

Sarah and Diana's Group

3rd Grade

Curriculum Report 2008-2009

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Assistant Teacher: **Diana Saraga**

While officially our third grade class possessed twenty-two students and two teachers, I tend to think of our group as being composed of twenty-four members of a dynamic community of learners. As I began to reflect upon the past year, which I can hardly believe was my first at Miquon, I thought of a favorite quote by the Greek statesman Pericles, who said, "What you leave behind is not what is engraved in stone monuments, but what is woven into the lives of others." While certainly there is a great deal of tangible documentation of the year's accomplishments and activities – papers and projects folded or stuffed into backpacks, conference notes, and crafts, it is the invisible connections that the greater third grade community has formed that seem most salient to me now.

The Group

Most of the third graders who entered our classroom in September came into the door buzzing with excitement about all the novel elements in store for them: two new teachers, one of the newest classrooms in the school, and two new classmates. It was also the first time many of them had been together since Kindergarten. Judging by the great deal of nervous laughter we overheard, Diana and I suspected that they would need some time to adjust to all of this. Thus, we planned many opportunities in those first weeks for building a cohesive community through group games, shares, and get-to-know-you projects.

And yet, somehow within a few days something clicked, and a high degree of trust

between all of us had formed. Over the next weeks, as Diana and I developed our teaching relationship and extended this to each of our students, we became a kind of school family. Over the course of the year, we shared many of the same experiences any family would: meals, stories, arguments, tears, laughter, and a mind-boggling array of learning experiences.

As with previous years, our group of twenty-two spent time each week in our classroom, with the specialist teachers, at Choice, and (in the Spring) at Mini Courses. While the group did not have as much time in mixed-aged settings as they had in the past two years, weekly activities with their Kindergarten buddies allowed them to hone their leadership and nurturing skills with younger children. Overlapping Morning and Lunch Choice times with other groups also allowed for this important socialization.

This group was amazingly lively, talkative, exuberant, and often precocious. Most were incredibly helpful and enjoyed participating in the daily routines of the classroom, particularly the maintenance of our beloved class guinea pigs. They possessed strong curiosity about the world and high ethical and moral opinions, particularly regarding how others should act or behave. Because of this, social conflicts at times tended to become surrounded with a great deal of passionate rhetoric. Usually, however, once all parties had smoothed their ruffled feathers, children were able to take a step back and see situations more calmly. The other challenge in a classroom setting in which there are so many eager, quick, and

verbal children is that there is only so much time in a day to hear each child's stories, connections, and predictions. Thus, a big emphasis for us this year with the group was in the importance of learning to listen, really listen and sit with, others' perspectives as well.

The Curriculum

Broadly, I organize my teaching and curriculum the around the development of **skills, content knowledge, and perspective**. While many think of "skills" in a procedural sense (e.g. the steps involved in addition or subtraction), I view skills as the learning tools that one uses as a vehicle for accessing content. Certainly, procedures across the curriculum are one element of this broad range, but in my mind this category also includes a bevy of social-emotional and academic practices and behaviors. How to use "I feel" statements, use word attack skills to read a text, or study for a spelling assessment are all skills that fit into children's academic repertoire. Once students have developed some practice with such tools, they are then able to access the experience's content knowledge and engage with it.

Perhaps most significantly, I emphasize the importance of developing a flexible perspective towards oneself, others, and the world. Children at this age tend to be all-or-nothing thinkers who might declare themselves "horrible artists" on the one hand and "already awesome" at a developing skill on the other. Thus our emphasis on perspective played out in a multitude of ways, such as through encouraging children to formulate their **own** strategies for solving social problems or in asking them to find counter-examples to common stereotypes. Overall we sought to empower children as critical thinkers who have a deep confidence in themselves based on who they are, rather than what they can or cannot do in a

particular way. The details and skills, we assured them, are a work in progress for all people, as I demonstrated through more than a few typos and spelling mistakes over the course of the year! I believe that encouraging this type of self-honesty and non-judgmental celebration of mistakes and challenges as part of a communal process empowers children to become bold academicians rather than those who avoid potentially challenging experiences. It also promotes tolerance and a spirit of generosity and forgiveness amongst the group, since children soon realize that, in fact, we really are all still learning.

