</i>
> Develop understanding and fluency with division, using understanding of place value and the relationship of multiplication to division > Use the context of the problem to determine the most appropriate form for the quotient (including the remainder) > Develop understanding and fluency with addition and subtraction of fractions and decimals, including problems involving measurement
<i>Geometry, Measurement, and Algebra</i>

- >Develop understanding of 2dimensional shapes, including formulae for perimeter and area
- >Develop understanding of 3dimensional shapes, including concepts of volume and surface area
- >Explore data analysis, including graphing and ordered pairs on coordinate grids

6th Grade

Number and Operations, Algebra

- > 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

Geometry and Measurement

- > Identify, describe, and construct 3dimensional shapes, extending the 5th grade work in this area
- > Analyze their properties, including surface area and volume
- > Find and justify formulae for area, perimeter of 2D shapes, and surface area and volume of polyhedra and prisms.

Much of our explicit math work is done through small groups which meet Monday through Thursday mornings. This is a consistently alert and productive time of day for most. The groups were led by Sarah and Diane in turn for many weeks, allowing both teachers to know the children well mathematically. They were organized -- with some fluidity -- by learning peers. "Learning peer" is defined as 1) a person whose understanding and skill level is similar, and b) someone whose style and pace is similar. Most often, it's a bit of both.

Early and late in the year, we worked with the entire group on math connected to our lunch (pizza) sales. In the fall, this means calculating unit costs (if a box of 10 lemonade packs is x , how much does each pack cost), and we use the data they collect to set the year's prices as well as to review our menu. Learning how profits are calculated gives us an idea of how to extrapolate our growing data from sale to sale to predict our total income and together set a trip budget for the spring. Close to the trip, we take a few days to connect the idea of percentages to tipping, and the children learn to calculate 10%, and from that 20% and 15%. We even practiced it, using menus from one of the restaurants we knew we would be visiting!

This year we held Math Workshops in mixed groups across the fifth/sixth building just after spring break. Each group focused on some aspect of data collection, analysis, and display. The workshops were titled, *Data About Us*, which developed a statistical portrait of an "average" 5th/6th grade Miquon student, *Exploring Data Literacy through Movie Company Information*, which included work on measures of central tendency and creating double-bar graphs, and *Cards and Dice*, which used those tools (and blackjack, poker, and craps) to consider fundamental concepts in probability such as permutations and the Fundamental Counting Principle.

Language and Literature

Storytime

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

This year began with the beautifully written, thematically relevant *Tuck Everlasting*, by **Natalie Babbitt**. The structure of the book is built around the metaphor of a ferris wheel, turning as do the seasons, Earth, and life itself. The question it raises is whether never-ending life, if ever possible, would be desirable? The wonderful metaphorical language, memorable characters, and important questions made it a great first choice.

As this novel wrapped up in late October or so, we wondered about returning to a common practice of reading an older “classic,” and we toyed with the idea of a version of *Frankenstein* (2018 was the 200th anniversary of Mary Shelley’s important novel). However, testing the waters with the young people by reading aloud a brief script from “Scholastic Scope Magazine,” and then reading aloud a wonderful brief biography by Lynn Fulton, *She Made a Monster: How Mary Shelley Created Frankenstein*, we got only tepid response from the group.

Instead, taking a cue from the observational work we had been doing with our studies of decomposing fish and lemons, we turned to a book of **Sherlock Holmes stories by Arthur Conan Doyle**, specifically, *The Solitary Cyclist*. It was very interesting to track the clues in the story, noting what we suspected to be relevant and making predictions along the way. Reading the story also involved a bit of historical unpacking and explanations of historical norms and social mores. It was a valuable experience...and a bit more like a language lesson than storytime. So we moved on.

This time we turned to a wonderful novel, *The Other Boy* (**M.G. Hennessey**), which attracted our attention -- and that of many reviewers -- as we looked at literature with an eye toward exploring gender identity more explicitly with our group this year. The book’s protagonist, twelve year old Shane -- a baseball player, sci-fi writer, and recognizable sixth grader, is a trans boy who was assigned female at birth. This is a secret he is keeping from many as the book opens, and a fact of his life which is a source of struggle in his relationship with his parents, particularly with his dad. This novel, falling squarely into the realistic fiction genre, was compelling to the group, and laid some groundwork for some explicit lessons around gender identity, posters from which have been posted in the room ever since.

After winter break, we took a hiatus from typical storytime for a while to allow the young people some time each morning to work on some handwork -- knitting, crossstitch, rug hooking, pattern drawing, and to listen to some podcasts. Our thought was that after a week or two, the handwork would be independent enough to allow us to explore a variety of podcasts, and perhaps even spark interest in NPR’s podcast event, for which they were seeking entries from young people. Well, a great deal of the handwork turned out to be collaborative (and therefore communicative), some were interested in podcasts -- and

some really were not -- and so toward the end of February, with handwork running its course, we returned to storytime.

