

Guinea Pigs in the Classroom

By Colleen Stebner



Introduction

I teach in a mid-sized, school district situated in the Greater Vancouver Regional District, within one of the oldest incorporated cities in British Columbia. The many Edwardian and Victorian era homes, located throughout the city, serve as sentinel reminders of the community's link with its past and are fondly preserved as part of its heritage. The nine elementary schools come together in the spring to celebrate the long-time tradition of May Day, again emphasizing the city's connection to the past, as well as its strong sense of community.

Class/Community Description

The community surrounding our school has a small-town, close-knit feeling. Many of the families have lived in the area for generations, with several of my students' parents having attended the school themselves. Our principal attended our school as a child, as did her own children!

The school's population is socio-economically middle class and culturally diverse. While the majority of the students in my Kindergarten class speak English as their first language, I have a few English learners who speak Farsi, Arabic, Romanian, Spanish, Slovak or Mandarin at home. Our school also hosts a French Immersion program.

Learning About the Literacy Practices of My Students

In order to acquire a thorough and complete picture of the environmental print my children were exposed to and the texts in their homes, I visited many locations in the community and conducted interviews with several parents.

To determine locations in the community which were important to my families (to observe, take notes and take pictures), the children and I brainstormed activities they enjoy and where they go to do them. I asked them where they shop for clothing and groceries and where they like to eat. I wrote the children's ideas on chart paper under the headings *Activity* and *Location*. The children came up with lots of places for me to visit, including favourite restaurants, the local grocery store and several popular community activity locations (skating rink, swimming pool, park, gymnastics arena).

To get a sense of the texts in the homes of my children, I asked several parents to take pictures of anything and everything in their homes that they and members of their family read and write. I gave a few examples: newspapers, monthly bills, instructions- so that they would not just take pictures of books. I reminded them to include writing samples as well: lists or work brought home from the office. I asked each parent to provide me with a CD of about thirty pictures. I then conducted the interviews to determine, for each photograph, the kind of text, who read or wrote these texts, the social context and the purpose for reading or writing each piece. I recorded this information on a table I had prepared ahead of time.

As I researched the home and community literacy practices of my children, I, of course, uncovered a huge variety of texts read and written by my families. In the community settings I saw washroom signs, Exit and Entrance signs, Rules for the Pool, bulletin boards, menus, posters, and more. In the homes, I documented catalogues, cookbooks, newspapers, self-help books, novels, manuals, labels on clothing, print on videos, information books, grocery lists, personal letters, many more.

For purposes of the classroom literacy activities, I focused on children's informational texts (guinea pigs), as well as labels, lists, letters and instructions. The activities below use these authentic, familiar texts of my children's homes, to teach some of the literacy skills emphasized in the Kindergarten classroom during first term (letter identification and concepts of print).

Skill Pre-Assessments

Letter Identification

I always administer a baseline assessment for letter identification for each child in October. I then do a recheck at each reporting period: November, February, and May. In mid October, after filling out the class assessment summary sheet for letter work, provided in Trehearne's *The Kindergarten Teacher's Resource Handbook* (Trehearne, 2001), I found a small group of children that could identify only a few letters. This would be a group with which to work intensively on letter identification. I determined the letters that were most commonly missed by the whole group (*b, d, f, g, h, l, q, t*) and planned to emphasize these in my whole group activities.

Concepts of Print

I used the Concepts of Print Observation Checklist, again from *The Kindergarten Teacher's Resource Book*. It assesses 18 items, including *features of a book, opening a book, where to start reading, directionality, page turning, ending the reading, voice-print match, concept of letter and word, periods and question marks*. I determined that almost all children needed work on concept of word, voice-print match, author, title, periods and question marks.

Let's Get Started!

We have guinea pigs in our classroom. The children observe them every day as they wait to wash their hands for snack time. The children really love to watch them and talk about them. They ask lots of questions and some children would like to take them home.

Set-up

"Boys and girls, I have noticed that you have been asking me a lot of questions about our guinea pigs. I can tell that you are very interested in learning about how to care for them. Some of you have even asked if you can take them home for the weekends or on longer holidays. I could certainly use your help to look after our guinea pigs in the classroom as well. I thought we

could ask our Mrs. Thomas, our librarian, if she might have time to look for some books about guinea pigs. First, let's figure out what we already know and see if we have some questions we'd like to have answered."

