As December began, we dove into the colorful world of Tomie dePaola. Our new unit provided the opportunity to explore the components of a story, beginning with what an “Author” and “Illustrator” are, then digging deeper into the key parts of a story. As we continued to study Tomie dePaola, reading more than twenty of his two hundred books, our discussion focused on what each story has in common: a title, characters, setting, beginning, middle and end. Feeling inspired by his use of imagination, creativity and ability to retell his own life stories, we spent our December days becoming illustrators and authors. Students recreated the characters from “Strega Nona” in an art studio for a puppet show, wrote and illustrated their own autobiographies, created books at the writing center, and imagined stories using story telling cards created by classmates. As the month continued, students quickly discovered their reignited interest in reading and writing blossoming.
CHALLENGES
During the month of December, we continued our infamous Challenges. These challenges are weekly or monthly activities that we use to “test” the students on their understanding of certain skills, such as alphabet recognition and recall, one to one correspondence in counting, and number recognition and recall. As the year progresses, these challenges will become more difficult with a focus on addition, subtraction, letter sounds, and sight words. This month students were challenged to recite the alphabet backwards, count backwards from ten (or higher if able) and place tiny alphabet noodles in order in honor of Strega Nona’s pasta pot. We continue to be pleased with their success!

STORY MAP
We dove deeper into the world of Tomie dePaola by discussing what makes a story. The children learned how the Author is a person who writes a story and the Illustrator is a person who draws the pictures for the story. We discovered that many times, Tomie dePaola was both the Author and Illustrator of his stories. The Friends then began to piece together the parts of a story. After reading a story, we would create a Story Map. First the children identified the Title of the story and the Characters we met while reading. They then worked together to identify where the story took place, the Setting, as well as the Problems the characters faced. We would finish by talking about how the characters solved the problem. From our many discussions of what goes into making a story, the children were able to help create stories together during activity time using people (animals), places and things picture cards drawn by the students. Each student would randomly select a card and add to the story, based on their selection (i.e a grocery store or cheetah, already originated by a chosen classmate). Students also had the opportunity to practice their retelling skills, taking a walk down our story path. As they walked down the path, illustrations were used to help guide their retelling as they shared the story with classmates.
Throughout the month, we explored the math concept of measurement, focusing on an object’s length and weight. Students first explored how we measure objects in different ways, such as short and tall, light or heavy, full or empty, cold or hot, and short or long. They then practiced measuring length with rulers, unifix cubes and links. After several days of teacher directed activities, students selected various objects around the classroom to measure on their own, selecting their tool of choice. Students were then asked to list their objects, shortest to longest aloud to the teacher.

Students also explored weight using a balance scale. Students were given an apple and asked to predict its weight compared to other objects, including a toy car and container of applesauce. Students had to determine which objects were lighter or heavier than the apple.

Inspired by many of Tomie dePaola’s autobiographical stories, students spent the month of December illustrating and writing “their own story”. Students began the process by reading Tomie dePaola’s biography, followed by “Nana Upstairs, Nana Downstairs”, “The Art Lesson”, and “The Baby Sister”. After discussing the noticeable components of an autobiography (the story and history of a person’s life written or told by that person) questions were emailed home for parents to discuss and answer with their child. From there, students drew a portrait of themselves using a wide variety of colored markers. Teachers reminded students that being an illustrator like Tomie dePaola takes lots of hard work and focus. The students then began illustrating various stories for their books, such as “the silliest story from when you were a baby” to “when I grow up, I want to be a ...”. Once the illustrations were complete, the students wrote their favorite school memory and their additional stories were typed with help of the teachers. The finishing touches were added as students created a title and dedication for their autobiography.
DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE KINDERGARTEN READING

Learning to read is a developmental process; all children do not begin to read at the same age. Literacy milestones appear along the way as children develop a basic oral vocabulary and understanding of the alphabetic principles before beginning to read. Learning how to read is a complex cognitive process that requires enriching and enjoyable experiences with books. As educators, we strive to create a comfortable and stress-free learning environment that promotes an understanding of the function of reading, while developing a positive attitude towards it. In kindergarten, we focus on emergent literacy and gradually progress to what is developmentally appropriate for each child at that time. Research has proven that reading and writing develop at the same time in young children and are interrelated. As students begin to explore “kindergarten spelling” (invented spelling), they reconstruct their knowledge of reading and books as well. Below are just a few milestones experienced within the kindergarten classroom and examples of how they are integrated into our curriculum.