This time we took on quite a challenge. **Markus Zusak's *Book Thief*** almost defies superlatives. Its surprising use of metaphors, its twists from humor to sobering reality and back to humor, its absolute honest read on the nature of childhood and early adolescence. All of those would be reason enough. In addition, the narrator of the book is Death -- a compassionate, wise, and reflective presence -- and the setting is a street in small-town Germany during the Second World War. WWII had been a stated interest of the sixth graders in this group as we wrapped up their fifth grade last year; however, their interest struck me as a romanticization of war, spurred by recent books of war heroics for sale. *The Book Thief* has been a way to respond to that interest, albeit through a different lens, while also tying up the year thematically, as it not only includes Death (a very prominent and relatable narrator), but also gets to the heart of what happens during colonization, when whole peoples are painted as "other" in service to the interests of those in power. It is a good thing this novel sums up the year so well, as it took some effort to get all 600 pages wrapped up by year's end.

Book Groups and Genre Studies

Book groups are a much-anticipated piece of our literature program. A few times a year we present a number of books to the group by "book talking" them -- introducing the plot, setting, genre, and theme, and inviting the children to choose between them, ranking their top several choices. Sometimes the books offered have been suggested to us by children, sometimes chosen by teachers, and sometimes selected for connections to our theme. We try to give children their first choices, while being sure that each group has at least three members, but not too many. **The groups then meet weekly, first to be introduced to the book more fully, then for conversation, further exploration of ideas or questions, and to negotiate the next week's reading assignment.** This year, Jen Curyto and Rossana Zapf were included in groups, and one book group included the whole 5th/6th (teachers and students).

Our first book group selections were connected thematically, each featuring death in some way. The group chose: *Bridge to Terabithia* (Katherine Paterson), *Where the Red Fern Grows* (Wilson Rawls), and *A Monster Calls* (Patrick Ness, inspired by an idea of the late Siobhan Dowd). While the books were different in many ways, each contained a young protagonist confronting death or its potential, and dealing with the many layers and complexities of grief. One group's presentation was a memorable modeling of its discussion process, called "rotating chair," through which they summarized and responded to the novel. Another created a fairly elaborate set of scenes which they acted out to capture the important moments in the story. The third group told the story through visual art, building to show the emotional impact of the story.

The next book groups began meeting in December, contained young people and teachers from across the building as well as our learning specialists, and were not thematically linked. The goal was to offer more light-hearted reading. The books chosen were: *Invitation to the Game* (also: *The Game*, Monica Hughes), *The Schwa Was Here* (Neal Shusterman), *Half Magic* (Edward Eager), *Better Nate Than Ever* (Tim Federle), *Three Times Lucky* (Sheila Turnage), and *The Great Greene Heist* (Varian Johnson).

The literature study to follow was a genre study of biographies and autobiographies. While the group had done some biographical research earlier in order to write obituaries, this study was focused on the reading. Upon finishing, we presented our work to our partner fifth and sixth grade class, to staff, and

to family members who were able to join us. Each presentation included a visual display of some sort. The subjects of the biographies (or autobiographies) were varied, and included: authors, historical figures, athletes, and artists of several kinds.

Our final book groups met in the spring, and had Indigenous authors in common, a great fit for our work on colonization and decolonization this spring. Aside from the authorship, the books chosen differed significantly in tone and content. One was Joseph Bruchac's *Code Talker: A Novel about the Navajo Marines of World War Two*, a riveting work of historical fiction that took us behind the scenes in major battle in the Pacific, and deep into the experience of Navajo (Dine) young men, growing up and serving in the war. Another was *Two Roads*, also by Joseph Bruchac. In this well-received book, twelve year old Cal takes to the road with his father during the Depression, only finding out during their wanderings about his Creek heritage. The third group read a pair of shorter novels, *How I Became a Ghost* (by Tim Tingle) and *In the Footsteps of Crazy Horse* (Joseph M Marshall III). The group really enjoyed Tingle's book in particular, and were interested by its protagonist and narrator, who continues his role after his death. Our wrap-up of this final session of book groups had young people from two of the groups working in pairs or trios to create visual presentations about their books to be shared with a smaller group made up of participants in each of the sub-groups. The third group (*Two Roads*) performed a short skit for the entire class instead.

