

A TRIP TO REMEMBER

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I am a kindergarten teacher in the Madison Metropolitan School District at Crestwood Elementary. Crestwood is located on the west side of Madison on a beautiful wooded lot. The school's population is approximately 450 students. Crestwood is unique in the fact that students are funneled in from two distinctively different social economic neighborhoods. Our school works hard to blend these two communities into one. As a kindergarten teacher, one of my main struggles continues to be how to form a classroom community where all children feel accepted and valued.

When the Quarterly posted a Classroom Action Research group on equity, it seemed like the perfect opportunity for me to dig deeper and to share experiences with colleagues. With this in mind, I began with focusing on our Afro-American population and their comfort level at Crestwood Elementary. When I took a closer look into our classroom atmosphere, it became quite apparent that there was a very large social gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots." The deeper I dug, the more I realized that kindergarten is not just what happens on the big blue carpet, but that some things just can't be taught, rather they come through life experiences.

One little boy immediately came to mind, Derrick. He is a child you just cannot forget. His smile runs from ear to ear and he is always smack dab in the midst of what is happening. He does not want to miss a beat. Derrick is one of seven siblings, four of whom presently attend our school and three of whom have IEPs. D has been fortunate to have the opportunity to spend a second year in kindergarten with the hopes of bypassing an IEP. Derrick is the kid that has to hug you every day before he goes home. He is one of those students who finds a special place in your heart. He entered the year as a leader; having already had a year of kindergarten experience, he was a natural candidate to be a local expert. His peers turned to him frequently and Derrick thrived on the attention.

However, as the year went on it became quite apparent that Derrick's personal experiences were not similar to those of his peers. He often relied on embellishing stories or humor to "fit the classroom norm." He seemed compelled to be like his classmates; that acceptance piece was so important to Derrick. If a classmate shared an experience about going

to a water park, Derrick would share the same experience, but up the ante, he would share that he went to the water park five times. I began to focus on what types of questions I asked and how I phrased the questions to avoid similar scenarios. However, inevitably they always seemed to return. The "have-nots" seemed to try so hard to be part of the "haves". Even with open-ended questions like, "tell me about your weekend" or "who did you spend time with this weekend?" their responses continued to pull at my heartstrings. The deeper I dug, I found myself repeatedly asking, "How can I help all students to feel a valued part of our classroom community?" which lead me to my question. **If children are given the opportunity to share common experiences, does it enhance their sense of belonging?**

Where Do I Begin?

1. I started by asking the children what field trips they were interested in taking. We recorded their responses while the children were given the opportunity to share until their ideas were depleted.
2. Individually, I asked each child to tell me at least three of their friends in our class. I was curious to see if with more shared experiences if these relationships changed; did it have an impact on their friendships?
3. My next step was to get our principals stamp of approval. At first, she had several concerns. Where would the money come from? She was uncomfortable having us ask parents for more money. Secondly, how would the other kindergarten classes, parents and teachers feel if they weren't included? And thirdly, it was very important to our principal that if she did give us the O.K., she wanted to make sure our children of color saw successfully employed individuals of color.
4. Once given the stamp of approval, it was time for the fun part, planning the field trips. Due to our limited budget, we knew we had to be creative. My co-teacher, student teacher and I began reviewing the children's "favorite picks". We wanted to go places that our underprivileged children may not have the opportunity to visit, but also places that children often hear about. Our first thought was the University of Wisconsin, sports

and Bucky Badger. Since children often hear people speak of the University or Bucky Badger but have no visual image. With a few calls to campus, we organized a trip to the Kohl Center for a tour and to meet some basketball and hockey players and hopefully see Bucky Badger. To finish the day off, we would have lunch and Babcock ice cream on the Memorial Union Terrace, over-looking Lake Mendota. We also thought a trip to a fire station would be very informative and enjoyable. Since we would already be in downtown Madison, we thought it would be interesting to expose the children to public dining at a non-fast food restaurant. We were fortunate to have an "in" at Dotty Dumpling's Dowry, and the location was perfect. It would be close enough to walk to so we just could not pass up the opportunity to eat lunch downtown in a well-known establishment. As we continued to throw ideas around, we wanted to take a trip some place where the children could get exercise and in an unstructured environment, a place where the children could socialize freely and challenge themselves physically. With a few more phone calls, we ended up planning a trip to Memorial High School's Gymnastics Gym.