**Telling a Story Through Pictures**
- Taking a “Picture Walk” through a story, uses the illustrations to anticipate what might happen in the story. **Reading books aloud during our daily circle times.**
- Using picture to create meaning. **“Reading” picture books with friends, Reading with the teacher Journals, Writing Center**
- Their drawings and artwork tell their story. **Journals/Birthday Pages/Writing Center**
- Explores books independently. **Free Choice, Activity Time**
- Able to retell a familiar story. **Circle time discussions, Story Path, Sharing at circle time**
- Listening to and comprehending books that are read aloud. **Circle time discussions, Story Path, Sharing at circle time, Reading with Teacher**

**Letter Recognition and Recall**
- Able to recite the alphabet in alphabetical order. **Challenges, Morning Work, Daily Work**
- Recognizes upper and lower case letters. **Challenges, Morning Work, Daily Work Activities, Identifying Name**
- Form letters of alphabet. **Challenges, Morning Work, Daily Work Activities, Writing Name, Forming sight words**

**Relationship between letter, sounds and printed words**
- Recognizes known sight words and uses picture clues and print to recognize new words. **Reading books with the teacher**
- Understands difference between letters and words. **Letter identification, Reading with the teacher, Photo Journals, Daily Journals**
- Has control of most consonant sounds. **Sounding out words when reading, Photo Journals, Daily Journals**
- Uses language, memory, picture and print as major cues to read and understand text. **Reading with the teacher, Read alouds**
PASTA, PANCAKES AND MORE, OH MY!

We found ourselves often growing hungry while enjoying many of Tomie dePaola’s books. After reading “Strega Nona and the Magic Pasta Pot”, we discussed how much fun it would be to eat as much pasta as Big Anthony. Throughout the month of December, we tasted four different types of pasta, including Wagon Wheel (Rotelle), Radiatore and Bowtie. The eating did not end there!

After reading “Jamie O’Rouke and the Big Potato”, we made delicious smashed potatoes using cheese, sour cream and butter. Students also enjoyed tasting bread after reading “Tony’s Bread”, based on Tomie’s childhood. We ended our literacy related eating by making pancakes based on the story “Pancakes for Breakfast”, a wordless picture book that follows the trials of a little old lady who attempts to make pancakes for breakfast. As a special treat, we also had the wonderful opportunity to cook with Shahrzad’s mother, Rubab, learning how to make prathas bread, a traditional Pakistani dish.

SURVEY QUESTIONS AND HOLIDAY GIFTS

Each week a student is assigned the classroom job as Clipboard Helper, a survey/graphing job. This child asks each friend to answer the survey question. The child records the answer and keeps track of who has participated. Once the survey is complete, we tally the results and share them with the class. Due to such a high interest in the types of survey questions asked each week, students decided to create, write and ask a question of their own to the class. As a whole group, we brainstormed ideas, then each child chose a question for themselves. Questions ranged from “Do you have a Dog?”, “What’s your favorite snack at school?” and “How many times a day do you hug your parents?” Students enjoyed the responsibility and excitement that came from recording their own data. Students also had the chance in December to make a holiday gift for their families using a self portrait drawn for their autobiographies. We hope you enjoy the special surprise!
The month of December brought a time to say goodbye to some of our friends. We enjoyed our time working with our University of Pittsburgh student teacher, Ms. Kroll. We wish her the best of luck on her next student teaching adventure at the Children's Institute. We enjoyed the many stories, science experiments, and artistic adventures we experienced with her.

We were invited by The Ellis School to attend their production of “One Hundred and One Dalmatians”. The children excitedly rode on the large school bus to the Ellis School, where they enjoyed a yummy lunch in the cafeteria. They then joined a sing-a-long and decorated dog ears to wear during the performance. The friends were a wonderful audience, engaged in the thrilling story of how dogs throughout London and one hundred and one dalmatians outsmarted the mean and sneaky, Cruella de Vil.

We then said goodbye to our intern, Marisa, who spent this semester helping in our classroom. Marisa learned and played with us every Thursday and Friday. We will miss both Ms. Kroll and Marisa, and we hope to hear from them often.