Cut From a Common Cloth

MEETING THE ACADEMIC, PHYSICAL, AND SOCIAL NEEDS OF CHILDREN AT THE GREEN SCHOOL OF BALTIMORE

By Kate Power

Critics of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) have decried the ways that the legislation has lead schools to abandon the education of the whole child, privileging reading and math instruction, time on task, test preparation, and testing, at the expense of the content areas, physical education, and the traditional social/moral curriculum of the elementary school (Center on Education Policy, 2008; Eisner, 2005; Kozol, 2005; Noddings, 2005; Wood, 2004).

This phenomenon is especially prevalent in schools that are segregated by race and class, where teachers throughout the country regularly report that science, social studies, physical education, and recess have been dramatically scaled back, if not completely eliminated Johnson, 1998); Kozol, 2005). Indeed, Teale (2007) identified a "curriculum gap" among poor and minority students, who as a result of expanded time spent in reading and writing instruction, have even less access to quality instruction in all of the content areas.

One school that intentionally bucks this trend is the Green School of Baltimore, a public charter school in Baltimore City, Maryland, where there is an intentional and fiercely guarded commitment to a humane and holistic curriculum for all children day in and day out. In this article, I will present a series of instructional vignettes to evoke the daily experiences of its third grade class. These vignettes were cut from observational notes compiled during classroom visits in March, April, and May of the 2007-2008 academic year.

After presenting these vignettes, I will use them to analyze how the philosophical and practical threads infused throughout the daily curriculum are woven together in a tightly constructed and durable common "cloth." The example of the Green School is one that, when understood in all of its complexity, can potentially serve as a model for other schools committed to meeting the needs of the whole child and beyond, while closing the achievement gap.

A Day at the Green School

Around eight o'clock in the third grade classroom at the Green School of Baltimore, a few children start trickling in. They say hello to their teacher, hang up their coats and bags, read the morning announcement, and consult the white board to consider their options for choice time (today, it is independent reading or practicing cursive). They pursue their choice independently at individual desks arranged in four clusters of four-five as the rest of their classmates arrive and settle in.

At 8:30, Mrs. Gunter calls table by table, bringing children to the carpet, where they sit in a circle around the carpet’s edge. The class is small, just 16 children. There are nine boys and seven girls. Nine of the children are white; seven are black. Five out of the sixteen qualify for FARMS. Mrs. Gunter has assigned their spots on the carpet, so, as they do their work, boys work with girls and black children work with white children.

When they are seated on the carpet, they begin the greeting they have been practicing lately, executing a series of special handshakes each member of the class has contributed over the past fourteen days. Zaire demonstrates his handshake addition and then they practice in pairs, running through all of their handshakes before adding the new one.

Next they move into sharing. Each day, three to four children share a story from their lives and respond to comments or questions from their other friends. Shalia recounts a story about being so excited to find out that she was given tickets to see Hannah Montana Backstage that she fainted. Justice shares a story about his cousin jumping from one story of a balcony to the next balcony down at a condo in Ocean City. Paula tells about going to the park with her older brother and his girlfriend to the park to play catch with their dog Diamond.

After the discussion, Mrs. Gunter reads the Morning Message:

Dear Superstars,
Today is a special day. We will be having a number of Towson University students visiting today. They are coming to learn about how students have smart conversations with each other about their reading. We also have visitors from the Baltimore Museum of Art this afternoon.
Love,
Mrs. Gunter

Do you think Rob and Sistine will let the tiger out of its cage?

Yes or No?

The Green School administrators and teachers believe that a caring environment in the school and its classrooms, so often ignored in discussions about closing the achievement gap, is a necessary prerequisite for the rigorous academic work the children engage in throughout the day.

Her approach is grounded in a thoughtful interpretation of research done at the Northeast Foundation for Children who have developed an approach called The Responsive Classroom. Central to this approach is the belief that "the social curriculum is as important as the academic curriculum" (Denton & Kriete, 2000, p. 13). This ethos runs throughout the school and is grounded not only in the practical advantages of children who can share and cooperate, but in a deep commitment to creating a school that functions as an incubator for children to have caring relationships across multiple differences.

