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# Responsive Classroom Newsletter

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## *Teacher to Teach*

Ideas from teachers who are using  
*The Responsive Classroom*<sup>®</sup> practices

## ***The Apartment Project:* An Interdisciplinary Approach to Learning**

**by Marianne Millette-Kelley, librarian at Wellfleet Elementary School in Wellfleet, Massachusetts**

### **Introducing the Project**

We start the project by sharing portions of *The Apartment Book* by Leo Hartas and Richard Platt (Dorling Kindersley, 1995.) In this book, each double page spread shows a cross section of an old apartment building and everything that happens inside from 7:00 AM until 1:00 AM. The characters are exaggerated and the action is silly which makes the book a good hook.

We use *The Apartment Book* to introduce the concept of cross sections (a piece of something cut across) as an arrangement that can allow us to study how something works. Fifth graders will use cross sections throughout the year to illustrate their understanding of various concepts. We also begin to talk about community by looking at how the characters in the book interact. We look specifically for examples of how a character's actions affect others. Finally, we announce that we will be building our own apartments in cross section, creating characters to live in them, and studying how the community works.

### **The Planning and Building Stage**

Each child gets a cigar box to build a cross-section of an apartment. We begin the planning and building stage by learning about scale: the relationship of models to the real Ideas from thing. Scale is a concept explored in math at the fifth grade level and it's generally a difficult one for students to grasp. However, the children do come to understand and master the concept by doing this project.

Our scale is 1 inch equals 1 foot. We measure the cigar boxes and plot out the size to scale on the wall and floor of the library with masking tape. I stand in the space and then show children a five-inch doll in the cigar box space. We then leaf through stacks of magazines using rulers to find furniture and people that are the right scale for the cigar box apartment. This usually takes one class period (about 50 minutes).

At the next class, we are ready for small group work. Children randomly select a street number from a bag to form apartment building groups. Each small group decides how they will position their boxes to form the apartment building and what "extras" they will add: elevator shafts, penthouses, walled gardens, etc. The goal is to make decisions as a group and to honor all ideas and opinions. When a building plan is agreed upon, children record the plan and set to work decorating their apartments.

### **Interior Decoration**

In my library I keep 27 plastic containers of recyclable junk. The containers are sorted in categories such as plastics, tin, tubes, cardboard, fabric, wallpaper, natural, newspaper, boxes, etc. Children may use any of these materials as long as they return like items to the right container and put the lid on. The apartment

deco-rating stage is a great time to practice using these supplies and cleaning up. We often stop in the middle of a work period to predict how long clean up will take. At the end of class, one of the things we reflect upon is how well we did with the clean up.

Children at this age love to personalize space, and once students are done decorating they start to redecorate. We try to limit this stage to two or three class times. We begin by deco-rating the walls and floors, using coffee stirrers, popsicle sticks, carpet samples, wallpaper books, fabric scraps, and paints. This year several children meticulously installed wood flooring made from coffee stirrers. Small tin boxes were sanded down to create stainless steel refrigerators. As soon as the interiors are ready, the small groups come together to construct the buildings and add finishing touches to the exterior (paint, shingle, stamp, texture).

### **Window Books**

Each child invents a character that lives in the apartment. Using a graphic organizer, children name their character and describe the character's physical attributes, family, friends, hobbies, occupation, and hopes and dreams. Students learn how to make a six-page "window book" by folding a piece of legal sized paper.

On the cover, students draw an illustration of the character as seen inside the apartment through a window (see sample below). Each page has a drawing and a sentence or two about the character. Window books are glued to the exteriors of the apartments. Once the individual window books are complete, children write collaborative stories about life in their building. The cooperative learning skills, which were introduced and practiced in the building stage, are now used and honed further in the writing groups. Apartment stories are collected and bound.

### **Installation**

As a final step, the class decides on a street name. We mount a mural-sized piece of paper on the wall, set the apartment buildings against it, and fill in the street background with collaged city scenes.

We save this part of the project until after our art teacher, Donna Knight, has taught one-point perspective. Developmentally, fifth graders are just beginning to understand perspective. Donna utilizes the nearby beach where the horizon is clearly visible to teach about vanishing point. The children then practice one-point perspective by designing the alleys between the apartment buildings. It works well to install the apartments in a wide windowsill or a shelf. This supports the structures and allows children to lay down a street and even add cross sections of subways and cellars underground.

Many children become quite attached to their apartments and continue to work on them throughout the year. Students can work on their individual apartments during rainy day recess, quiet time, and after lunch. Children decorate for holidays and add furniture and miniatures. At the end of the year, we dismantle the buildings. Tenants take home their apartments, making room for the next class to build in the fall.

### **About the Teacher**

Marianne Millette-Kelley is a full-time librarian at Wellfleet Elementary School, a K-5 school with 141 students near the end of Cape Cod. Prior to this, she was a children's librarian in the Brooklyn Public Libraries, Brooklyn, New York, and the Providence Public Libraries, Providence, Rhode Island.

She holds a Masters Degree in Library Science from the State University of New York at Albany and a BA in Art from Wheaton College in Norton, Massachusetts. She has completed five summer sessions at Haystack Mountain School of Crafts and has participated in Responsive Classroom Institutes, levels one and two.

Marianne lives in West Hyannisport, Massachusetts with her husband David. She spends all her waking hours teaching and quilting.

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