Happy Fall Break!
I am writing here at the office at my desk, which is adorned by a blazing red maple leaf bouquet delivered by our kindergartners who were off on a nature-scientist amble across the campus. What could be better than traipsing through leaf piles with five year olds?

Talk of leaf study and children undertaking scientific studies brings me to a wonderful article The Springfield Republican ran last week on the work that Penny Block, Janice Henderson and the Department of Education and Child Study’s Susan Etheredge have pioneered with the botanical gardens around art and botany. The project links our kindergartners with students in Professor Etheredge’s Foundations of Early Childhood Education course. The article ran on the front page of the arts section and it had a wonderful photo (displayed on the bulletin board by the main office). Here is the link to the article: "Smith College Exhibit Shows the Potential and Power of Children."

The exhibit featured in the article is on display at Smith College’s Lyman Plant House as part of the inaugural events for Smith College’s new president, Kathy McCartney. The exhibit is titled: “Early Education: Cultivating Young Botanists through Inquiry-based Learning.”

A second exhibit featuring the work of our students will be on display at the Campus Center. Bob Hepner and colleagues from Fort Hill have mounted, "Children’s Visual Expression: Artwork by the Children of Smith College’s Center for Early Childhood Education and Campus School." The exhibit is organized around the processes children use in creating their artwork. It is in the Nolen Art Lounge, Campus Center, October 6–November 2

In the spirit of clumsy segues, I would like to turn from art and nature to a quick observation about national public policy in education. A few weeks ago, I represented the College at a meeting convened by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education focused on the Common Core. The Common Core is a national education initiative that seeks to bring diverse state curricula into alignment so that we have one national curriculum. American education has a long history of local and state control and oversight, which, depending on your stance, can be seen as a virtue or a fundamental system flaw that leads to uneven and inequitable outcomes in educational achievement. Sponsored by the National Governor’s Association and many corporate leaders, the Common Core represents an effort to raise the educational achievement bar in the country by developing specific curriculum guidelines developed by experts in the content areas (literature, math, science, etc…). These curricula will then be tied to national assessments/tests.

As an independent school, we have autonomy over our curriculum; however, as a lab school for the Department of Education and Child Study at Smith, we prepare teachers to enter into public schools. In fact, nearly 80% of the teachers that graduate from our program teach in public schools. Thus we are not mandated to use the Common Core curriculum, but we do need to be aware of what they mean in the broader field.

A critical aspect emphasized in the conference, focused on the Common Core’s explicit intent to teach higher order thinking in literacy and math. In particular, the new standards focus on expanding discourse opportunities for children to work through complex ideas and texts. The presenters at the conference also highlighted how in far-reaching studies conducted by the Gates Foundation using video tape analysis of classrooms — the researchers concluded that while American teachers scored well in managing classrooms, it was rare to see teachers facilitate high-level discussions about text. In response to this data, a college president at the conference endorsed the importance of lab schools because they provide opportunities for teachers-to-be to observe and then practice the skills and approaches to engaging children in higher-order thinking.

With these words in mind, I have spent the last week observing a range of complex and impressive conversations around literacy texts that I believe represent what the Common Core aspires for all children to experience. These discourse episodes occur both in and out of the classroom and they are wonderful to experience. I feel very lucky.
Earlier this week, I received a petition from several sixth graders proposing that the 4th-6th graders read the book *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio as a community experience. They wrote, “This book is a terrific story for all ages as it is a story about acceptance, kindness and empathy. This book represents many things and it happens to represent many of our own guiding words…This is a ‘role model’ book with concepts younger children can grasp and carry with them through their years at the Campus School. The older students will be able to leave with the lessons the book teaches them and take those lessons everywhere they go in life.” Today they showed up in my office with big slices of pizza and their napkins to talk their ideas through with me. It was a high-level strategy session replete with persuasive talk and sophisticated observations about the spirit of community. One of the students began by saying, “We think *Wonder* is a great book with a wonderful lesson for our school.” A second followed by saying, “I believe in this book, because I have a sister with special needs and I try to be empathic to people with special challenges. It was very touching book and I cried and laughed reading it. They described everybody’s perspective and this will help us have empathy for others.” Needless to say, we are working on what this might look like as we move forward.

