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Students from The Montessori Middle School hike Friday in Huntington State Park, which borders the towns of Bethel, Newtown, and Redding. The Norwalk students were learning how to interact with nature as part of the school's education philosophy.

Students: Take a hike

NORWALK

By JOAN GAYLORD

Hour Staff Writer

The ice-glazed tree branches sparkled in Friday's morning sun. Underfoot, a half-inch of snow disguised more ice. Undeterred by the cold, eight students and two staff members from Norwalk's Montessori school headed down a footpath at Huntington State Park, each footstep producing a loud crunch as their hiking boots broke through the crusted snow.

The students were participating in one of the middle school's outdoor expeditions. This year, the weekly excursions relate to land and include activities such as the all-day hiking trip. Last year, the curriculum was tied to water and included canoe and sailing trips. Lessons that involve children with nature, especially adolescents, are an integral part of the Montessori educational philosophy.

"The calm environment, the silence, the marvels of nature satisfy the mind..." wrote Maria Montessori in *Erdkinder*, her treatise on adolescent education.

Brian Wallace, the school's outdoor program director, prepared

lessons on navigation and planned to guide the students through an exploration of a quarry on the grounds of the state park that is located in Redding. Eighth-grader Kate Nelson led the hike, passing out trails maps and assigning jobs to the seventh-graders. Jaelyn Stultz lepped up as navigator while Aidan Kaye took a turn as "sweep," the last one of the bunch who is responsible for making sure no one got left behind.

In between the navigator and the sweep, the seventh-graders hiked and talked and improvised their own lessons that reinforced a sense of camaraderie. Some lessons were practical—effective techniques to keep from slipping on icy slopes. Others were more pragmatic—when all else fails, sit down on your bottom and slide. The pragmatic lesson produced peals of laughter that broke through the quiet of the forest.

The students also discovered practical application for their math lessons when a navigation direction told them to look near a stone wall that ran "perpendicular" to the footpath. They quickly discovered who remembered the difference between perpendicular

and parallel.

The excursions teach many lessons, Wallace said. That was Montessori's intent.

"Men who have hands and no head and men who have a head and no hands are equally out of place in the modern community," wrote Montessori.

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A Montessori student uses walking sticks for balance on icy terrain.