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On the Road Again: Field Research in a Rural Elementary School

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At 4:30 p.m. on a Sunday afternoon, the school parking lot is full. The yellow school bus labeled "Marlboro School District" sits with doors open. Parents and students mill around and bring duffels and packs to the back. Parent chaperones pack coolers of food and bags of groceries into the support vehicles. Finally, everything is packed and the kids are aboard, and the bus heads onto Route 9 to descend the mountain for Cape Cod, or New York City, or Washington, D.C., or Bradley Airport in Hartford.

This is a familiar scene at the Marlboro School, where "field research" has been an integral part of the curriculum since the 1960s. Marlboro is a small town, with a population of less than 1,000 residents, in the mountains of southern Vermont. In the early 1960s, several one-room schools combined to create a single kindergarten through eighth grade school. As with most rural Vermont schools, the student population has risen and declined since then. In the 1990s, there were more than 115 students in the school. This year, in the fall of 2007, we will open our doors on the Tuesday after Labor Day to 80 students.

Field research began as a way to expose backwoods kids to the wider world. Their parents may never have been out of Vermont, but, when Bruce Cole, the first principal of the unified school, came on board, he knew it was important for his kids to know there was more to the world. He loaded the whole school onto buses for outings to Cape Cod or Boston so they could experience the ocean or the city.

Bruce stayed at Marlboro for 20 years. Connie Barton, who started out as a teacher, reluctantly moved into the principal's position when Bruce retired. For the record, she's back to teaching now. Connie was principal at Marlboro for another 15 years. The longevity and common philosophy of these folks allowed a small public school to develop a unique approach to education, which was supported by the citizens of Marlboro every March at Town Meeting when they approved the school budget.

At 2005 Fall Forum in Boston, I attended a Saturday morning workshop with Deborah Meier and Jane Andrais. They showed a 1970s-era video of New York City's Central Park East Elementary School (CPE) that demonstrated how they conducted field research by getting children out of the school and taking advantage of their surroundings. They challenged us to think of ways in which our own schools implemented the principles and practices that directed CPE. I immediately thought of the field research we hold dear at Marlboro and was pleased to see the importance of this educational experience recognized as an important Essential school practice.

When you go to "principal school," you have to take a course in school finance. One of the things you learn is that your school budget should reflect your educational priorities. Any reader who has had to deal with this knows that it is easier said than done. Once you've paid teachers and put aside money to fix the furnace, there's not a lot left over. However, the Marlboro School Board recognized the value of getting these kids down off the mountain, of learning about other people and places, and of tying classroom learning to real life experience. And so, when I arrived at Marlboro as principal in 2002, I found that there was a line item in each classroom budget for "field research." And I quickly learned that this translated into week-long trips for the fifth and sixth graders to New York City one year and Cape Cod the next, and for the seventh and eighth graders to Washington, D.C. one year and an international destination such as London, the Dominican Republic, or Costa Rica the next. Committed teachers, town budget support, parent support, and, sometimes, fundraising and grant writing make this possible at our small, rural public school.

Marlboro's field research makes student learning and skills durable and memorable as students go on to apply them in many different contexts. And it is a significant commitment. A week in New York City or Costa Rica is preceded by months of preparation and study and followed by more study and presentations of what

was learned. As principal, I've had the opportunity to join classes in the planning and execution of field research trips, including the 2006 seventh and eighth grade trip to Costa Rica. A major impetus for choosing Costa Rica was that I had lived there for a year, teaching in the cloud forest of Monteverde on the continental divide. Connections are important when you do field research – whether they are connections with a school, a church in the Bronx, an Audubon Center on the Cape, or a homeless shelter in D.C. My connections in Monteverde provided a springboard for our students.

Students' first steps in their journey to Costa Rica related to the connections between Vermont and Monteverde; students started asking questions and exploring topics. As the students gained some general knowledge about Costa Rica, they focused on coffee. Even though there is not a Starbucks within 30 miles of Marlboro, lattes, cappuccinos, and a good strong cup of coffee are parts of their parents' daily rituals. They learned that coffee is grown in Costa Rica and exported to the U.S., and their essential question became, "Is coffee good for Costa Rica?"

With the help of Dean's Beans, a local fair trade coffee vendor, we sold Costa Rican coffee to raise funds. Before we left for Costa Rica, as part of our Spanish class, we wrote a play about coffee growing: what it means for the people who work on the coffee farms, what the advantages of shade-grown coffee are for the environment and the economy, and the difference between large coffee plantations and small cooperativas. We then presented our play in school and to a community gathering, eliciting audience feedback as to how we represented the issues.

And while traveling in Costa Rica, we asked students, farmers, and coffee processors, "Is coffee good for Costa Rica?" For many years, Marlboro School has recognized the importance of environmental stewardship. We think it's important for students to understand where they live and to learn what they need to know to take on this stewardship. As we are all finding, what happens in our backyard is connected integrally to what happens in the backyard of our international neighbors. The students soon learned that their question had a very complex answer. Yes, the Costa Rican economy depends on coffee exports, but the loss of rain forest and cloud forest as land is cleared for growing is a major concern, as is the erosion of the soil. In their play, they promoted the value of shade grown coffee, and then found that local growers were coming to the same conclusions.

We stayed overnight with Costa Rican families, an event that transformed students' relationship to their Spanish language studies. I've always been frustrated by foreign language instruction in the United States, and in Vermont, we have little opportunity and less need to practice our Spanish. During our homestays, we worked hard enough in one night to justify several years' of study. Amy, Zoe, and I stayed with Rosalia and her family. Rosalia's daughter was about the same age as Amy and Zoe, and the three of them spent two hours secluded in her room exchanging their life stories.

And then there was Davey. If Davey graduates from high school, he'll be the first member of his family to do so. Davey didn't study Spanish because he needed to use the time to work on reading and writing English. But Davey got a passport and went to Costa Rica. While there we stayed at the Ecolodge in the tiny farming town of San Luis. During an evening seminar, a presenter asked the kids what they wanted to be when they grew up. Davey announced that he'd like to be a traveler. Davey is the first in his family to ride in an airplane, and his horizons are wider due to this "field research."

When we returned, the students presented their play again to a Marlboro audience. They wrote a newsletter with articles on different aspects of their trip. They presented a parents' evening with slides, video, and excerpts of reflections from their journals. And, four or five years from now, when we contact them to ask how their education at Marlboro prepared them for high school and beyond, we know we'll hear about Costa Rica.

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