5. With the children's input, the principal's support, a small budget and three organized field trips all we needed was our transportation. I have used the Madison Metro Bus before, so it was a logical place to begin. They have Day Trippers for \$25.00 round trip and they transport thirty children and three adults to just about any place in Madison. It is a great deal and a wonderful experience for the children.

6. Just a few more logistics: notifying parents, getting parental permission (see Appendix I), ordering lunches and asking for parent volunteers. Then we would be good to go. Wait, anticipate, talk about what we may see and review public safety and manners, was all we had left to do! A lot of preparing, organizing and jumping through hoops went into the preparation of these trips. I wonder if it will be worth it and I wonder if I will see any changes in the children's social interactions, or the building of a stronger classroom community.

7. Measurement! How would I know if these three field trips did indeed enhance the students' sense of belonging, building a stronger classroom community? The first was obvious; listen to the children. Does Derrick participate in conversations without feeling the need to embellish? Do the conversations seem to flow? Are all students heard and feel a valued part of the conversations? Therefore, my first method of data collecting was through observations. My second method of data collecting came from a colleague. She suggested the idea of journaling, having the students share their experiences through pictures and writing depending on their abilities. We designed a "Field Trip Journal," not necessarily just for these three field trips but for all trips taken throughout the year (see Appendix II). We created a "before" page and an "after" page. We were thinking it would be interesting to hear and see the children's perspectives before they take a trip and then compare it to what they share after a trip. How different were their pages? Did sharing their pages with one another build a more inclusive environment?

Taking the Trips

Our first field trip was to Memorial High School's Gymnastics Gym. The day before our trip, the children generated ideas about what they thought they might see and do. They shared their ideas verbally and in writing in their "Field Trip Journals." It was exciting to hear all their ideas. Many of them made comparisons to gymnastic classes they had taken from private organizations or to experiences they had in Physical Education class. Others had nothing to share. In any case, their journal entries were very eye opening.

The day of the trip could not have been more perfect! The weather was warm and sunny. All the children came to school and everyone was excited and ready to travel. Our lunches from home and our school lunches were packed. The Madison Metro bus stop is directly in front of Crestwood, so we did not have too far to go. Waiting at the bus stop and taking pictures gave us an excellent chance to listen to their conversations and share in their excitement.

Well, this was just the beginning! All the preparation and all the anticipating could never compare to the experiences these children shared today. The littlest things excited them. When the bus stopped to pick them up, it lowered to the ground through a hydraulic system, to make stepping up easier. You would have thought we were going to the moon--they were amazed.

"The bus got a flat tire!" "How's it going to drive us?" "No, now it don't got a flat tire anymore!" This was just a small fraction of their excitement. What about the yellow cord people pull to have the bus stop, or having two doors open on the bus, or the bells and lights that go off at each stop? The littlest things in life that we take for granted were now magnified, they were now the coolest things! Arriving at Memorial High School was everything we anticipated it would be: big, with lots of noises and smells. Many kindergarteners began sharing stories about siblings and babysitters who go to school here.

The children loved the gymnastic gym. We set up a large obstacle course for the children to maneuver their way through. They walked on a balance beam, swung on a bar, climbed through a tunnel and bounced on mats. We had a blast! If it was not for the kids running out of energy, I think we would still be there. It was interesting to watch the children challenge themselves at different comfort levels. Some children confidently maneuvered their way through the obstacle course, while others cautiously approached each task. But without a doubt, everyone left the gym with a smile on her face.

As we were leaving Memorial, we had a few minutes to spare, so we took the opportunity to watch the high school concert band. They were in the auditorium practicing for their upcoming concert. Sometimes it's the littlest things that have the biggest impact on the children. First of all, the seats were big, soft and tipped back and forth. When the band started rehearsing Derrick leaned over wide-eyed and said, "Dem guys sleep here?" It was such a reality check for me, the sincerity in Derrick's question really hit home for me. I was speechless, I told Derrick that he had a great question and we should figure it out. Derrick decided to ask the band director, who was sitting in the audience. From afar I could see the reality check the band director had too. He had a smile from ear to ear and walked Derrick up on stage while the band was playing and placed him smack dab in the middle of the orchestra. Derrick was in a trance, just taking it all in, he wasn't about to miss a beat. In the end he got his question answered and an experience of a lifetime. It's exciting to see the impact that these little experiences can have!

I anticipated the gymnastic part of the field trip to be amazing and indeed it was, however; it was the little things like flat tires that don't stay flat and band members that don't sleep at school that seem to play over and over in my mind! What an experience and how fortunate I feel to be able to share it with these children.