The Literacy Block
After the Morning Meeting, Mrs. Gunter moves into literacy instruction, beginning the Interactive Read Aloud with a continued examination of Kate DiCamillo's book Tiger Rising. Throughout the year, Mrs. Gunter has used the read-aloud segment of the literacy block to model and scaffold strategic thinking in both whole and small group discussions at the carpet. She selected this book as her last read aloud for the year because it offers rich opportunities for her third graders to bring together literary understandings about theme, symbolism, the internal motivations of characters, and moral ambiguity.

This morning, she is closing in on a pivotal moment in the novel in which the two primary characters, children named Rob and Sistine, are forced to resolve the novel's central conflict: deciding whether or not they will release a caged tiger. Before beginning she asks, "What do you think Kate DiCamillo will

choose to do here to follow through on what needs to happen to bring her story to a conclusion?" Hands shoot up all around the circle. "Justice," she says, "what do you think?"

"They have to let the tiger go," Justice says. "Only by letting the tiger go will Rob release his sadness and Sistine release her anger. Letting the tiger go represents their freedom."

Mrs. Gunter reads on; her students are rapt. "The first key slid into the lock so smoothly that it made Rob dizzy with amazement," she reads. A collective release of breath rises from the circle. "I knew it!" says Justice. She continues reading, moving from reading aloud, facilitating whole group conversations, and providing opportunities for children to share their thinking in paired "turn and talks." The thinking the children do in the whole group read aloud lays the groundwork for the next part of the day -- Independent Reading, in which the children read silently and make journal entries in response to their reading.

Before Mrs. G. releases the children from the carpet she pushes them to sharpen their thinking further: "During our reading of Tiger Rising, we don't write down everything we are thinking in our anchor charts. We are very selective about what we write down on our charts and share with each other. I want to challenge you today. Don't write down everything you think; just write down the thinking that really deepens your thinking further, just like in our discussions about Tiger Rising."

Independent Reading

Mrs. Gunter sends the third graders by table to retrieve their cardboard book boxes and return to their seats. The range of titles represented include examples from both shorter (Captain Underpants, Little Bill, Time Warp Trio) and longer (The Chronicles of Narnia, Harry Potter) series books. Struggling readers read books from a wide selection of leveled books. The leveling system used at the Green School (Fountas & Pinnell, 2007) organizes the books on an A-Z continuum, according to multiple factors that contribute to the difficulty of the text.

In October, Mrs. Gunter assessed the children using the Scholastic Benchmark Assessment. At that time, six (two with Individualized Education Plans who qualify for special services) of the 16 children were reading below grade level (between Level F and L), five were reading on level (between L and O), and six were reading well above (between Q and T) where children can typically read at the beginning of third grade.

Thus, the Independent Reading segment of the morning is essential time for Mrs. Gunter to differentiate instruction. She practices continuous assessment, using both running records and conferences, and offers on-the-spot individualized interventions. She also pulls small groups for Guided Reading or Book Clubs.

During this time, a Special Educator offers support to the children with IEPs. Mrs. Gunter assessed the children in October and has just finished her end-of-the year conferences and running records. The results of Mrs. Gunter's end-of-the year assessments using the Scholastic Benchmark Assessment show that all of the children have progressed two to five levels from where they began the year.

Writing Workshop

After a 5-10 minute snack break, the children move into writing workshop. Since the beginning of the year, the children have been working on writing personal narratives. This week they are working

furiously to complete final revisions of the second narrative they will carry all the way through to publication. I walk around the room, looking over their shoulders as they work.

Topically, their end-of-the-year narratives continue to reflect the same milestones in the lives of eight and nine year olds that they talked about during wrote about in their first published work (beloved pets, special days, special trips, scary experiences, injuries, conflicts, and happy times spent with siblings and family, etc.).

