

Paths of Belonging

Third graders explore and connect with their neighborhood

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“Look! That is my grandpa’s garage!” exclaims Sarah as she spots the brightly painted garage door a few meters ahead.

“It is?” Michael, her teacher says and stops the class of third graders who are walking the cobblestone neighborhood sidewalk. “Tell us about it,” he encourages her. Her fellow students gather around as she explains that the cars are for the people who live in the multistory building above it. The students gaze at the vibrant colors and a few recognize their city’s name, Madrid, painted in big black letters.

“Is this graffiti?” Michael asks the group.

Some think yes and a girl adds, “But I like it, it’s not dirty.” After some discussion about when graffiti is good or bad, the class continues up the old city street looking for other familiar signs and places.

These twenty-five third graders attend the prek-6th grade International School SEK Santa Isabel. The school sits in the densely populated and historic Barrio de las Letras district of downtown Madrid. Since the pandemic, the teachers have been developing ways to better support student learning and well-being. Everyday students take part in “learning paths” outside of school



to explore and engage with people and places in their community. These learning paths are one strategy in which students explore, connect and enjoy their natural surroundings while developing important skills. “One of my IB units of inquiry is about exploring natural environments and recycling,” notes their teacher, Michael. “I designed this learning path around the nearby blocks so they can explore their ideas about what is clean, what is dirty, and how we can better take care of our neighborhood.” During the hour stroll, students recognize familiar landmarks, make connections to things they’ve experienced, and create new connections to local people and places.

The Learning Path

Michael gathers the students in the open area outside their classroom and announces, “Today we are going to explore our environment!” He asks students questions about what they have been discussing in class: how can we take care of our environment? He holds up a yellow, green, and blue bag and asks what each color means for recycling. Three teachers in training help students into bright yellow safety jackets and give them a paper with objects to look for along the way, like a treasure hunt.

Students walk in pairs, hand in hand, out of school and down the old cobblestone sidewalks surrounding their school. They are bubbling with excitement, many pointing to the colored flags waving from the roof of the building next door. A boy spots the speed limit painted on the street, “What does it say?”

“That’s on our sheet!” a girl exclaims when she sees it. Michael invites the students to look closer and practice reading the number 15, asking students what they think it means.

They continue, encountering many pedestrians who smile and others who linger, curious what the students are exploring. The students notice and discuss many of the strange and familiar objects along the way: traffic signs, plants hanging from buildings, trees, posters, dog waste bins, graffiti, water fountains. “What is this?” Michael asks occasionally to focus the group on objects they may have missed and invite students to share what they know about it.

As they turn a corner, Sarah recognizes her grandpa’s parking garage. Michael is elated to



learn this and invites her to share more with the other students. They huddle around her as she proudly explains how many cars are inside and describes the people who live in the multi-story apartment building above it.

The narrow street they are walking opens up to a cozy sun-filled plaza dotted with tables of locals drinking coffee and enjoying the warmth. Michael spots three very large recycling bins at the other side of the street. “Let’s go everyone!” Michael leads them across the plaza to the bins where they practice identifying glass, paper, or plastic objects and placing them in the correct bin.

“Oh, look at that, how lovely.” a woman says to her friend as they walk by, smiling at the children. Once all the objects in the bags are put in the bins, Michael leads the group back across the plaza toward school.

On the way back they pass a small shop and one of the students, Maria, exclaims “Monica lives here!”

“Who is Monica? Michael asked.

“Monica is my friend,” she replies, bending her head to look into the shop.”

Suddenly the owner of this beauty center opens the door grinning, “Maria!”



The excitement and hugs are contagious. Two other students join Maria and Monica for a group hug. Monica knows Maria and her mother because they pass the shop center every day on their way to and from school. “I recognize the shop,” Michael reflects, “But I never knew the owner, Monica, or her connection with Maria, so that was great to learn.”

While turning the last street corner to school, several students excitedly spot a couple on the other side of the street walking their dog toward them. Above their delightful din of “oohs” and “look!”, Michael says hello to the owners and asks if they can talk with them. “Of course,” the woman says. He asks them questions about their dog, if they clean up after it poops, and why that’s important. The woman tells them she used to be a teacher and loves to see the students outside. And, yes, they always clean their dog’s

poop so we can all enjoy a clean neighborhood. The children approve and one student says that he has a dog, but his mom does not let him pick up the poop.

“But we have to clean it,” his friend reminds him. “Otherwise you step on it. I did that once and I did not like it.” After saying goodbye to the dog and its owners, the students re-enter their school doors.

Sitting in a circle in the school lobby, Michael asks them to reflect on the experience. “So what did you like? Draw me a picture of what you remember from our walk?” Students pick out markers and paper students begin their drawings. The images of the parking garage, dogs, and recycling bins become stories as students share what they remember most from the trip.

“And we must always take care of our neighborhood,” says a boy to several of his friends.

“Right, or else things will just get dirty and broken and I don’t want that,” another boy answers.

“Me either!” a third chimes in.

“Overall, I was very pleased with the students’ learning,” Michael shares afterwards. Of course there are things that he’d like to do differently next time. “Sometimes it’s hard for me to hear the students and for them to hear me when we are walking in a long line.” He wants to have another teacher with him so, when they are walking, the class can better engage students in conversations along the way. That said, he has done this type of experience a few times with other classes and feels good about how it went. “We have this unit of inquiry about exploring our environment and I want my students to understand how to care for their surroundings. That means they need to see things in their neighborhood and know how to take care of them. They were noticing things and telling me things I didn’t even know about, like the parking garage and Monica. It’s important for me to also model that sometimes I don’t know all the answers.”

