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Service Learning Project

Mary Eyre Creek Clean-up!

Mary Eyre Elementary School is backed by a creek that travels through the neighborhood. Many family homes are along this creek and the community has access to it by way of the school's playground. Community members enjoy the playground and creek when school is not in session.

One morning a student announced that she had seen a pink bike helmet in the creek. Another student was reminded of Earth Day and mentioned that we should not pollute so that the earth can stay green. This seemed like a beautiful opportunity to suggest a Service Learning Project, so I asked if students had noticed lots of trash around the creek before. Students were in disagreement about how much, if any, trash they remembered seeing on a regular basis. I suggested we take a survey to determine if there was a problem with trash around the creek. All were in agreement!

The next day my third grade class set out to survey the trash they observed near and in the creek. Students were excited and engaged with the hunt for trash. Many students at first said "there's no trash down here!" But as soon as I pointed out two or three pieces hiding in the tall grass the kids became treasure hunters (or "trash hunters").

The learning part of this project covered many subjects. When I created the survey sheet I set it up to read like a bar graph. Students therefore were not only practicing data collection but also had an opportunity to read and interpret the graph they created while taking the survey. I labeled some of the categories of trash such as hard or soft plastic, metal, paper, etc. I left a few blank for students to fill in with other observed trash, like Styrofoam or food trash. As students filled in these blanks I saw another opportunity: classification. Some students wrote "pop cans" in the provided blank and this is metal. We briefly talked about the classification of pop cans as metal during the reflection.

The following standards were met within this Service Learning Project:

- *Language Arts (EL.03.RE.21) Interpret information from diagrams, charts, and graphs.*

- *Math (3.2.7) Analyze frequency tables, bar graphs, picture graphs, and line plots*

- *Science (3.3S.1) Plan a simple investigation based on a testable question… and collect and record data from a scientific investigation.*

The service part of our project was to pick up trash, leaving the school and neighborhood a cleaner, safer, and more pleasant place to be.
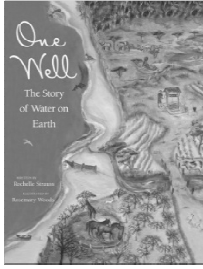
After completing the survey I read from *One Well: The Story of Water on Earth* by Rochelle Strauss (a book about water conservation). We then discussed what the results of their survey meant and talked about the impact of litter on the environment. I also introduced some pictures of the effects of the recent Gulf oil spill and included a reference to the Dawn commercials showing animals covered in oil. Most commented in their reflection that picking up the trash would make the creek look better, and that the creek was ugly with all of the litter. We decided that the next sunny day would be the best day to pick up trash.

The expected outing was anticipated and so worked well to temper classroom behavior. We gathered gloves and trash bags on the day of clean-up and headed outside. The litter was hard to find but students were proud to show me the amount of trash they had each found. One student suggested we sort out the trash and recycle the rest. While I agreed that this would be an excellent and ideal solution, I reminded the students that the school didn't provide recycling services for anything but paper. This would have made an excellent segue into another relevant writing engagement had I more time with this class.

How have students responded to this project? The third grade class I have been placed with is full of students who lack most of the 40 Developmental Assets that make for successful learners. Most lack interest in anything except bickering over *whose mechanical pencil it is* and who *put glue on the chair*. This project brought up many personal connections for them however, especially with Earth Day around the corner. This helped them engage with the learning.

Attitudes toward school are often improved when a project is outside and involves kinesthetic learning and movement; especially with a group made of primarily boys. In this case students were looking forward to the outside activity. I am not sure if learning was increased due to the service learning activity however. This project may have worked better near the end of my 3-week solo because students would have been better behaved and less apt to test my authority, therefore increasing productivity and learning.

The community benefited from our project because they now have a cleaner and more pleasant creek to enjoy. And a cleaner creek means a cleaner watershed; a positive outcome for both the people of the community and the animals that share our urban life. In the future I think I would try to get the neighborhood involved. As we know from the 40 developmental assets model, when students feel involved and important to the community they are likely to be better students. And these students can only benefit from a stronger base of assets in this low-SES, highly diverse community. Having family and neighbors participating would present opportunities for instant and positive feedback, as well as help build community bonds with each other and the school.

Over all I believe the project went well. I look forward to the time when I can do it again and improve upon my original model. Or develop an entirely new project with my class; one that speaks to their values and concerns.