

personal growth, and social growth. The three-year experience in the Mighty Acorns program is intended to provide increasing experiential activities and challenges as students progress.

At level I, students are largely involved in simulated, spectator, and exploratory experiences, which include listening to stories, putting on plays, and conducting experiments. This type of activity is exemplified by the level I spring post-visit activity, “Flute’s Journey.” In this activity students read a story based on the life of a wood thrush and the perils he encounters growing up, migrating to Central America, and then migrating back to his home. It deals with the variety of threats the bird faces, including habitat loss and fragmentation, migratory bird food sources, pests such as the brown-headed cowbird, and pesticides. The story also illustrates the theme of competition, which is the focus for the next level.

At level II students participate in activities that are analytical in nature and those that are generative (learning by doing) or challenge-based. In the fall level II pre-visit activity, “Connecting Past and Present,” students build a vision of presettlement Illinois and reinforce their recognition of community types through the reading of historical accounts. They become familiar with the process of change by sorting a series of pictures into a sequence. This is followed by field observations of their present-day community remnant and a comparison to presettlement conditions.

At level III, students engage in competence and mastery experiences as well as experiences of personal and social growth. This is addressed through the spring level III post-visit activity, where students examine the values of biodiversity through time by mapping historical episodes on a “Time Values Chart.” Students then reflect on their own feelings about biodiversity developed through the participation in Mighty Acorns.

Core Concepts of the Mighty Acorns Curriculum

The content of the student activities was developed integrating the core concepts of ecology with the 4th, 5th, and 6th grade State of Illinois Learning Standards.

- Level I curriculum focuses on the concepts of adaptation and interdependence.
- Level II curriculum focuses on the concepts of community and competition.
- Level III curriculum focuses on the concept of diversity.

A personal experience with natural communities coupled with knowledge and skills is a powerful combination. Today’s students will be called upon to make decisions about complex environmental issues in the near future. To make such decisions responsibly, they will need more than just knowledge. They will need a personal, visceral connection to the natural world that can occur only through experience.