

Boat builders ply a sea of learning

By Michelle Apuzzio
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Raheem Lee and Tristan Edwards examined the figurehead of a model African “mtepe” boat before sketching it on graph paper. A foot taller than his partner, Lee, 10, decided he would hold the paper against the boat’s wooden bow while Edwards, 5, traced. “It’s too hard,” the older boy remarked, wondering aloud how teacher John Rowse — Mr. John, to the kids — had suggested they complete the task. The younger boy pressed on, and Lee gently held his hand over the younger boy’s as the two continued tracing.

Sketching the figurehead was one of many steps for the students at the Young Achievers Math and Science School in Jamaica Plain building their own mtepe, a project that kindergartners and their fourth- and fifth-grade partners began more than two months ago. The idea was kindergarten teacher Alicia Carroll’s. Knowing that fourth- and fifth-grade teacher Rowse builds boats in his spare time, she saw a way to make it happen.

For both teachers, the project has provided a chance to integrate math, science, and social studies curricula. Since the children record their boatbuilding sessions in journals, it also gives them the chance to use reading and drawing skills.

In summer 2001, Carroll visited the Silk Road in China with other Boston teachers, including Lucy Montgomery, a history teacher at the New Boston Pilot Middle School. As they learned of the goods traded, many of which came from east Africa in mtepe boats, Carroll, an African-American, questioned why books and lecturers failed to mention how Africans participated in the trade routes.

Montgomery had heard the same questions from her students: Why didn’t history textbooks contain more information on Africans?

While spending the night in a yurt, or Chinese tent, surrounded by field mice, Carroll and Montgomery vowed to develop a curriculum to teach children about the connections between Africa and China as well as the Islamic influence along the trade routes. Last summer, the two women visited Kenya to do research for a children’s book they hope to publish, “Malindi’s Voyage,” the story of a giraffe that travels partway from east Africa to China on a mtepe, and the kindergarten teacher knew they “just had to build a boat” as part of her pupils’ yearlong studies on east Africa.

Undertaking the construction of a 10-foot-long, 3-foot-wide cargo craft in a classroom with 19 small children was no small feat. Mtepe boats are traditionally held together by sewn fibers, but they have corked holes as well. Teamwork was essential when the kindergartners used a power drill to set the holes.

“The kindergartner was pulling the trigger. The fifth-grader was aiming, and I was making sure it wasn’t going into the floor,” said Rowse.

Crouched next to the model mtepe, on loan from the Boston University Center for African Studies, Rowse and the pupils huddled around their boat’s frame, working through the next step of finding center line.

Before they reached this point, the students had spent two months planning, recording 132 measurements from the model mtepe.

The students hope to finish the boat by the end of school, June 30. Plans are for a launch in the fall.

“It’s fun to drill in the wood,” said Mackenzi Thompson, 6, but she added, “It can be hard because you have to have a lot of muscles.”