Authentic Literacy Activities and Embedded Skills Lessons

Activity # 1: Science KWL

What do we know about guinea pigs?

What do we wonder?

What have we learned?

I had the children dictate the things they know about guinea pigs and what they wondered, while I recorded the information on chart paper. We left the 'What have we learned?' part to be filled out after reading about guinea pigs.

Activity # 2- Letter to the Librarian- Shared Writing

I asked the children what we could do to let our librarian know we needed books about guinea pigs. One student said, "Lets write a note!" Another said, "How about a letter?" We talked about why we write letters (to send a message to someone who wasn't right there) and what elements needed to be included in a letter (date, Dear Mrs. Thomas, the actual message, closing salutation, signature). The children dictated the letter as I scribed onto chart paper. I suggested the beginning sentence of the letter to get things going:



November 6, 2006

Dear Mrs. Thomas,

As you may know, we have guinea pigs in our room. We would like to learn more about them. Do you think you could look in the library to see if you have any guinea pig books?

Thank you for your time!

Division 18

After the letter was written, we reread it aloud together to make sure it made sense to everyone. "Have we said what we want to say?" We read it a second time (using a tracking stick). I drew the children's attention to the many features, included in the text (periods, commas, question marks, exclamation marks, capitals). I asked questions like: "What is a word? What are periods and questions marks and what are they for?" We hunted for letters and then for words. I printed letters and words from the letter on large stickies and the children took turns coming up to make a match.

We put the letter in a big envelope, and our special helper delivered it to the office, where it could be put in the librarian's box.

The librarian made a big fuss when she came to our classroom with the books! She said she could only find four books about guinea pigs, and that she could sure use some more!

I read one of the books aloud to the children right away, and read a couple more over the following week or so. I also made a trip to the public library where I was able to find a number of additional guinea pig books to put in the reading centre.



As I read each book we talked about title and author; “Where is the title of this book? Where is the author and what is an author? How is this book different from a storybook?” One of the books we received from the library was a story about a guinea pig, rather than an informational text. This gave us the opportunity to talk about how the two texts were different. We noticed that the storybook had drawings, rather than real photographs, and we learned more about guinea pigs, and their care, in the informational text than we learned in the story. One of the children said,

“One is ‘real’ and one is make-believe and couldn’t really happen!”

And of course, we added information about guinea pigs to our KWL chart as we read.

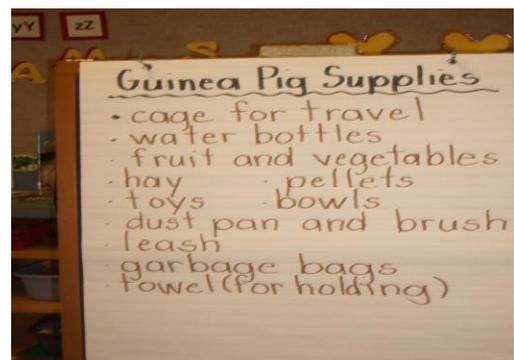
Activity # 3- Labels

We made labels for our guinea pigs’ names to put on the cage so visitors would know their names. This could be a shared writing activity, with the teacher scribing, or it could be an interactive writing activity, where the children come up to the board to print what they think the spelling is. I chose interactive writing. I asked children to come up to write the letters they thought would make up the correct spellings for Talker and Pepper, as I ‘s-t-r-e-t-ch-ed’ each name. We made corrections together with small stickies and I copied the correct spellings onto cards for the children to put on the cage.



Activity # 4- List of Supplies

I placed all of the supplies that guinea pigs need on the floor. The children sat in a circle around the items. We talked about what lists are and why we sometimes need them. The children talked about grocery lists, chore lists and so on. I suggested that it might be a good idea for us to make a list of guinea pig supplies, to be kept on hand in the cupboard where the guinea pig supplies were stored, so that we would be able to check periodically to see if we had everything we needed or if we needed to replace anything. I suggested that this would be especially important if the guinea pigs were to go home with someone for the weekend since we would need to have a way to check that they had everything needed to take care of them. As the children called out the supplies they saw on the floor, I wrote a list on chart paper. I then transferred each item from the





list on to cards. Volunteers taped the cards onto the inside of the guinea pig supply cupboard. We also made a label for the cupboard itself; “Guinea Pig Supplies!”

