

MIDDLETOWN TOWNSHIP BOARD OF EDUCATION

59 Tindall Road
Middletown, NJ 07748
Phone (732) 671-3850
Fax: (732) 615-9351
www.middletownk12.org

Contact: Karen L. Bilbao, Superintendent

Phone: 732-671-3850; ext. 1002
bilbaok@middletownk2.org

Marianne Kligman
Media Relations, klig30662@aol.com
732-758-9089; 732-586-1232 (cell)

Press Release FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

November 12, 2008



A new method for teaching Spanish in Middletown Schools through story-telling and role-playing is a hit with the students and a significant improvement in how language is learned. Pictured is Sonia Cataldo's 4th grade Spanish class in River Plaza School.

Middletown Teaches Spanish through Role Play and Storytelling

Middletown: For forty minutes one afternoon, a class of River Plaza fourth graders was totally immersed in playacting a story in their Spanish class. Several students took turns pretending they were traveling to several stores in search of a bicycle of a particular color. Twenty hands flew up whenever the teacher posed a question in Spanish regarding the character's next action. These native English speakers could have been Spanish children participating in a live puppet show staged on the sidewalks of Madrid, for the laughter, excitement and yes—language was the same. The story was repeated over and over again in Spanish with the children acting out the vocabulary structures their teacher verbalized—such as “el muchacho llora” (the boy cries), “el muchacho va” (the boy goes), “la bicicleta” (the bicycle), etc.

River Plaza principal Linda Pesce comments, “Previously we had attempted to teach our young students another language by giving them a laundry list of vocabulary and worksheets in a 20 minute lesson. It was not surprising that the students could not recall very much from one lesson to the next. In order for children to acquire a second language it must be meaningful and connected to their reality.”

Ms. Pesce explains that the best way to teach a child a second language is the same way they learned their first language—through commands, imitation and repetition. Middletown's new methodology for teaching language to elementary school children incorporates both TPR (Total Physical Response) or teaching through the use of commands, and TPRS (Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling). Instructing in this way injects the program with both physical activity and fun as the students playact their roles and respond to both simple yes/no, either/or questions and more complex information questions (who, where, when, etc.). The children's participation is as constant as the physical activity during the lesson. TPRS also requires that the language teacher be part mime and part actress in ensuring that the children completely understand the story before they act it out. This new program's success lies in the total engagement of students at all learning levels, which results in language acquisition.

Ms. Pesce, a former Spanish teacher and administrator with the Colts Neck School District, experienced a great deal of success with these teaching methods before joining the Middletown School District last year. Ms. Pesce is now facilitating the training and adoption of these new exciting and effective teaching methods for Middletown's world language teachers.

Middletown Superintendent Karen Bilbao explains, “When we hired Linda, we knew her special skills in world language could be of assistance to us as we explored ways to improve our elementary

world language program. We provided our staff with an initial teacher training last spring and we provided a second session this fall. So far, the results have been very positive.”

Linda Pesce conducted the first in-service training in June for all elementary Spanish teachers in the school district. Representatives of the middle and high schools were also invited to learn about the program. The training session included a lesson demonstration conducted by Ms. Pesce and nine of her River Plaza third grade students who were specifically representative of all performance levels and abilities.

She explains, “The demonstration went very well, and the children caught on very quickly. The teachers, however, commented that I must have requested only the high achieving students in our school for the lesson, which proved my point that the program works well with all learning styles and abilities.”

River Plaza world language teacher Sonia Cataldo is a strong supporter of the new program which has evoked a strong, positive response from her students. Ms Cataldo explains that part of the reason for its popularity with students is that the program stresses individuality by personalizing the stories to include the names of the children in each class. But equally important, no child feels alienated or inferior because every child is given the opportunity to participate at their own level. Role-playing is used after the new structures are introduced and practiced in each class session. Additionally, the learned vocabulary is repeated and practiced in subsequent stories. The children are also asked to draw pictures of the story and to then re-tell the story, thus reinforcing the language learned through the role-playing.

Ms. Pesce comments, “Within a short period of time, these children actually begin producing the language by creating original stories.”

Materials supporting the program include new consumable workbooks for the 3rd to 5th grades called Cuéntame (Tell Me) which includes exercises in listening comprehension, fill in exercises, picture matching, answering questions, writing new endings to stories and a progression to reading long passages in Spanish. The latter would not have been possible in the elementary grades with previous instruction methods. The kindergarten through 2nd grade program also uses TPR and TPRS. The teachers have a manual called Hola Niños which helps them to create the very basic stories and structures they teach to the children. In all, the school district has made a significant investment in these materials this year in order to implement the program.

To enhance the program’s success, the district also increased Spanish instruction time by 50% by including Spanish in the “Specials” rotation with other subjects including art, music, health, computers and physical education, which are 40 minute classes taught on varying days within a 6 day rotation cycle in Middletown’s 12 elementary schools. In addition to the 40 minute class, there is also another 20 minute instructional period within a six-day rotation. Research indicates that frequency of exposure to a second language relates directly to the ability to understand and speak the language. Another improvement to the program was adding to the world language staff so that each of the 12 elementary buildings has its own Spanish teacher; (the teachers in the smaller buildings have additional responsibilities such as a co-teacher providing Academic Assistance instruction, or as in Ms. Cataldo’s case, a G & T co-teacher). This change is important as the world language teacher is now a full time member of the staff of each school and no longer must travel to one or two other buildings.

Today in Middletown, the favorite time in a child’s school week might very well be their Spanish lesson, as they are enjoying this method of instruction and learning effortlessly through acting out the stories which are funny and imaginative.

Ms. Cataldo explains, “There is energy in the classroom with the children and teacher. You can see it and feel it. It is such a refreshing change from the way we taught world languages in the past.”



River Plaza Spanish Teacher Sonia Cataldo gives 4th grade student William McCauley the cue “llora” (cry) as he acts out the story that the class is learning in Spanish. Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling is the new method of teaching Spanish in the Middletown School system which involves role-playing as well as storytelling. The process thoroughly engages the children and increases their level of language acquisition and production.