Da'von is writing about a big football game, Garry a special day at soccer camp, and Haley about her ice-skating lessons; both Justice and Jordan are sharing stories from days at the shore.

In their first narratives, Mrs. Gunter concentrated on helping the children turn "small moments" (Calkins, 2006) from their everyday lives into tightly focused, chronological pieces. As they worked on those pieces, her explicit instruction in revising and editing emphasized judicious use of detail, quotations, conventional paragraphing, and end punctuation. While the children did spend a modest amount of time learning how to write the "Brief Constructed Responses" that constitute the only extended measure of writing proficiency in the Maryland School Assessments, the majority of their writing instruction has consisted of personal narratives or informational texts written during their science instruction.

Based on my observation, I see evidence that their final narratives show signs of the growth Mrs. Gunter has been working towards. One of her first lessons in this unit showed how authors write strong leads. This lesson has clearly been taken up by Jordan, who opens her piece describing a close encounter with a horse shoe crab with this question: "Have you ever gotten the feeling something is dead but it's not?"

Another one of Mrs. Gunter's lessons focused on borrowing the techniques of "mentor" texts during which they examined short pieces by famous authors, including Sandra Cisneros. As I circulated further, I noticed how Haley has skillfully appropriated Cisneros' use of alliterative, onomatopoeic language into her own piece about ice skating. "I could feel my heart beating as my feet itched to be stretched. We click-clacked across the ice. When I first started skating I always felt clumsy in my skates klonking everywhere. But now after skating for two years, skating feels as easy as walking or running."

In another lesson, Mrs. Gunter showed the children how centering the story around a turning point or a powerful emotion and building an arc to the climax of the story can provide greater punch. Both Garry and Da'von had taken to heart Mrs. Gunter's lesson on digging for a strong emotion. Da'von's football piece centers on his team winning the championship. Garry's piece moves from the low of homesickness on the first day of soccer camp to the heights of winning the Most Valuable Player award.

The children work with great focus for about 30 minutes, transferring the revisions they made on lined notebook paper to template pages in book format, with a box at the top for illustrations. Those who have completed the transfer work using their best handwriting and spelling carefully illustrate each page with colored pencils and crayons.

Physical Education and Lunch

For all the students at the Green School, the day includes a one and a half hour block of recess, physical education, and lunch. During outdoor recess, the third graders engage in supervised free play. Children gyrate with hula hoops, play ball tag, trade Pokeman cards, and dig with sticks in the dirt. When they

stay indoors, they play Connect Four, build with Legos, participate in crafting activities, or read alone or in pairs. After recess, the third graders are picked up by Ms. Gabrys, their Physical Education teacher.

Like all the children at the Green School, the third graders have physical education every day. The third graders are in the middle of a unit on muscles. Ms. Gabrys asks Noah to demonstrate a curl up. Then the children work in pairs to predict the number of curl ups they will be able to do in one minute and test their predictions against their actual performance. After the test, Ms. Gabrys asks, "So, where do your muscles feel tired now?"

"My stomach is aching!" volunteers Shalia, and Ms. Gabrys gives them the language they need to describe this experience, adding "abdominal muscles" to a life size chart of the human body they are working to construct. She further explains that pushing against the force of gravity is what makes this movement so challenging and builds muscle strength. The third graders are out of time. Ms. Gabrys promises, "Tomorrow, we'll learn more about the muscles in your arms and legs!" before lining them up to go to the lunch room.

The lunch room is staffed by an employee provided by the city school system, two parent volunteers, and a part-time paid Wellness Coordinator. Only one grade eats at a time. The children eat family style, four or five to a table, and use real silverware and cloth napkins. The school has no control over the content of the school lunches. At mid-year, budget cuts lead the school system to cut back on the fresh fruit and vegetables, so the Wellness Coordinator implemented "Tasty Tuesdays" for the children, bringing in additional fresh produce to supplement the lunches.

