



Southside Montessori Elementary School

Winter 2004

Tropical rainforests

It may clearly be winter in Spokane, but inside the Southside Montessori Elementary classroom, there is a feel of the tropics. We are investigating the tropical rainforest. Our approach is to learn about its location, its proximity to the equator and ramifications for its climate. With well over a hundred inches of rainfall a year and a steady warm climate, its lushness is of great interest. How are the plants adapted to a sudden and heavy rainfall? Drip tips provide an answer. The water is able to rush off the leaf without damaging it. Plants such as bromeliads catch the rainfall, creating pools of water for the animals that live above the floor of the forest. Thirsty insects that venture into the cup of the bromeliad may lose footing and slip into the water. The decomposing insect's body adds nutrients to the water that is then passed along perhaps to a bird or frog. The variety of animals of the forest are explored. We discover how they feed off the plants, nourishing their bodies and often assist in furthering the plant as in the pollinating process or seed dispersal. We looked at a tribe of people and how they live in the environment interacting with the plants and animals. One begins to see how important each is to the other and how necessary it is to keep the balance. An awe and respect for the designs in nature is stirred.

After learning about the fruits of the forest, a tropical fruit salad was made and eaten for snack. Brazil nuts were munched. A new appreciation for chocolate was stirred after learning about the cacao beans and how chocolate is made. Sounds of the rainforest were introduced by way of an environmental tape and the children were surprised at how noisy it is there! Musical instruments such as flutes and rainsticks again demonstrated how people create from objects in their environment. Looking at the materials used to construct housing, make hunting weapons as well as jewelry and clothing, again brought home the idea that the environment provides resources for their daily life.

The rainforest was illustrated on a classroom wall as the children positioned plants and animals in their appropriate locations from the forest floor to the emergent layer. Following will be an opportunity to create tissue paper collages and to cut linoleum blocks with images of the rainforest or any other art idea that comes to mind!

Snowflakes and science

Back to the reality of our snowy winter in Spokane, we have also paid much attention to snowflakes. We learned about Wilson Bentley (1865-1931) who lived in Vermont. He became known as "Snowflake Man" because of his passion for photographing snowflakes. This became his life's work! We looked at photos of snowflakes produced by electron microscopes. We learned that 10 inches of snow equals about 1 inch of water. We did observations, measurements and calculations. We also enjoyed watching the squirrels outside the classroom windows as they dug through the snow in search of their food!



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Wind

Along with learning about directions and the making of compasses, we have applied that knowledge to observations of weather and the relationship to the direction of the wind.

Musical notation

The reading of written symbols is a theme in the elementary child's world. Reading abilities advance as well as their enthusiasm for reading chapter books. Mathematical notation, another application of written symbol, becomes more advanced. The children have enjoyed learning to read musical notation, composing their own, and sharing it with their peers.

Physical games

In the elementary years, an interest in sports grows both in the desire to increase skill level and to play with peers. Whereas in the preschool age child, one sees a repetition of an activity such as pouring, in the elementary, the repetition maybe repeated throws of a snowball at the top branches of a tree with the intent of toppling the accumulated snow! In PE sessions, different skills are introduced and incorporated into games.

The News

There is a growing awareness of the world outside the elementary child's community. Newsworthy events are discussed. This past fall, news of the California fires stimulated many discussions about fire. We learned about wildfires, fire in general, fires affect on the life and regeneration of the forest, and of course, we looked at the impact on the people affected by it.

The lives of people take on new interest as the child's world expands. Biographies are of great interest. When focusing on the life of Martin Luther King, Jr., the children were amazed at the mistreatment of African Americans. Many thoughts and discussions were stimulated.

There never is a dull moment here! The enthusiasm and joy in learning is evident whether there are ongoing conversations or a silent concentrated hush falls over the room. Southside is a great environment for learning and growing!