

Children Get New Perspectives on Nature

By Heather Zimar

Belle Sherman Elementary School kindergartners and their families gathered on March 22 in teacher Peggy Dolan's classroom, which was transformed into a gallery of students' artwork. The event culminated a three-month project connecting nature, art, literature and movement, and was funded by an Ithaca Public Education Initiative (IPEI) Red & Gold Grant.

"Science, art, poetry and music; it's a lot of fun to help the students connect these areas," Dolan says.

Red & Gold Grants are one-time awards to teachers, administrators, students and community members to assist with programs that strengthen and enrich the schools. The maximum award amount is \$500. May 7 is the next deadline for application submissions, and grant awards are announced within two weeks.

The project, titled "Seeing Trees in Winter," included mixed-media art lessons with community artist and retired school art teacher Yvonne Piburn. In addition, a parent and yoga teacher led students in creative movements connected to nature and trees. Dolan taught the poetry and math components.

"This project integrated curriculum so easily and naturally," Dolan says. "We've been dividing up our curriculum so it is skills-based and thematic. It combines everything."

Over the three months, Piburn presented a series of photographs and paintings of winter trees and discussed with students the differences among the art, such as the angle of the photos or the colors used.

"The paintings are blurry and the photographs aren't," says student Evie Doyle during one lesson. "The paintings let you see things you can't see in photos," adds Samantha Kager.

Following Piburn's presentations, students made their own prints and paintings of trees. Many explored mixing colors for the first time, swirling their brushes around a plate of paints until they created the right shade for their



Photo provided

Belle Sherman Elementary School kindergarten classes combined science, art, poetry and music for the "Seeing Trees in Winter" project.

trees.

"I just love watching kids make art," Piburn says. "It's intuitive, spontaneous, and 99 percent of the time, it's marvelous. There's no one right answer; they have total freedom to just go wherever it takes them."

"Working with an artist in the community who is also a retired school art teacher, the children get a totally different experience of paint, technique and imagination," Dolan says. "It enriches the experience."

To complement their artwork, students wrote poetry about trees. In addition, the class

measured the circumference of tree stumps, a tie-in with the math curriculum. The project also included "creative movement" sessions where students gathered in the gym and practiced moving like trees.

At the culminating event, students showed parents their artwork, hung carefully against a black background to showcase the range of vibrant colors. Kindergartener Nathan Czopps says his favorite part of the project was "the coloring."

"He's so proud of his work," his mother, Liz Czopps, says. "The artwork is so impressive. I want to hang it up in the living room."

"It's fun to see a different take on trees," says Scott Doyle, Evie's father.

"It's beautiful," says Shion Hogg, parent of kindergartener Jim. "He's really excited that I'm here. He's been looking forward to this all day."

J.R. Clairborne notes that the project inspired his daughter, Indira, to write more. "She's writing about pine needles and trees losing their leaves," he says. "Anything that expands horizons like that we're thankful for."

Belle Sherman principal Daniel Breiman says Dolan connected the project to the school's common core curriculum. For example, she used graphic organizers for students to display information in a visual manner. "She's really done a lot with trees, in a non-linguistic representation that's guiding her nonfiction writing unit," he says. "It's beautiful."

IPEI is a community based not-for-profit 501(c)(3) organization that develops supportive community and private sector relationships with the Ithaca City School District. Founded in 1996, IPEI is committed to connecting school and community through collaboration, engagement, gifts and grants. For more information go to www.ipei.org, call 256-IPEI (4734) or email ipei@ipei.org.

Heather Zimar is an Ithaca College graduate student and IPEI intern.



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