

## **Food for a Party**

By Jason Hodgins

### **Introduction**

“Are going to talk about party today?” Prempreet asked as soon as he saw me after lunch.

“Can we look the cook books?” he inquired another day.

Prempreet is still only four years old; he’s turning five in a month. He struggles with listening and speaking English. He’s a young boy who is gradually adjusting to the routines of school. He only knows a few letters, fewer sounds, and still hasn’t mastered printing his whole name. Yet, he is excited about the reading and writing tasks we are doing. Such was the power of authentic literacy activities in my Kindergarten classroom.

### **Class/Community Description**

I teach in a community in Greater Vancouver in a suburban bedroom community. The neighbourhood surrounding the school is almost exclusively made up of houses. There are a few townhouses and many basement suites but mostly single family houses. From the school you must travel seven or more blocks to reach a store, recreation centre, or public library. Most people drive in this community, though a few ride the buses, and even fewer walk. Public spaces are mostly commercial: Strip malls, big-box stores, small malls, and corner stores. These are all within a short drive of the school. The demographics are predominantly working and middle class. There is also a significant transient group that depends on income-assistance and rent some of the houses and basement suites in the area. In the last 20 years, the ethnicity of the

## Authentic Literacy Instruction: Model Lesson

neighbourhood has shifted dramatically. Twenty years ago it was almost exclusively white. Today there is a very large Indo-Canadian population along with a handful of other minority groups.

The school population closely mirrors the diversity of the neighbourhood. It is a medium-sized, public elementary school with one and a half to three classes per grade, kindergarten through grade seven. Many of our students come with language, learning, and/or economic/cultural barriers that add layers of difficulty to their school experience. Within the school there is a particularly high need for ESL support, Learning Assistance, and Mainstream Support (for students with disabilities integrated in the classroom).

The trend within the neighbourhood and the school is that more of the young families speak a language other than English. Looking from the grade seven classes down towards the primary grades there is a clear increase in the number of students from minority language groups. Between my two kindergarten classes of twenty-two students each, there are only twelve students who do not attend the ESL kindergarten. Students are eligible for ESL kindergarten if a language other than English is spoken in their home. Of the thirty-two ESL students in my classes, almost all of them were born in Canada, though a few immigrated after being born and one arrived during the current school year. Most of these students begin school with a functional level of English, though there are several with very limited English and others as fluent as a native-speaking five year old.

Mine is a fairly typical kindergarten classroom with a group seating area, tables, toys, dramatic play centre, painting centre, puzzles, books, writing centre and listening centre. The times are quite flexible to allow different focuses on different days and there are always lots of songs and movement activities thrown in to get the students up and moving. I try to create a

learning environment where the students are active and lessons are fast-paced to hold their attention.

### **Gathering Literacy Data**

To get a handle on the literacy worlds of my students, I sent home a parent questionnaire and I interviewed my whole class. The questionnaire asked parents to list the different type of texts they had in their homes that their children would be familiar with. I included what I thought to be a thorough and approachable explanation of my purpose for collecting the information and how I wanted it filled out.

The internet was the only type of print mentioned by all of the respondents. It was used by a variety of people for different purposes, including:

- **Children playing games (both educational and otherwise)**
- **Parents and older siblings using it for news**
- **Parents and older siblings using it for research**
- **Bill and bank payments by adults in the house**
- **Adults searching for recipes**
- **Adults searching for music**

Families also reported using computers for emails, instant messaging, and toddler games. The next most common form of print was newspapers, used frequently by grandparents and parents in the children's homes. Books were listed by many families as being used for entertainment, and storybooks read with children were explicitly named by five families.

Lists, notes to self and other family members, flyers and magazines were the next most common items. Lists were mostly used for shopping by the adults in the home. Many of the families reported writing notes to each other and themselves.