LANGUAGE ARTS

In our classroom, Language Arts was composed of a potpourri of activities, lessons, and projects that all worked to promote children's familiarity and skill reading, writing, and speaking. Third grade is a particularly significant moment in many children's literate lives because they are no longer "learning to read," but instead "reading to learn." Sometimes we find that students who have always had strong decoding and word attack skills have not quite become readers who interact and engage with what they are reading. In order to encourage this development, we surrounded children in print and provided time each day for a read aloud in which Diana and I modeled the kind of connecting, predicting, and meaning-making that skilled readers do. These read alouds included picture books throughout the year as well as the novels **Dickon Among the Lenape, Abel's Island, Minn of the Mississippi, and The City of Ember**.

Using the "Four Blocks" method of instruction as our base, each week children had time participating in word work activities (editing or phonics), reading groups, independent reading time, and writing experiences. Reading and word

work generally took place in our morning half-group time in order to provide children with the most efficient and targeted small group instruction possible.

After a daily partner editing or phonics activity (such as “Making Words” or “Mystery Word”), children broke into their homogeneous guided reading groups. The structure and emphasis of each group differed based on the needs of each child. Certain groups used whiteboards and letter manipulatives in order to build phonics skills before and after reading. In these cases, I took a very active teaching role, walking group members through a structured, systematic approach to building word knowledge and applying it to new reading experiences. Other groups needed less explicit help with word attack skills but were transitional readers who were in the midst of making a leap to chapter books.

In these cases, Diana and I gave them strategies to glean more meaning from the text and encouraged them to become more active readers through asking questions and making predictions. With these groups, we were guides who, over the course of the year, sought to hand over more and more responsibility to the students. With groups of fluent readers, we alternated between sitting back completely and taking a more active role, in some cases asking children to lead book talks themselves (which we called “facilitating”), and in others challenging them to look more deeply and critically at texts than they had been doing previously. “Where is your support for that statement? Find an example,” became a frequently heard (and much bemoaned) statement from me. Generally, we would provide each group with several book choices and the students would choose their favorite. Over the course of the year, groups formed and re-formed as children chose books like **Frindle**, **Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing**, **Junie B Jones** and a

Little Monkey Business, **Shark Lady**, **Harry Houdini**, **The House With a Clock in its Walls**, and **Julie of the Wolves**. After book group meetings, children worked with one another to respond to comprehension and vocabulary questions. When a group finished a text, each child chose a manner in which to demonstrate his/her understanding, whether in the form of a poster, diorama, PowerPoint, play, or puppet show.

Weekly spelling “checks” also provided children with an opportunity to experience assessment each week. In September, I asked all children to complete a basic pre-test in order to get a sense of their spelling and word knowledge. Then I assigned each child one of the three differentiated spelling lists to study each week. On Friday, each child took a post-assessment, with an open invitation for re-taking it as often as s/he desired. Over the course of the year, spelling lists based on common spelling patterns morphed into those based on common Latin and Greek roots, prefixes, and suffixes. At the end of the year, children’s lists were composed of dictated sentences based on the content in our Theme study.

Writing Workshop occurred 2-3 times per week in our classroom and was one of many of our students’ favorite parts of our schedule. We broke our writing curriculum into units of genre study, and over the course of the year each child had at least one experience publishing poetry, historical fiction, fiction, and non-fiction writing. Diana or I taught at least one mini-lesson for the week, such as “How to Add Character Thoughts” or “How to use Dialogue” that enabled children to focus on improving one particular area of their writing as they worked. After the mini-lesson, we might, for example, ask them ensure that they include 3 examples of the given element in their writing over the next two sessions. Since allowing children’s

authorial voice and creativity to flow was our first priority, targeting one such writing element generally did not overwhelm them or interrupt their ideas. Publishing parties then offered a chance for our young writers to celebrate their accomplishments with families and friends and to receive feedback on their writing. They were much-loved opportunities for compliments and camaraderie.

Handwriting practice was also built into our schedule 2-3 times per week. At the start of the year we reviewed print and assessed children's posture, pencil grip, and attitude toward handwriting. In October Diana began to teach Cursive using the Handwriting Without Tears method of instruction, and children completed their student workbooks. In the Spring, we introduced touch typing instruction, using the computer program Type to Learn. This was definitely a popular activity, and some students even begged to stay in for Choice so they could type away!