Mathematics

After lunch, Mrs. Gunter picks the children up. Back in the classroom, she calls them to the carpet and passes out the supplies for math. The focus of this unit is understanding numbers below zero, net change, the opposite effects of addition and subtraction, and many ways to use addition and subtraction to reach a given answer. Each child has a paper "elevator" with a vertical column of numbers starting with 3 at the top of the column, down to – 3 at the bottom. Each child also has a baggie with 20 "change cards," two of each for the numbers on their elevators.

Mrs. Gunter asks them to select any ten cards and arrange them in the longest sequence possible that will result in a net change of + 2. They work individually, and Mrs. Gunter slides around on her office chair, conferring quietly with children about the strategies they are using. After they all arrive at their answers, she slides back to the white board and calls for their attention: "I noticed that different children used different strategies. What did you do Danny?"

Danny explained, "Well, I just looked for the numbers that cancelled each other out and put them next to each other."

"Okay," Mrs. Gunter said, "so you did this." She writes on the board: 3, -3, 0, 0, 1, -1. "So, how did you get it to have a net change of +2?"

"I took out the -2 and just left the + 2," Danny explained.

"Right! So that is one way to do it."

“Let’s try this too,” Mrs. Gunter says. “I saw Isabel do it this way, “as she models on the white board how to draw arrows pointing up and down to the corresponding “elevator” floors as a physical manifestation of the possible changes.

After additional practice on the carpet, Mrs. Gunter provides the supplies and instruction for the children to return to their desks and play a game that extends their understanding of net change. Before moving on, the children return to the carpet and discuss what they discovered as a result of playing the game.

The units and lessons Mrs. Gunter teaches during math are drawn from a curriculum titled Investigations in Number, Data, and Space, which signals opportunities for embedded assessments and checkpoints for the teacher. Mrs. Gunter can tell, based on her observations and discussions with the children at the carpet as they worked with their elevators and at their desks while they played the game, that her third graders are ready to progress to the next sequence in the unit in which they will represent the concept of net change by producing graphs. The graphs themselves will serve as performance based assessment of the math skills and strategies she has taught.

Science

Science instruction happens during the time called Investigations. The Green School’s mission is driven by an environmental science focus, with an emphasis on the Maryland region and the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Each grade has a major focus of study and culminating project. The third graders’ unit of study has been about worms and composting. The first part of the investigation consisted in reading widely about earthworms. In November, they supervised construction of a composting bin to keep in the classroom and received a shipment of worms. During the ensuing months they put soil and worms in the bin, observed the proliferation of the worms, and tested the quality of the soil.

On the day of my observation, the third graders are proudly traveling from grade to grade reading from their publication titled We’re Up to Our Elbows in Worms: The Superstars’ Worm Composting Adventures. The beginning of the book has sections on the earthworm’s body, circulation, digestion, and diet. Unfortunately, they discovered that they made some mistakes along the way, and their effort to create high quality soil failed. So, the last section of the book is devoted to reflecting on what they learned from to help the next group of third graders who take on the vermicomposting project. This section, titled “Advice for Vermicomposter: What Should We Have Done Better?” includes the following: “It is important that your bin doesn’t leak out moisture. Try to make sure it is sealed on all sides; make sure you have microorganisms; don’t use potting soil as a bedding material. You can use top soil, peat moss, outside soil, and newspapers, etc.”

End of the School Day

Flushed with pride, the third graders return to the classroom and pack up their backpacks, lunchboxes, and water bottles. They follow Mrs. Gunter to the stairs and pause as she descends past the line to the foot of the stairs, looking up. They leave with high fives and the occasional hug. They look happy, but are perhaps not fully aware of just how holistic and well-balanced their day has been compared to many other children in American schools.

Grounding in Standards and Core Beliefs

Weaving together the academic, physical, and social curriculum at the Green School, all academic content area instruction is grounded in both state and national standards (Maryland State Board of

Education 2007; National Academy of Scientists, 1995; National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, 1991; New Standards Primary Literacy Committee, 1999; Pinnell & Fountas, 2007).