## Authentic Literacy Instruction: Model Lesson

The other way I decided to collect information about my student's literacy experiences was to ask them directly. I didn't think I would be too successful asking specifically about reading and writing so I decided just to ask them what kinds of things they did with their parents and then infer the types of literacy likely involved. We did this as a whole group activity with me scribing their individual responses and asking for a show of hands from other students who had the same experience. When I polled the students in my classes about what they did with their parents, shopping was the clear favourite. In total, six out of nine places named were stores. The stores that were most familiar to them (as judged by a kindergarten show of hands so take it for what it is worth) were: *Real Canadian Superstore*, *Save-On Foods*, and *Zellers*. *Superstore* is a large grocery store that also has clothing, furniture, and seasonal departments. *Save-On* is a typical grocery store. *Zellers* is an economy department store. Clearly marked and labeled aisles, large price signs are common to all these stores. All three have weekly flyers with specials that are delivered to neighbourhood homes and are available at the front of the store. Other frequented stores were *Wal-Mart*, *Fruiticana* (a produce store very popular with the ethnic communities but rarely used by white families) and some dollar stores.

The only activity that a majority of the students raised their hand for that was not shopping was going to parties. We have a large Punjabi community at our school. Children of Punjabi families are usually very familiar with large parties that include food and dancing. The other students also reported going to parties with their parents although I suspect the scale and nature of their party experiences are somewhat different. Some students also reported going to the local recreation centre and one student named ballet class. (As an aside I decided to make a class book with photos of the common locations in the community. It remains a popular book in our book centre)

### **Introducing the Authentic Literacy Activity**

As I thought about what to do with all this information, I was instinctively drawn to the idea of putting on a party. I think what drew me to this idea is that, while it is not a literacy activity, there are lots of reading and writing tasks that go on around it. It seemed like a natural fit to create authentic literacy activities. It was also an experience common to all my students, though the nature of their experiences was of course different. To get the ball rolling, I just had to suggest the idea. It was no surprise that I got an immediate buy-in from the students. Our first task was to brainstorm a list of things we needed in order to have a party. They (with occasional prodding and categorizing from me) came up with food, decorations, music and invitations as the things we needed to plan for.

I decided to start with food. Cookbooks and recipes were one of the text types mentioned by some of my families in the survey. I decided to work with cookbooks for two reasons. First, I wanted to focus on concepts of print skills as we carried out the activity (e.g. print is the part you read, you start reading at the top left, and you read left to right and top to bottom). I also wanted the students to have a first-hand experience looking at books for a purpose other than pleasure. I scoured three community libraries looking for cookbooks that would be appropriate. My criteria were:

1. Each recipe in the cookbook had to have a picture of the food it made. (I wanted them to search through recipes to decide on the one they wanted to make.)
2. Each recipe needed a clear title and ingredients list
3. The cookbook needed to contain recipes for food suitable for a part.

Since five-year-olds can only focus on a task for a short amount of time, I broke up the lesson into a number of short sessions. During each session, a group of five or six students

## Authentic Literacy Instruction: Model Lesson

cooperatively shared a cookbook. The cooperative nature of the task added another layer of complexity to the lesson, but for the most part, the students managed it quite well. The sequence of sessions with the cookbook are described in Table 1.

**Table 1. Sequence of cookbook sessions.**

<b>Session 1</b> <b>Orientation and</b> <b>and parts of a book</b>	-Locate the Front Cover, Back Cover, Spine, Title, Author  -Open the cookbook and search for a recipe
<b>Session 2</b> <b>Titles and pictures as parts of</b> <b>recipe and left-right directionality</b>	- Review Parts of Book, Title and Author  -Point to where to start reading the Title and Which Direction to Read
<b>Session 3</b> <b>Lists (Index and Ingredients as</b> <b>a feature of cookbooks, top-bottom</b> <b>directionality of print</b>	-Start at front cover  -Open pages one at a time to find the Index  -Point to first item in the index  -Find a Recipe, review Title  -Locate steps to follow  -Students look through cookbooks with their group searching for food they want to make
<b>Session 4</b>	-Students groups meet with me to look