A second example from the 6th grade involved an activity and discussion from students reading *Seedfolks* by Paul Fleischman. Ms. Colon-Bradt described a lesson taught with her student teacher Ms. Britain Scott that focused on community building and the power of taking the time learn about others—particularly those you may overlook. This lesson happened on the blacktop in the playground. The book is organized into chapters where each character tells their story. Students were assigned a character and wrote their name on the blacktop and then they drew a line between their character and other characters with whom they had a relationship. A spider web of relationships unfolded on the asphalt and, as Ms. C-B said, “We had a kumbya moment. We were sitting on the blacktop and the chalk lines linked all the characters together into a web and then we noticed that none of the characters connected to a character who was a homeless person; he was ignored and nobody ever spoke to him until they heard his story.” The conversation unfolded about the importance of knowing and listening to the stories of others and how once you connected with another person’s story you had a relationship.

In the fifth grade, Mr. Matylas had a different kind of text encounter. He organizes his classroom in a variety of permutations that provide multiple structures for students to think, reflect and talk about text. There are large-group discussions, small-group conversations, and one-on-one conferences. I watched him meet in a small conference with one student as they reviewed his writing about the book *Adam of the Road*. Together they analyzed the student’s paragraph and focused on what tools could help logically organize a paragraph. They compared the task of writing to that of a filmmaker telling a story. It was a mind-to-mind conversation about writing, text, and the tools of storytelling.

In the first grade, Ms. Perkins launched a poetry activity by having her students bring in special collections. The first activity involved organizing those collections onto a large piece of paper. Students brought seashells, sea glass, special beads, and other talismans. They took photographs of the special collections and then wrote poems describing what was “special” about the “special collections.” They then worked on revising their poems using the a poet’s tool they named “the tool of the heartbeat,” which focused on how poet’s repeat a particular line to get the reader “to stop, stay, and think.” They also read poems that utilize “heartbeats” such as “Things” by Eloise Greenfield:

Went to the corner  
Walked in the store  
Bought me some candy  
Ain’t got it no more  
Ain’t got it no more
They then went back and revised their pieces so that they could identify a line that was their heartbeat. As one first grader wrote:

*Reminds me of my cousin*
Diving for rocks in VT
Learning how to ride a bike
*Reminds me of my cousin*

At the end of the week, they get pocket poem— which are poems on an index card that they get to carry with them wherever the go.

• In Ms. Murphy’s second grade class, I witnessed a student give a long and descriptive presentation on bird banding. He talked the class through his experiences working with ‘mist nets’ which, “are nets that hang low to the ground and look like mist on a rainy day.” He had prepared a talk that described how there were eight steps of bird banding from setting up the mist nests, to capturing the bird, to carefully disentangling the bird from the net, to weighing the bird, to banding the bird and more. The other students listened intently and asked many questions. Throughout the presentation, Ms. Murphy coached the student along and helped other students formulate open-ended questions to ask. As I watched, I thought the opportunity to present a passion and respond to questions is a complex act of literacy.

The Gates Foundation study is called the *Measures of Effective Teaching* and a disheartening finding of their observations and videotaped analyses is that, researchers “rarely found highly accomplished practice for the competencies often associated with the intent to teach students higher-order thinking skills.” These skills included questioning and discussion techniques, analysis and problem solving, and student participation in meaning making and reasoning. As I noted, the conference emphasized— if teachers are to make this happen in their classroom, they must have models of practice. Given these bleak findings, I celebrate the Campus School as a place of higher-order thinking for children and a school where teachers-to-be experience a model of instruction and learning that launches them into teaching with a sense of what is possible.

Enjoy the break!

Sincerely,

Sam