Each segment of the instructional day is based on its own particular body of research on best practices. The literacy work is grounded in view of a balanced literacy (Allington , 2006; Allington & Cunningham, 2007; Calkins, 1994, 2008; Fountas & Pinnell, 1995, 2007; Harvey & Gouvadis, 2007). The mathematics curriculum is adapted from the Investigations in Number, Data and Space authored by Russell, Tierney and Mokros (1998), and the science curricula is authored by the Green School teachers drawing from a variety of sources (Michaels, Shouse, & Schweingruber, 2008).

Literacy, mathematics, and science instruction is unified around certain core beliefs. First, as the instruction described showed, content and process are not viewed separately. Children read, write, compute, and do science in about topics that are relevant to their experiences. All instruction begins with extensive teacher modeling, followed by guided small group work, and ends with independent application. This work is as authentic as possible, focusing on the kinds of real thinking, talking, and acting done by expert practitioners in that content area.

The Green School opened in 2006 with grades K-2, added grade 3 in 2007, and will add grade 4 in 2008 and grade 5 in 2009. Thus, the third graders featured in this piece are the first group to participate in the Maryland School Assessments. Test results for this group of third graders showed the children scoring at 87.5 % for Mathematics and 93.8 % for Reading (proficient or advanced). These results are well above the state average and on a par with the highest achieving schools in the city and the state, but as all the instructional vignettes reveal these figures only confirm the daily, ongoing, performance-based assessments completed by the Mrs. Gunter.

The Green School is unusual in its commitment to physical education. The fact is that, despite the call in 2007 from the U.S. Surgeon General to “prevent and decrease overweight and obesity” by ensuring “daily, quality physical education in all school grades,” many children in Baltimore City have physical education once a week at best. It is even common practice to deny children recess in the interest of more time spent in academics. And, despite the additional recommendation from the U.S. Surgeon General to “provide culturally appropriate education in schools and communities about healthy eating habits,” school lunch programs suffer from the funding woes that led to the cut backs on fresh fruit and vegetables in Baltimore City in the 2007-2008 school year.

The Green School was founded based on research showing the social and academic benefits of maintaining a socio-economic and racially diverse student body (Orfield & Lee, 2005; Rusk, 1998). Its student body (40% percent of the children are African American, 54% are European American, and 6% are Asian; 43% of the children qualify for free and reduced meals) is rare in Baltimore City, where, in the wake of legal desegregation, middle class white families fled to the suburbs or enrolled their children in one of the city’s many private college preparatory schools. That is why, throughout the school day, Mrs. Gunter intentionally integrated opportunities for talk and cooperative interactions across race and gender, as well as problem solving towards fostering caring and equity among the children.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to unravel the threads intersecting at the Green School of Baltimore to create a common “cloth” that represents just one promising example of a place where children achieve at high levels because of their holistic curriculum. I have ended with a discussion of the importance of a diverse student body on the achievement of children because, despite the fact that the research (Orfield & Lee,

2005) shows that school segregation "is almost always related to seriously unequal opportunities for all races, including whites," as our population becomes more multiracial, our schools remain segregated or have resegregated.

It might be tempting to adopt reforms in the academic and physical curriculum in light of this intractability in our haste to make changes that might close the achievement gap. Despite the history and expectation that the elementary school be one of the places where children learn to "get along," another by-product of the emphasis on individual achievement is a generation of children who have less time to interact socially and are not being explicitly taught how to communicate with each other in caring, ethical, and democratic ways.

That we have tolerated what Kozol calls "the restoration of apartheid" in separate, unequally funded, but equally accountable schools is perhaps the most daunting hurdle to our collective responsibility to foster children who are grounded and well-rounded. We are in dire need of examples of schools where all children succeed without unacceptable trade-offs and sacrifices in the name of "closing the achievement gap." We are in dire need of more schools, like the Green School of Baltimore, that take seriously the call to educate the whole child.

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