Authentic Literacy Instruction: Model Lesson

<p><b>Selecting a recipe</b></p>	<p>through their cookbook one more time and decide on their recipe</p>
<p><b>Session 5</b> <b>Making a Shopping List</b></p>	<p>-Students use a photocopy of their selected recipe to write/draw a shopping list on whiteboards</p>
<p><b>Session 6</b> <b>Shopping</b></p>	<p>-Students take edited list to local grocery store to buy food (each group had 2-4 items to find in the store and at least one adult to help)</p> <p>-Adults draw student's attention to the print in signs, labels, prices on the products and on their own lists</p>
<p><b>Session 7</b> <b>Cooking</b></p>	<p>-Students follow photocopy of the recipe to make the food for the party</p>

To begin our foray into the world of cookbooks, I began with three separate layers of connections. First, I read a story book that I found entitled *The Little Pigs' First Cookbook* (Watson, 1987). It's a charming little story of three pig brothers who take turns cooking. They set the menu and follow recipes from cookbooks. I chose to use this story to introduce the vocabulary words *cookbook*, *menu*, and, *recipe*. Based on my survey of home literacy I suspected that cookbooks and recipes were present in a good portion of the homes. However, that didn't mean that the students had the expressive vocabulary to match (especially given the fact that English is not the primary language in the majority of my students' homes.)

## Authentic Literacy Instruction: Model Lesson

The next connection layer was reminding students that our party needed food. This established the need for cookbooks and recipes. Finally, I wanted to connect this experience to student's home literacy environments. This is, after all, the point of authentic literacy activities: Real texts that exist in the real world used for a real purpose. I asked the students about cookbooks in their homes and had several students share their home experiences. If I had it all to do over again, I would spend more time on this piece. Nonetheless, I had 22 expectant faces looking at me and the deadline of the already-planned shopping trip bearing down on me by the time I realized this. So, into the cookbooks we plunged, sufficiently connected to their home literacy experiences or not.

### **Assessing for an Embedded Skills Lesson**

At the time we were planning the party, one of my instructional goals was to help my students gain knowledge of, and solidify their grasp on, some fundamental concepts of print: (a) print is the part of the page that is read; (b) one begins reading at the top left of the page; (c) print is read left to right and (d) from top to bottom with a return sweep at the end of each line. I had recently assessed these concepts one-on-one with my class using a simple story book. Thirteen of my students were unable to demonstrate understanding of all four concepts. It was report card season and I had not gotten to any direct teaching of these concepts since discovering these gaps in my students knowledge. The cookbook activity provided a meaningful opportunity to focus my students' attention on these concepts. Since few of the students were likely to have looked at a cookbook without an adult's support, it actually felt quite natural to be this focused and structured as we explored the book. Naturally, I had to balance the amount of structured concept time with time spent on the students' authentic task of searching for and using a recipe to make food for a party. The reality is that they needed to learn some of the text features of a recipe

## Authentic Literacy Instruction: Model Lesson

(title, list, steps) in order to start making sense of what they were looking at. It was the perfect time when pointing out these features to review the directionality of print.