Word and Language Study

We attend to word structure all year (prefixes and suffixes) and to a good deal of new vocabulary, especially tied to our thematic work. We also make a point of looking closely at word patterns and at root words. This is very common during math, and it also happens during storytime, work with geography, and current event conversations. American English is a challenging language in terms of spelling, as it does not abide very strictly by phonetic rules, but not a random one, either, and we want young people to understand that spelling is one sign of the history of a word. Over the course of the year, there were references to a number of languages and their distinct patterns -- from Latin and Greek (as roots), to Hebrew, Mandarin, Spanish, and even a bit of German (especially in *The Book Thief*, which introduced all of us to some "naughtier" phrases as well).

Writing

Writing is a strand of the language and literature curriculum that crosses disciplines readily, and includes practical as well as creative tasks. Children explain their mathematical thinking; they write balanced responses about events and work in the classroom; they create blog entries about recent events in our classroom and with specialists for publication. Nearly every child in the group had an opportunity during the year to write a thank you note as well, to visitors, people we met on field trips, etc.

One of the most important new areas of focus for writing in fifth and sixth grade is note-taking. In math activities, thematic work, and in literature activities, we emphasize taking notes *not* by "copying" what the teacher says or writes on a topic, but by recording the gist of an idea and any examples that will make the information memorable and meaningful. We remind children to note the date as well as to title their notes, and then to glance at their notes with this question in mind: "If I read these a couple of months from now, would I remember what this means?" One sign of the success of this approach is that math groups regularly ask us to pause between activities so that they can record some

notes for remembering what we had been doing. Note-taking, particularly around social studies, was done when listening, when viewing media, in discussions, and especially when reading for research.

The first long-term writing piece was an obituary. Each child chose a subject (some living now, most deceased real figures, and several literary characters), and then used scaffolding to examine real obituaries and create their own. Some of the group went a bit further down the research path than was our intention; we saw it more as a creative writing project. Others truly embraced the creative elements and wrote descriptive and even humorous obituaries.

The biggest writing piece of the year was the BAE (Become an Expert) project, the topics for which were sacred places (interpreted quite broadly). This work, too, was scaffolded significantly. It involved some initial research (with help from librarian, Sarah) in order to narrow to a topic choice, then thought-mapping to decide upon three to five subtopics and guiding questions inside of those subtopics. From there, the children took notes -- from books, online sources, short films, reference books -- and organized those notes by source and by subtopic. Once notes were sufficient, they were organized again (which meant reconsidering division among subtopics for some), and arranged into a narrative -- literally attached in order to larger sheets of paper. At that point, connecting words and phrases could be added, the language smoothed, and the paper typed up to prepare for student and teacher editing. The process went further beyond spring break than had been our hope, so that we wrapped up with reading finished products to one another.

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

We also spent some time this year journal writing. This was a social emotional process, rather than an academic one, providing a space for students to write freely. The purpose was to help them develop journal writing as a way to express their creativity, to record their lives, and to process their feelings. We did various imaginative writing exercises, built personal "secret places" out of modeling clay, and did freewriting.

Speaking

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

In the first weeks of school, each child prepared a slide introduction of themselves to the class using Google. (These slides also became portfolio covers.) It was a chance to review or learn some Google tools use as well as a first oral presentation to the class. Book groups prepare and present to the class in a variety of formats. Research projects, biographies, study group work, and trip planning is presented, sometimes formally, sometimes to audiences of one or two as people circulate through the room. Children are encouraged to answer the class phone and to make phone calls to businesses and organizations as needed. Feedback (both positive comments and helpful suggestions) is offered by adults

and by peers so that the larger experiences -- presenting the Life Skills 101 Projects, Personal Projects, facilitating Good of the School meetings, etc. -- are just parts of a much bigger lesson.

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

Conference Weeks

During the Fall conference week, the students, Sarah, Jeri, and Diego studied youth activism. We read stories about youth activists from around the world, and ended up researching a number of climate activism projects. We also learned some songs from the Civil Rights Movement, and the students enjoyed learning to sing “We Are the World” while signing along in American Sign Language. Towards the beginning and end of the week, we talked about what gives us hope and courage, and each child imagined and drew the world they want to live in.

During the Spring conference week, the students, Sarah, Jeri, and Julie (who works in After School) studied Philadelphia. The students broke into themed groups to write guides to various aspects of Philadelphia, including Visual Arts, Music, Food, Skateboarding, Basketball, Soccer, Myths and Folklore, and Parks and Trails. Much of the week was spent researching themes and creating brochures. We also talked with Reid Bramblett (Kemper’s Dad), who is a travel writer, about the process of creating travel guides. We spent one day on the road, driving down Germantown Avenue for a driving tour of Philadelphia and visiting Awbury Arboretum.

Culminating Trip

A student-planned trip has become a highly anticipated part of a year in our group. It is often the largest collaborative project of the year. We use the profit raised by our pizza lunch sales to completely finance the trip, and were able to pay for a full three day, two night adventure!