Activity # 5- Acrostic Poem

Previously, in casual snack-time conversation, we had talked about how our two guinea pigs have different personalities. I suggested to the children that it would be fun to write poems about our guinea pigs, so that the families they stayed with and visitors to the classroom, would know them a little better. I

introduced them to the format of the acrostic poem. Starting with Pepper’s name, I told the children that when we write an acrostic, we start by printing the subject’s name vertically. We then had to come up with an idea for each letter. When we were stuck, I prompted the children by asking questions or giving clues. “How would you describe Pepper? She always runs away. What does that mean? Oh! She’s shy!” This is what we came up with:

P epper is shy.	T alker!
E ats a lot!	A lways eats a lot!
P arsley is her favourite.	L ikes to talk.
P izza, she doesn’t like.	K ale, she enjoys.
E ven eats cauliflower!	E ats more than Pep!
R uns to her cage!	R uns in her cage!

As we constructed the poems, we talked about periods, commas and exclamation marks: “What are they for?” I s-t-r-e-t-ched a few words to focus on the idea that letters are put together, in a special order, to make words. Over the next few days, we read our poems, tracking the words, until we had memorized them. Then we used our poems for a number of other activities to help develop the concept of word and voice-print match. I also took the opportunity to begin introducing sight words.

I made two copies of strips. I placed one in the apart into individual words. I pocket chart to track the print aloud. I showed the children talked again about what children to come up to the words to make complete individual words. We reread been put back together



the Pepper poem on sentence pocket chart and cut the other had volunteers come up to the while the rest of us read it the second copy and we words are. I invited the pocket chart to match the sentences out of the the poem, to make sure it had correctly.

Authentic Literacy Instruction: Model Lesson



After reading the poem together, using the tracking stick, I talked to the children about how some words in our reading and writing, are used more often. “So, these words are really important to learn!” Our poems have several sight words (is, a, she, like, to). I chose ‘like’ and ‘to’ for this activity. I printed the word ‘to’ on the board, telling them it was the word ‘to’. I asked for a volunteer to come up and find ‘to’ in our poem. I gave them a strip of coloured,



overhead transparency plastic, so they could highlight it in the pocket chart. I then asked someone to come up and build it with magnetic letters. I told them I had a really good way for everyone to be able to remember these kinds of words, so they could use them in their writing. I taught them to chant and clap the spelling of the word (Tompkins, 2006): “To, to, t – o!” I followed the same procedure for ‘like’ and then put the words up on our word wall, suggesting to the students that they could look up at the word wall, if they needed these words in their writing. We practiced using ‘like’ and ‘to’ aloud in sentences.

I typed copies of our poems onto 8.5 by 11 inch paper and gave each child a copy. We got out our reading folders. This is where we keep other poems we know and also where we keep our individual tracking sticks—coloured popsicle sticks with a sparkly pompom on one end. The children ‘read’ their individual copies of the poem aloud, tracking the print themselves several times. I took this opportunity to check to see who could track accurately and who needed help. Next, I handed out highlighter felts, so they could highlight ‘to’ and ‘like’ on their own papers.

Remember those students who only knew a few alphabet letters? We got together several times for letter hunts, where I asked the students to look for letters. “Find the letter *m*.” Sometimes I wrote the letters on stickies and the students found the match and sometimes they simply circled or highlighted the letters. On a couple of occasions, I partnered them with more