MATHEMATICS

This year Diana and I followed the Miquon mathematics scope and sequence for third grade, drawing from many different materials and resources but using TERC's **Investigations** curricula for 3rd and 4th grade as our base. We implemented both homogeneous and heterogeneous grouping structures that shifted depending on our teaching goals. Generally, we began each half-group math session in two smaller ¼ groups, each lead by a teacher, and presented different versions of a given concept or skill. We tweaked the depth, speed, and content of our teaching depending on each group of 5-6 students' needs, making sure that the root of the lesson was the same in each case. Games and projects allowed us to regroup students in more flexible ways, and provided

opportunities for children to teach and learn from one another.

We began with a general pre-assessment that enabled me to identify areas of mathematical strength and weakness in each child's repertoire, and moved on to reviewing and building upon children's sense of number and numerical procedures. Using the first unit of Investigations, *Mathematical thinking at Grade 3* and *Mathematical Thinking at Grade 4*, we reviewed basic addition and subtraction facts for students who needed continued practice. We encouraged children to begin to commit facts to memory or break facts into "easy numbers," such as groups of ten, in order to facilitate more efficient computation.

We explored properties of numbers, breaking numbers into their component parts, and putting them back together in expanded notation. We practiced counting by regular intervals and worked with large numbers (how large varied for each math group). We emphasized the many ways numbers can be expressed and challenged students to depict them both numerically and linguistically. Later, we built upon these concepts further when introducing estimation and rounding, which we introduced as very practical means for checking the reasonableness of one's work. We linked estimation skills to our work with money, and practiced estimating mentally in order to arrive at ballpark figures.

Building on this base of whole number properties, we spent quite a bit of time exploring how one adds and subtracts larger numbers using a variety of strategies. After children had explored the conceptual underpinnings of regrouping, we introduced the algorithm for "borrowing," first for adding numbers and later for subtracting. Students used base ten blocks in order to visually and kinesthetically depict this process.

Adding different numbers of objects using regrouping provided us with a nice segue into adding equal groups of objects, which Investigations explored in its *Things that Come in Groups* units. This introduction to multiplication as an extension of addition enabled students to correctly solve addition problems before they had memorized multiplication facts, which is exactly what we wanted to encourage. Thus, each was skilled at depicting multiplication pictorially, or by means of games such as “Circles and Stars” or “Roll for Cubes” before s/he committed them to memory, ensuring that s/he understood the concept behind the skill. We simply reversed this process during our division investigation.

In February, we conducted a unit that explored measurement and how one uses common tools for measuring. This was a hands-on unit that intertwined with mapping skills, in which children determined lengths of objects and rooms using both standard (inches, feet, yards) and non-standard (e.g. arms’ lengths) units.

In the Spring, we shifted our focus back to grouping objects, this time using fractional parts. Following Investigations’ *Fair Shares* curricula, students practiced expressing basic fractional parts numerically and pictorially, determined which fractions were larger or smaller by drawing pictures, and solved a variety of fraction word problems.

In our final unit, we explored plane geometry using a variety of hands-on methods. Using geoboards, pattern blocks, interlocking cubes, and tangram, students practiced building three-dimensional models based on drawings. We introduced common geometric vocabulary and created a word wall depicting all of the new terms.

SOCIAL STUDIES

This year, I organized our **Watershed** study around two broad themes: children’s *sense of time* and *sense of place*. Developmentally, children at 8 and 9 are able to begin thinking about concepts of “long ago” meaningfully, but often have only a vague sense of temporal change. Thus, we began our Lenape study by contrasting what the area surrounding Miquon might have looked like 500+ years ago. We took hikes in the woods and pretended we were time travelers, and I gave them guided tours about what they would (and wouldn’t) see during this period of history.

Our read aloud, the previously mentioned **Dickon Among the Lenape**, also introduced children to these concepts. The book traces the fateful shipwreck of a boy bound for indentured servitude in Jamestown who finds himself taken in by a Lenape tribe in the New Jersey area. The text is meticulously researched and historically accurate in its content, and introduced the third graders to an extraordinary amount of Pre-Contact Native American history. While some of the book’s colonial era language was initially challenging for the group, they quickly became immersed in Dickon’s transformation to young Lenape warrior and soon hung on the text’s every word. Incidentally, In the Spring, I attended a Lenape language workshop (along with one third grade parent and several students), and was told by the course’s presenter, Shelly DePaul, that Dickon is one of only two books for youngsters that The Lenape Nation currently endorses.