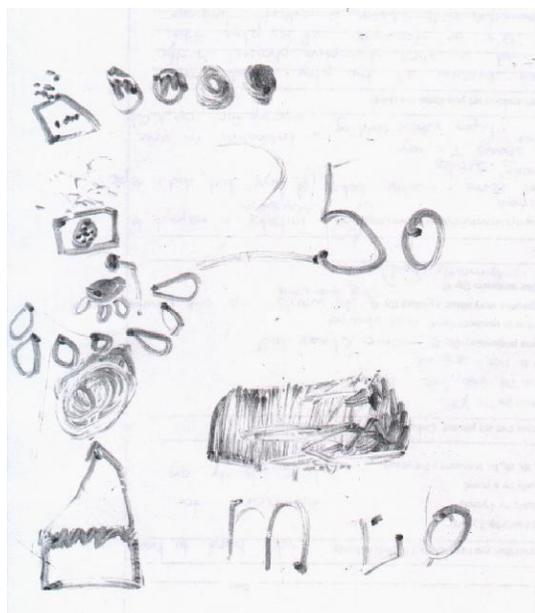
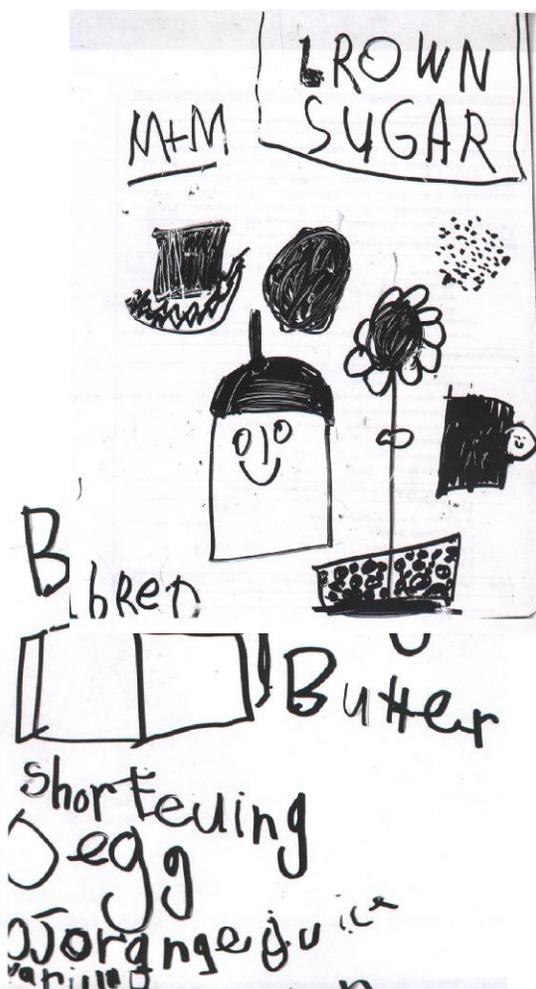
### **Authentic Literacy Activity**

After the student groups had decided on the recipe they wanted to make, it was time to make a shopping list. Lists were one of the most common text types mentioned by families in the survey. I wanted the students to be involved in creating the lists. This was their chance to do an authentic writing task. We began with the idea that they were making the list to take shopping. It was their own list and they were the only ones who needed to understand it. I told them that they could draw pictures, print letters, print words, or copy words. In my mind this is a wholly appropriate emergent writing task since each child was representing at a level appropriate for their skills and stage of development. I had the whole gamut of representations. A few students sounded out words and used invented spelling, and many copied the words from the recipe and/or my white board. Most of the children drew pictures to go with their writing, and some just drew pictures. And, yes, I have to admit to those of you wondering that there were one or two who heard the draw pictures instruction and just drew things completely unrelated to the items in the recipe; it in itself a very telling thing to observe. Part of what I liked about this activity was that the act of copying and drawing pictures to represent items on a list are actually authentic parts of real-life lists. They certainly are for me. If my wife asks me to buy her some make-up or other feminine product, I'm going to copy the one she's got before I go searching for it in the store. If I am buying a number of things that fit together, such as plumbing parts, I will often draw it out so that I get the right pieces that I need.

Of the eight groups that I worked with, all but one were excited about the task and required very little encouragement. They were excited and stuck with it for at least 10 minutes.

## Authentic Literacy Instruction: Model Lesson

Some of the groups had a very long list of ingredients, and I suggested abbreviations as we got near the bottom. Some samples of student-created lists are below. The unfortunate part of these lists was that, at the time, I couldn't figure out a way to actually have the students use them when shopping. The timing was such that it just wasn't possible to make the lists for all the groups and shop for the ingredients within the next few days. It would have been hard for the students to remember what they had written. Also, I had many groups that needed some of the same ingredients. I didn't want, nor could my budget afford, four different bags of flour, etc. So, unfortunately, the students couldn't actually use the lists that they created themselves. Nonetheless, what I did do was assign each group 2-4 items from their recipe to find in the grocery store, with the help of one or two adults per group. I gave each of the students their own lists that I had made and had them use these lists on our shopping trip.