The trip was built around four parameters: fit in with our topics of study, was a place of interest to the group, could be accomplished for our (projected) budget, and was within a reasonable traveling distance. After some preliminary research and presentations, the group narrowed their focus to either Washington, DC or Massachusetts (specifically Plimoth Plantation in Plymouth, MA and Cape Cod). The final choice of Massachusetts meant that in terms of curriculum, the trip would be most connected to our spring work on colonization and decolonization. It also meant we would build some work on the Wampanoag people and their current experience as well as before and after European contact into our studies.

We left early in the morning of Wednesday, May 15th, and drove straight through (with a couple of bathroom breaks) to Plimoth Plantation, where we enjoyed our packed lunch at a picnic grove before heading in. Showing up after other school groups have headed out for the day turned out to be lucky, as we were able to watch the orientation film and spend time at the Wampanoag homesite, Craft Center, and 17th century English village without running into crowds. The children entered into conversation with many people in all three sites at Plimoth. As is typical with Miquon kids, our hosts (and we teachers) were impressed with the depth and complexity of their questions and observations.

We drove to the house we rented in West Falmouth (on the cape), where we admired the view of the bay and the lovely quiet of the neighborhood, then proceeded to struggle a while to figure out the sleeping arrangements in the house. Tired and clearly a bit “hangry,” we left the negotiations and drove a few minutes away to a local restaurant for dinner. The food was very good, the servers and staff accommodating, and divided into three tables, the young people handled their independence (and the bill) admirably. A movie seemed a more fitting end to the evening than the game night we had envisioned, so the group settled in to watch a while before heading off to bed and preparing for an early morning.

Diane and several children made a grocery store run in the early morning, and every person in the group helped with shopping, cooking, preparing, or cleaning up a hearty breakfast. Thursday’s big event was a whale watch out of Barnstable. We were very lucky to get sunny and cool but comfortable weather for the event. We were also lucky to see a number of whales, including finback, minke, humpback, and harbor porpoises. After our four hour adventure, we headed into Hyannis for lunch (we split up between a Thai restaurant and a pizza joint), then headed back toward the house, stopping first for mini-golf and some ice cream. We were early patrons at the place, arriving on the heels of a cold, wet spring start. Since there weren’t a whole lot of other customers, we were invited to play as many rounds as we pleased and to “make ourselves comfortable” on the course. A bit of a blessing and a curse, really...

That evening, we enjoyed some more time together at the house -- and a whole bunch of snacks -- and no one argued about getting to bed a bit earlier. We had a more relaxed morning, got the house packed up and cleaned up, and headed to a local place for breakfast. They were a bit apprehensive to see us arrive, and we assured them this was something we had prepared for and practiced. Accordingly, the children divided themselves into four tables (with teachers at a separate fifth table) and proceeded to impress the staff -- and other customers -- with their ease, considerate behavior, and (again) skill at handling the bill.

There’s nothing especially fun about a ride home through the NYC area on a Friday, but we got through it, enjoyed one another’s company and music, and made it home in time to get a night’s sleep and wake up to come to Spring Fair at Miquon...the very next day.

Thanks to Diane’s husband, Scott, for once again jumping into the fray as a driver, chaperone, and all-around flexible traveller.

In Closing

Personal Project presentations in the last full week of school offer a glimpse into the interests, growth, and skill of the children over the course of a year. We were enormously proud of and impressed by every child in the group, and it is clear that the diversity of interests and personal styles is a key element to the strength of the group (and the school). Graduation and skit night -- fun, poignant, and well-executed -- provided similar views and we appreciate the good fortune we have to work with these children every day.

Thank you, first and foremost, to the children in this group. You are an interesting, fun-loving, deeply curious group of young people. We appreciate your questions, your willingness to giggle uncontrollably and dress up outrageously one minute and to earnestly address the world’s concerns the next, as well as your affection for each other and for Miquon.

Sixth graders, we really do expect and look forward to your return visit(s) and want to hear *all* your news -- good, bad, and just interesting -- bring it all when you visit us! We know your next schools

are lucky to be getting you. We will miss you as well. It is a joy to know all of the sixth graders in the group for two years and to feel such strong connections with and between them.

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

Louis and Jeri, you have been generous neighbors, collaborators and team members. We are lucky to have colleagues on which we and all of the children in the building can depend so easily!

Sarah has been a wonderful addition to our community this year, and it is very exciting to know that she will continue in the fifth/sixth building next year, even as Diane welcomes Mark back into the group. Sarah's math warm-ups and silly voices, passion for justice, compassion, and deep connections to young people are a hugely positive addition to the team. Bring some more of your songs to Sing next year, Sarah -- they are wonderful!

Enjoy a summer of learning, adventure, and rest!

Diane and Sarah