

JK-2 October 12, 2014

Dear Parents,

OK, so we didn't get to go on the bus trip, but we still recommend that families take advantage whenever they can of the nearby nature centers, forest preserves, and state parks. Emily Oaks Nature center is in Skokie, near Howard and Skokie Blvd. (Cicero). North Park Nature Center is in the North Park Village at 5800 N. Pulaski in Chicago. Keep in mind that for many kids a short time may be enough. Little by little, the attractions of dirt trails, wildflowers, tall grass, mud, grasshoppers, and crickets in the quiet may become quite absorbing.

We have taken two walks to the Park West Park on Wrightwood near Halsted. The exuberance and camaraderie while walking were well worth it, and by the second trip our procedures were in place: stay with our group, stay behind the leader, stop at the stopping lines (at streets and alleys), and when teachers say to hold hands for crossing, you can't say "no."

Before going the first time we showed and gave kids a map of the major streets on the way, with our route marked in yellow.

Now, orienting oneself between a depiction on two-dimensional paper and real-life space and direction is very difficult, even for some adults (that we know). It's not only a question of maturity or developmental level or age. Some people, even kids, just have the ability. But the experience necessary to develop that ability, no matter how inherent, requires a lot of confusing decisions and mistakes. So we are using maps, the idea of maps, and whether they can help with real life spatial orientation. It's not just a picture. What does a map show? What are the important features, the landmarks, on our walk to the park? Does a map show how to get to something (the treasure)? It is important that a map refer to a space that kids actually know and experience in order to help them begin to relate the abstract to the concrete. Last year, some of the current kids played a board game that was a map of the classroom, with the object of finding the jewels. The furniture is different now, but eventually we will see if kids can help make a new map of the room. But we are not saying that kids should, or need to, understand maps. However, for some, perhaps many, it is an interesting beginning of thinking beyond pre-operational reasoning.

Anyway, on that first walk, some kids made sense of the turns, checking the street signs to verify where we were, with prompts and questions from teachers. Some kids were clearly confused, and found all this irrelevant to a walk to the park. And even those interested were sometimes confused and unclear.

On another day, at table time, the "assignment" (OK, OK) was to make a map, any map. Some kids are always reluctant to accept the restrictions of table time, and some kids were still unclear what a map is and does. But they all tried, and we did get a lot of them, and they were very interesting in the variety of graphics and landmarks. But there was one thing common to almost all of them. Between one place and another was a squiggle of lines full of curves, double-backs, and undifferentiated space. The sense of direction that some kids had made use of with the teacher-made map was completely absent in their own maps. Again, this is understandable. There are many incremental steps in thinking through the relationship between the concrete and the abstract.

For our next walk to the same park, we gave kids the same teacher map, but asked if they wanted to mark out a different way of getting there. Most kids did, and again the results were interesting. For some, it was just another coloring page. Some marked all the streets. For others, it functioned as a simple maze between school (start) and the park (finish). One guy noticed that we were stopping at alleys, but that the alleys were not on the map, so he drew them in. One girl kept saying we were supposed to go that way (east), not this way (west). After a number of questions by teachers and objections by kids, she kept trying to explain why she thought that. On her own, she started turning her map to orient to the actual place, and realized that she had been looking at the map upside down, and corrected her direction.

And that was the issue for many kids. Not just orienting in space, but orienting between the map and the real-life space they were in. At the various crossings and turns, a teacher would ask “Which way do we go?” Lots of kids would clamor “That way, that way!” But they would be pointing at the map (not always correctly), not at the actual way on the street. When asked “What do you see, how do you know which way to go?” most were at a loss about how to explain what they actually saw in relation to the map.

We don’t want to make any conclusions about what kids can or cannot do with maps, but it is certainly invigorating to see how far this will go.

In a future letters, more about the music room, group time, table time, and whatever other projects we do.

Thanks,

Joseph, Amanda, Kristin