The shopping trip began with a tour of the store. The local grocery is happy to, and frequently does, give tours of the store for free. They do a very nice job of showing the students both the retail area and the behind the scenes parts of the store, not to mention feeding the kids samples of pizza, oranges, and mini-doughnuts as they travel through the different parts of the store.

Once the tour was finished and we were back at the front of the store, we began part two, the shopping. I assigned each group to one or two adults and gave the adult(s) a package that included, a list of student

**Tips For Adult Shoppers:**

(Make sure you keep all the children in your group with you at all times!)

Remember, the point of this activity is to have the students use reading and writing skills while shopping. Try to involve them as much as you can in reading or noticing things in labels, aisles and sign markers, prices etc. Make sure each child is using her/his list.

1. Give each child in your group a list
2. Go over the list together
3. Look for the items in the store (try to point out the aisle signs to the children)
4. When you find the item, have each child cross it off his/her list with the felt
5. Meet the rest of the class at the front of the store when you have all your items.

names in the group, a shopping list of the ingredients I needed that group to find (enough copies for each person in the group) and some tips for the parents on working with their groups. I had each group go over their list before setting out and cross off or put a check beside each item as they put them in their basket. When the groups had finished their lists, they met at the front of the store and I paid for the items.

The shopping trip was a big hit with the students. They talked about it and asked about it for two weeks before we went. Even during the tour, quite a few were asking, “When can we do our shopping?” They really enjoyed having their own list and crossing the items off. When, I

## Authentic Literacy Instruction: Model Lesson

returned to the store with the afternoon class, the customer service manager asked me, “So what are you teaching these kids? Everyone just comes for the tour. I’ve never seen anyone actually go shopping!” I told her about the party, the cookbooks, the recipes and the students making their own lists, all the time reading and writing, at their own level. I was glad we weren’t just there for the tour. It was chaotic at times but felt so much more meaningful.

Now that we had a recipe and the ingredients, it was time to get cooking. I could only cook with one group at a time per day. I used some adult volunteers and worked with some of the groups myself. Each chef had their own recipe to refer to as we measured and added ingredients. Once again I had them tick off each item as we went.

### **Re-assessing for Concepts of Print Skills**

By this time I had reassessed all my students on the four concepts of print. I used one of the cookbooks opened to a single recipe with a two-line title. I began by asking the students if they remembered what this is called (“recipe,” most knew without any prompting) and then asked them to show me the title of the recipe (nine had trouble but six of those were able to tell me when I reminded them that a title is usually the biggest printing on the page). Next I had them show me where to start reading the title, where to go next, and what to do when they got to the end of the line. Between assessments, the students unable to demonstrate their understanding of the concepts of print had dropped from 13 to 5. After the cookbook activity, four of the five students still struggling were only having difficulty with the return sweep. Interestingly, one of the five who had trouble with the cookbook assessment had shown no trouble with the previous assessment that used a storybook. I was not sure if she was unclear on the concept or if she had trouble with the cookbook activity for some reason. When I re-checked her concepts of print skills with a storybook, she easily demonstrated the concepts. It was interesting that her

knowledge of print did not transfer to the cookbook despite the amount of time we spent looking at them.

### **Planning for the Party**

I used the cooking time as an opportunity to focus the attention on my five students who were still struggling. Once again this was a natural thing to do, given the level of support required to work through a largely written text with emergent-literate children.

Using the recipes to make the food was the culmination of our cookbook project. But the literacy associated with the party did not end there. As a class we composed an invitation, and the students addressed and signed their own invitations to invite whoever they wanted to the party. I also sent home a small CD -shaped sheet of paper for students to write the music they wanted played at the party. I recruited an older student to be our DJ. She needed a play list. I told the students that if they wanted their music played at the party, they had to bring in the CD from home with the piece of paper with the CD Title and Track Number written on it so that the DJ would know what to play.

