

## WORLD CLASS TRAVELERS

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The fourth grade sections at Malcolm Price Laboratory School began a multidisciplinary unit last fall that brought the world a little closer to home. The interesting part of this unit is that it still isn't over even though the school year is over. The project is called TRAVELMATES. Travelmates? What are they? Who are they? What are they doing? Since it is difficult for students to do a great deal of traveling in actual miles during the school year, they selected "special friends" to do the traveling for them! Each fourth grader chose a doll, bear, or stuffed animal from home to be his/her Travelmate, preferable one they could live without. A dog tag with a class picture was placed around each Travelmate's neck. The school's name, address, and phone number were also included on this dog tag. A copy of what the project is about was included on the opposite side.

The preliminary details were taken care of and the next step involved sewing backpacks for each of the Travelmates. This was accomplished with the collaboration of the Fundamentals of Home Economics teacher and students. With this class's expertise a pattern was developed, and they helped the fourth graders safely sew a backpack for each Travelmate. This was a big event for some of the fourth graders who had never touched a sewing machine before, let alone, produce a beautiful product that would be important to their traveling friend. The backpack became a necessary part of the traveling gear for the Travelmate as this would house the diary packed so its journeys could be recorded.

The diary was designed with the logo "Passport to the World" on the cover. The cover of the diary also read, "Dear Friend, Please sign my diary. Include places I've been and sights I've seen. A souvenir or, best yet, a photo of you and me together would be wonderful! My only form of transportation is from person to person, so please pass me on. Sincerely, (Travelmate's name) P.S. Please assist me in sending home an occasional postcard!"

The students then brainstormed what model of writing we should place on the first page of the diary so people would have an example of what to possibly write to us in the journals. We decided to personalize our entry by talking about ourselves, the type of community we live in, its population, industry in the area, and the type of geographical region in which we live. Some added a personal interest sentence to complete this model.

We were now ready to send Travelmates out the door and say goodbye. We couldn't do this, though, without a proper farewell party. The students created farewell cards that would rival Hallmark's fame for sentimental thoughts. The send-off party, including music and food, was a huge success. The students shared a last moment with their Travelmate alone by reading it the card created for this event. I even saw one pretending to feed his Travelmate as he said so long. The confetti thrown on the Travelmates before the students took them out the door before Thanksgiving vacation was the final hurrah.

Most of the Travelmates began their adventure sometime between Thanksgiving and the end of Christmas break. The family's job was to find someone traveling between this time period, be it near or far; be it dad, grandma, or a neighbor. Example: Monty, Laura's Travelmate started on his adventure with Laura's dad on a business trip to San Diego, CA. We know dad handed Monty off to a flight attendant, and Monty was OFF! Monty then traveled to Munich, Germany, Australia, and Hawaii. We received postcards throughout these travels. After Monty had been gone for about two months, the class received a phone call from another flight attendant while she was in Paris, France. She reported that Monty was fine and had traveled the world with four major airlines. This attendant also added that Monty's picture would be on the cover of Southwest Airlines next travel brochure for being a world class traveler!

During the absence of our Travelmates the students used Writers' Workshop time to create marvelous tales about their friends. These stories were so terrific because the students felt great ownership with this unit. Talk about writing with meaning! When children write about what is alive and vital to them it becomes an amazing story. Some fourth graders created truly fanciful adventures--something they "hoped" would happen to their Travelmate. Others wrote what they truly believed was happening at that very moment.

Auckland, New Zealand; Sitka, Alaska; Surfers Paradise, Australia; Guanzxi, People Republic of China; Kingston, Jamaica; Tokyo, Japan...

Postcards, letters, packages, pictures, books, and gifts for the students from wonderful places such as these were some of the items the fourth graders received in the mail during the Travelmates' absence. Most of these specialties arrived from people we didn't even know! We heard from pilots, flight attendants, parents, grandparents, managers, teachers, corporation presidents, aunts, uncles, farmers, truck drivers, buyers, retired friends, children, and so on. These people were just interested and considerate enough to continue passing on our Travelmates to other people and kept the fourth graders informed about the journeys. What a great lesson in kindness!

The literature included as part of an integrated unit like this is endless. Our collective list of books found and read relating to specific cities, states, regions, countries, continents, animals, land features, and/or specific events increased as the sites visited grew. Two of our favorites were Stringbean's Trip to the Shining Sea by Vera and Jennifer Williams and Anno's Journey by Mitsumasa Anno. This was a great way to incorporate multicultural literature in a significant way.

The proper use of reference materials became an important skill as we located the wonderful places our Travelmates were visiting. Example: locating Aruba, a small island in the Lesser Antilles, North of Venezuela in South America was a thrill for Adrienne! She then showed the entire class where she knew Cherish had visited after receiving a postcard. We couldn't wait until the mail was delivered each day! Philately became a new hobby for the class as our collection increased. There was an on-the-spot reading, geography, historical or current events, science, and math lesson all rolled into one with each new piece of correspondence. We learned new names, new places, and new locations. We discovered how humans interact with their environment in different cultural and geographical regions. People often included information about time zones, population count, and square miles on a particular area. We continually compared this information to us and our location so we could begin to understand places of the world. We could then begin to apply, interpret, and speculate on global connections.

As requested on the dog tags, the Travelmates started arriving back at school by April 15. Over 75% of the Travelmates have since returned. Each with its own unique story. Their diaries were full of fabulous information of their worldly adventures. The backpacks were often overflowing with treasures. Foreign currency was a favorite.

It seemed appropriate to have a "Welcome Home" party for the Travelmates before the school year ended. Both fourth grade classes came together for this exciting event. The students shared a favorite passage from the diary, a picture, a gift, or an unusual traveling story in this large group. One Travelmate, Sylvester, held a piece of history in its paw as the student told about Sylvester's trip to the Berlin Wall. We honored the Travelmates that had not returned yet with a Missing in Action poster featuring their picture with their owner.

Social studies period the last week of school was spent with the children working in cooperative teams. Teams of two or three students read through the journal and recorded all locations in sequence to create the Travelmate's itinerary. A sticker was placed on a large laminated map to plot each location. Addresses of new friends documented in the diary that helped transport the Travelmates were also recorded by the team. It was time to send updated news about the Travelmate and "thank you" letters to the many wonderful people who had assisted us in this project. The team also attempted to calculate distance traveled. All we can say is that each Travelmate would have earned enough frequent flyer points for the distances logged to go on another free trip with its owner.

The unit isn't over because we still expect to see some Travelmates arrive "home" over the summer. Rachel dreamed that her Travelmate would come back three years from now when she is a seventh grader. One never knows...

Literature, reading, writing, math, science, geography, history, current events, art, sewing, reference skills, risk taking, and higher level thinking skills were all a natural part of this multidisciplinary project. We never dreamed this one small idea could teach us so much about ourselves and the world.