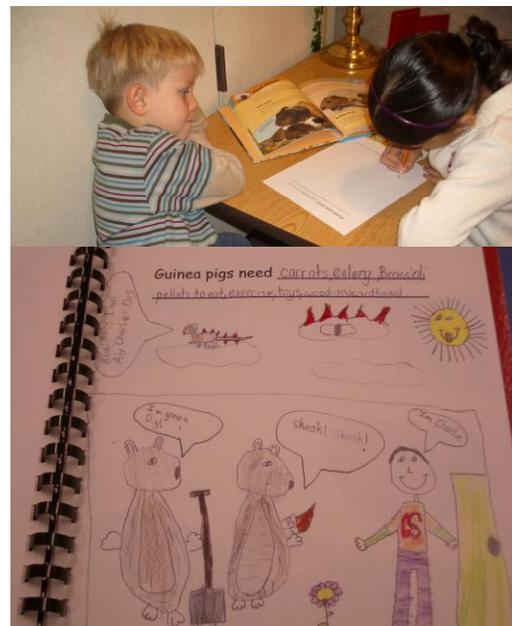
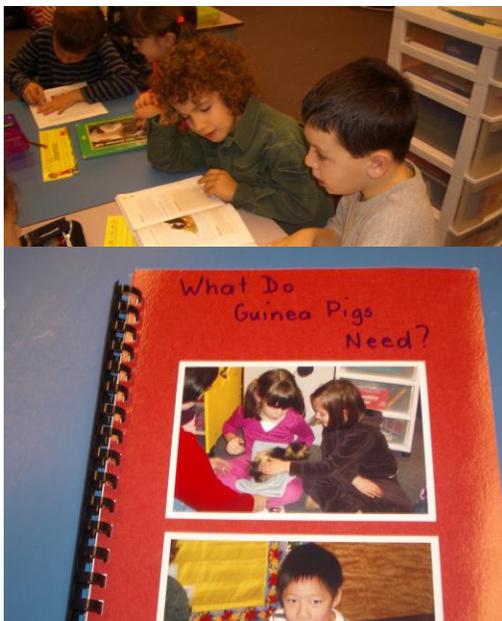
Authentic Literacy Instruction: Model Lesson

capable students. We used our poems (on chart paper, in the pocket chart and our individual copies) as well as our supply list and the KWL chart we had created together, for the letter hunts.

Activity # 6- Our Own Information Book

This activity was the most fun! I reminded the students that when we had originally asked the librarian for books about guinea pigs, she'd only had four books! "Mrs. Stebner had to go to the public library for more!" I suggested that we could make our own guinea pig book, with all the information that we'd gathered. "We could keep one for our class library, keep one for going home on weekends with the guinea pigs, as they visit people's homes and give one to our school librarian as a gift for our 'big' library!" I told them I would talk to our Grade Two and Three Buddies' teacher, to see if they could come down to do the writing for us and then we could draw an accompanying picture together.

The children were really excited about this idea. Once we knew our buddies were available, we made a web- 'Guinea Pigs Need...' And everyone, with some teacher help, came up with a different idea. Our buddies were excited when they arrived, as well, because they would have an opportunity to hold the guinea pigs! All the students worked hard. The Kindergarteners dictated sentences to their Buddies and then all set to work on the illustrations. One of the older students suggested handing out the 'real' guinea pig books to help draw better pictures. They were busy for close to an hour!



Post Assessments

Letter Identification

When I did a recheck for those students who were struggling with identifying alphabet letters, I was pleased to find that there was a definite improvement for all seven students. One of my students went from a score of three to seventeen alphabet letters! Other students scored, on average four to five letters higher than before this mini-unit.

Concepts of Print

I re-assessed the whole class for *concept of word, voice-print match, author, title, periods* and *question marks*. I again found improvement. Most children scored correctly for author, title

Authentic Literacy Instruction: Model Lesson

and periods. Two students that previously had not been able to match voice to print or 'show a word', were successful. Only one student indicated an understanding of a question mark, so this will be something to work on in the future.

Reflections

Generally, I felt that all of the activities went well. The children were very engaged, learning about something so hands-on. I did, however, notice at times that if the activity went too long, the children would start to lose focus. For example, when I transferred the items from the supply list to the labels for the cupboard, it got very wiggly. Interactive writing is a challenge as well, since it can be time consuming. It is best to keep the activities short for Kindergarten!

For teachers who don't have a classroom pet or don't want to make a long term commitment, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in many communities have fostering programs, where people can foster an animal or animals until a permanent home is found.

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