The party itself was a huge success. We had parents, grand-parents, siblings, teachers and administrators drop by. The students were the hosts. They took their guest's jackets, and with great pride showed them the food that they had made. They even let their guests eat first. The party was close to Christmas break. The resulting combination of Christmas music, children's music and Bhangra made for eclectic musical atmosphere. Prempreet's mom came, and I don't think he stopped smiling the whole time. We ate, played board games in groups, and listened to the music.

### **Reflections**

## Authentic Literacy Instruction: Model Lesson

As I consider this literacy activity, I can't help but be thrilled with the results. I loved the energy and excitement and sense of anticipation it created in my room. It was hectic at times but thoroughly rewarding. Through it all the children were highly motivated. When we approached a reading or writing task, there were about 3 out of 44 who said "But I can't read/write". These were a slim minority. The rest approached these tasks confident that they could do them, and they could. Whether, it was reading or writing, they could all participate at their level and they were all challenged to extend their skills and knowledge.

If I was to do it all over again, and I plan to next year, I would change two things. First, to begin talking about cookbooks, I think it would be great to have students bring a cookbook from home to share. This would firmly establish the connection to the literacy of their homes. It would be great to actually use some of them for the activity as well. Of course they wouldn't all be useable for Kindergarten, but some might meet my criteria. The other part I would change is the way we composed the lists. When we were caught up in the process, my mantra was to do all the reading and writing with the kids so that they were involved in the literacy activities that went into the party. At the time, it just seemed to make sense to sit with the kids and have them write the shopping lists from the recipe. It did make sense and I believe that this was beneficial to the kids but unfortunately it meant that the lists were unusable. There were too many items for the students to have a hope of making sense of all their drawing/printing. There were also too many duplicate items between the different groups. After making the lists with each group, I had to sit down by myself and figure out how much of each ingredient we needed and which group was going buy which of items from their list. It didn't occur to me until long afterwards, as I was writing this chapter in fact, that I could have done the arduous task of sorting through the lists of ingredients before meeting with the groups. Then

## Authentic Literacy Instruction: Model Lesson

each student would only have to include 2-4 items on their own list. We could have just read and talked about the other items in the recipe that they didn't need to buy. This way I think they could have successfully used their own lists on the shopping trip. The task of writing the list would have been more authentic if they wrote the list and used it themselves at the store.

Despite these changes, I am still very pleased with the process and the outcomes of this activity.

When I talked to other teachers about what I was doing in my classroom I usually got one of two responses: "Wow, isn't that great." And "You must be nuts!" Sometimes it seemed to be mixture of both, the first articulated, the second implied. There were times when it felt a bit hectic. The shopping trip was a little chaotic with parents and their groups heading in different directions all over the store. And, there were moments during the group work time with cookbooks that students lost it because they couldn't wait their turn. Honestly though, it never felt unmanageable. I never felt like I'd bitten off too much. It also didn't feel like I was pushing the students too hard to do things they were not ready for. There were times when I had to shorten sessions because of the time of day and the student's energy level but they stayed motivated throughout the process. I believe the keys to this success were:

- **The reading and writing tasks were for an authentic purpose that the students were excited about.**
- **I kept each session short.**
- **The tasks were designed such that each child could participate and learn regardless of their level of understanding**

Authentic literacy experiences are here to stay in my classroom. I am convinced that they are not simply add-ons to my real program, suitable for special occasions or when I have time. Instead they can and will be a cornerstone of my Kindergarten literacy program, giving my

## Authentic Literacy Instruction: Model Lesson

students real reasons to learn to read and write, and infusing my classroom and my teaching with the enthusiasm and energy that characterized this experience. I could have just gone and bought the food myself. We could have simply gone for the tour of the store to learn about grocery stores. But this was so much more fun, so much more real.