What a reassuring feeling to return to Crestwood with a bus full of tired kids. Once we were settled in and got back into the swing of things the children had the opportunity to put their thoughts on paper. To me it seemed like a given, the best part would be climbing through the gymnastic maze. Wrong again, the children all had a variety of favorite parts, from the bus ride, to jumping on the mats, to watching the gymnasts, listening to the orchestra and even simply singing songs and playing games while waiting for the bus.

With modern technology we were immediately able to put the photos from our field trip onto the computer. Giving the children an opportunity to watch the slide show, laugh and reminisce. It will be exciting to build upon these photos as we take future trips. I was also able to print out a photo for Derrick to take home and share with his family or keep in a safe place.

Conclusion

So back to my original question; **If children are given the opportunity to share common experiences, does it enhance their sense of belonging?** I routinely check in with Derrick, giving him plenty of opportunity to share and I must admit he seldom seems to have the need to embellish his experiences. Has it been time? He's older and realizes he can be accepted and be a significant part of the group without embellishing. Or is it possible that these shared experiences really are making a difference? Does Derrick feel a part of the group because his ideas are similar and validated by his peers? When I look back at the children's journals, sure they have made wonderful individual gains. Is it due to time and practice? Sure, I bet it is, but I'd also bet that having the opportunity to travel together and grow together sure plays a significant role in their shared journals.

My co-teacher, student teacher and I anxiously await the upcoming field trips. I'm certain the experiences will be different but equally as rewarding. I feel very fortunate to have been a part of this Classroom Action Research and very lucky to have had the opportunity to share in these experiences. It's exciting to see what little things impress the students, especially the "have-nots," the things that we so often take for granted. If given the chance to repeat these field trips or similar field trips in the future, I'd jump on it in a minute! There is so much to be gained both academically and socially for all children, especially for disadvantage children, like Derrick.

Everyday should be a field trip day!

APPENDIX I: Mackman, 2005

February 16, 2005

Dear Families:

Our classrooms have been fortunate to obtain an Equity Grant to make three additional field trips possible. We will be going to:

- 1.) Memorial High School's gymnastics gym,
- 2.) Fire Station #1 & Dotty Dumpling's Dowry for a cooking experience
- 3.) The Kohl Center & U.W. Memorial Union for ice cream

We will be traveling via the city bus to and from each of these field trips. There will be no additional charge for any of these trips. Our goal is for the children to enjoy sharing common experiences while traveling and dining together and learning about popular Madison sites and professions.

The children will need a lunch from home or school when traveling to Memorial High School and the Kohl Center. (The children will have the experience of making their own lunch while at Dotty Dumpling's.) Our school's eatery offers a "Lunch to Go" for field trips. If your child chooses the "Lunch to Go" option, your lunch account will be charged as a regular school lunch (either free and reduced or \$1.80 regular lunch cost).

Memorial High School's gymnastics gym
Thursday, March 3rd 10:00am-2:00pm

Fire Station #1 and Dotty Dumpling's
Thursday, April 7th 9:00am- 1:00pm

Kohl Center and U.W. Memorial Union
Wednesday, May 18th 9:00am-1:00pm

So, here is what we need from you:

- 1.) Help your child pick their lunch preference for the Memorial High School and Kohl Center field trips.
- 2.) Space may be limited, but if there is room we would love to have parent volunteers. Please let us know if you are interested and we will contact you a couple days prior to the trip if there will be space available.
- 3.) Please sign and return the attached permission slip giving your child permission to travel on the city bus to and from all three field trips. Also, please fill out the lunch portion and return the slip to school tomorrow so lunches can be ordered in a timely fashion.

Thanks in advance for your promptness and support, we're looking forward to three outstanding trips with the children.

Sincerely,
Libby Mackman, Jennifer Diebling & Emily Peterson

1.) I give permission for _____ to travel by city bus on the following field trips:

- * Memorial High School 3-3-05
- * Fire Station #1 & Dotty Dumpling's 4-7-05
- * Kohl Center & U.W. Memorial Union 5-18-05

Parent signature

2.) My child's lunch preference for both trips requiring lunches : (choose one)

"Lunch to Go" meals include:

- * a sandwich of your choice
- * chips
- * fruit snacks
- * veggies
- * milk

_____ My child will be eating the school's "Lunch to Go"

Please choose one:

- _____ Turkey Sandwich
- _____ Sub Sandwich
- _____ Ham and Cheese Sandwich
- _____ Peanut Butter and Jelly Pocket

- - OR - -

_____ We will pack a sack lunch from home.