We built upon children’s understanding of environmental change over time through a variety of hands-on projects. Children constructed shelter models using natural materials and then compared their efforts to the types crafted by the Lenape.

(Interestingly, many bore a striking resemblance!) Children researched Lenape foods and took hikes with Bill, Diana, and me during which we pointed out native species of plants and animals. We explored Lenape entertainment and tried our hand at a variety of games and activities, such as the “hoop spear” game. In PE, Bill taught our group archery, and children practiced their skill in this area over the course of the year. Before Winter Break, students made a variety of corn husk dolls and presented them as gifts to their Kindergarten buddies and families. At a fire circle gathering, we made authentic corn cakes by grinding corn and cooking them in the ash and coals. In the tradition of the Lenape, I related some of the most important Lenape stories to the children as they huddled around the fire’s flame.

Trips also provided an important piece of our study. A visit to a Lenape Powwow and dance presentation in the Fall provided students with an opportunity to speak with Native American dancers and get a sense of how some people are keeping their families’ traditions alive today. Our expedition to UPenn’s Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology enabled us to touch and view many Lenape artifacts displayed for the Exhibit “Fulfilling a Prophecy: The Past and Present of the Lenape in Pennsylvania.”

Our culminating work for our Lenape study centered around our creation of a 6 by 3 foot model of an Algonquin community. Using a mix of plaster of paris, paste, and gallons of paint, our group created a realistic woodland landscape on a large wooden frame. Then, children grouped themselves into teams and chose whether to focus on creating trees and animals, people, or shelters using clay and other materials. This work was amazingly engaging and fun for the group, and we presented it to parents in March at our

culminating celebration, along with an original PowerPoint created by the children.

In the Spring, we shifted back to the present day, teaching children to explore their *sense of place* by investigating nearby watershed ecosystems. We read non-fiction picture books about rivers and the organisms that live in them, researched the ways in which pollution has affected stream life today, and made our own seine nets in order to complete stream studies of our own Tohickon Creek and the Wissahickon. We studied how organisms and the environment affect one another, and used the results we obtained in our stream study to create a portrait of the stream’s health. We also studied the scientific method and students conducted experiments in order to investigate the properties of water. They planned original experiments as they became more adept at using “good science.” At the end of the year, students chose to pursue personal projects related to questions the class had asked about watersheds at the beginning of our study. They researched these topics independently or with a partner and presented their findings in a format of their choice at our final culminating celebration/dance party.

IN CLOSING

Overall, children were able to show one another a very high degree of tolerance and respect this year. There were difficult moments, to be sure, such as when one of our foster guinea pigs, Squeaky Mc Squeaker, passed away. However, I think that the children’s ability to come together and share their feelings around the event is really a testament to the kind of community Miquon fosters. In fact, the song they composed about our pet, sung to the tune of “Miquon in Our Hearts,” was one of my favorite memories of the year. My favorite line read, “May your squeaks forever flow.”

In conclusion, I would first like to thank all of the students who shared so much of themselves with Diana and me each day. Thank you for trudging up our hill, getting stuck in rainstorms, and becoming covered in green paint during the course of the year. You were flexible, honest, and open with us, and you were very forgiving when we needed to make a scheduling change or adjustment. Thank you for being the wonderful, unique, and kind learners that you are!

Secondly, I would like to thank all of the families of the group. You welcomed me into the Miquon community with open arms, answered emails, drove vans, and always lent a hand bringing food or paper cups when we needed them. You have assisted your children with homework, read through parent newsletters, and sent in changes of clothing. I am extremely grateful for your support and willingness to collaborate honestly and openly. You also throw one heck of a potluck!

Finally, I would like to thank my teaching partner and friend, Diana Saraga, who is a daily model of dedication and lifelong learning. Diana embodies tolerance, flexibility, and a love of children. Happy 20th, Diana! I am so happy that we could share it together.

It has been an extraordinary year, and I look forward to seeing everyone again in September!