

Literacy lessons in one language arts sixth-grade classroom: The year of the guinea pigs

Safe learning environments allow risk taking and the expansion of literacy to advance significantly through community bonds enhanced by classroom pets.

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“Over the years I’ve come to appreciate how animals enter our lives prepared to teach and far from being burdened by an inability to speak they have many different ways to communicate. It is up to us to listen more than hear...”
(Trout, 2010, p.XV).

All classrooms are active social systems; the middle school classroom involves complex interactions between and among peers as well as between students and teachers. In the elementary years, attention is often given to nurturing students and fostering relationships, yet when young adolescents transition to the middle school, a focus on control and discipline tends to be the norm (Schmakel, 2008), contrary to the middle school model with a primary emphasis on relationships and democratic community where students have responsibility for exploration, integration, and the development of self-worth for all. Indeed, this ideal drives the Association for Middle Level Education’s (formerly National Middle School Association [NMSA]) position paper (2010) that presents four attributes of a successful middle grades school: developmentally responsive, challenging, empowering, and equitable.

This article centers itself in the premise that all humans desire a sense of belonging; this craving is achieved through positive, persistent, caring relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). But fostering relationships require the capacity for interpersonal attention. Thus, to develop this capacity, one must engage in caregiving activities (McHugh, Horner, Colditz, & Wallace, 2013; Noddings, 2002).

Given this foundation for understanding young adolescents, the year I taught sixth graders, I decided I wanted a pet for the classroom—a guinea pig to be exact. During pre-planning, I brought my request to the principal. His response was, “Why?” His question was expected, and I began to discuss the nature of young adolescents as the basis for my rationale. I focused specifically on the social and emotional needs of young adolescents and how a safe and positive environment is needed for learning to occur. I went on to share how providing for a pet would allow the students to see how their actions directly impact another being, and the sense of pride and accomplishment that can come from caring for another life. Affording these opportunities via a class pet could serve as a bridge to developing positive relationships with peers. I closed with the statement, “In short, middle school students and guinea pigs are the perfect combination.” Although not entirely convinced, the principal acquiesced.

Accepting the guinea pigs into the learning community afforded the students opportunities

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to participate in providing care for another while nurturing a sense of belonging. A few examples of the positive impact the pets had on the students' social and emotional development and sense of belonging throughout the school year are highlighted here. While the guinea pigs interacted with all classes, the students in the intensive reading class experienced the deepest bond with these class pets.

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Symbiotic relationships

When Delmus entered the classroom furious about something that had taken place in the hall, I asked him if he could give Oreo a little love. He lifted her from her cage, cradled her in his arm, and petted her with such a delicate touch. Oreo helped calm the anger raging inside Delmus.

Roderick took to Angel immediately, as she was the tiny one, and he, too, was the smallest student in the class. Roderick was picked on by students throughout the day... especially in the halls and at lunch, but he developed a relationship with Angel and found solace in her company.

Alisha and Keosha referred to themselves as the "babysitters." While the cages were cleaned throughout the day, all students took ownership of the Good Housekeeping Award, but Alisha and Keosha came in every morning before school to check on the guinea pigs and make sure "their babies" started the day with clean cages.

Cedric, a student repeating the sixth grade for the third time due to extreme absenteeism, struggled with multiple issues stemming from his home life. On days that he entered the classroom and said, "Ms. R., I need time alone; this is not a good day," I shared with him that I thought Gucci needed some alone time too. Cedric referred to Gucci as his "study buddy," and he would take Gucci to a quiet place in the classroom to complete the day's tasks. Cedric submitted some of his best work on the days he took Gucci to "their space," and he attended

school more regularly, citing that he had to make sure Gucci was okay.

The students took great pride and joy in caring for the guinea pigs, and in return, the guinea pigs gave the students the unconditional attention and affection that others in their lives could not always provide. While the guinea pigs served their purpose as presented in the rationale given to the principal, their impact grew beyond assisting with the social and emotional development as their inclusion provided rich lessons incorporating literacy and life.

Literacy lessons learned from the guinea pigs

The first week of the school year was like any other school year. I started first by teaching the routines of the classroom and building community through various activities that required collaboration and cooperation. At the end of the week, I talked about the possibility of adding another member to our learning community—a guinea pig—if the students were willing to help care for the pet. They were, and so began the year of the guinea pigs, a year that presented some amazing and unexpected learning opportunities.

Learning about guinea pigs: Learning about research

Teaching students how to access and critically engage with informational text is crucial to students' literacy development (Cervetti, Jaynes, & Hiebert, 2009). Before bringing the guinea pigs into the classroom, the students conducted research to learn more about guinea pigs. To help the students focus their research, they learned about and used Inquiry Charts (Hoffman, 1992). The Inquiry Chart (I-Chart) strategy provides a planned framework for examining meaningful questions by integrating prior knowledge about a topic with additional information found in multiple sources.

Students began their research about guinea pigs by posing questions about food, exercise, housing, grooming, and veterinary care. First, they answered their questions based on their collective prior knowledge, and then they identified sources that might contain information about guinea pigs: Internet sites, informational books, a pamphlet from PetSmart, and a local vet. Students worked in small groups, with each group consulting a different source as they attempted to answer each question posed. They then

posted the answers on the I-Chart in the cell that aligned with the appropriate question and source. Once the grid was completed, students compared the answers for each question across multiple sources to synthesize information and verify facts as well as identify discrepancies. The students then had to apply what they learned as they prepared for and took care of the guinea pigs.

The type of bedding needed was the most challenging inquiry given the limited consistency across sources. When the students realized a definitive answer did not exist in the literature, they decided they would “ask the guinea pigs.” The answer to this question was not actually confirmed until weeks later, although the guinea pigs always had bedding. Once the guinea pigs joined the class, different bedding was tested over several weeks. In the end, the students concluded that the aspen shavings bedding was the best choice in terms of odor control, cleanliness, and guinea pig satisfaction which was based on them not kicking their bedding out of the cage.

While the students were focused on learning how to care for the guinea pigs, I was focused on providing a standards-based curriculum. According to Florida’s Common Core State Standards for Reading (informational text strand), sixth-grade students should be able to cite textual evidence to support their analysis of texts, provide a summary of the text that is distinct from personal opinions, and compare and contrast one author’s presentation of information with that of another. Additionally, the writing strand requires students to conduct short research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question), drawing on several sources. All four anchor standards mentioned were addressed with students using the Inquiry Chart strategy for conducting research.

Throughout the week, students developed their research skills, tested a research strategy, and engaged in critical thinking as they investigated the basic needs of guinea pigs, identified the required supplies, and determined the associated costs. Preparing for the guinea pigs provided an authentic purpose for engaging in the research process.

Learning about persuasive techniques

After the environment was prepared, the guinea pigs became members of the learning community. All three entered the classroom without names on a Monday during the third week of school. Students engaged in a conversation regarding names, the importance of a

name, the sense of belonging that a name or nickname can instill in an individual, and the importance of addressing others by their name. The purpose of the conversation was three-fold: (1) foster a culture of acceptance and respect within the classroom community, (2) set the stage for naming the pets, and (3) learn about persuasive writing and speaking techniques.

Finding the right name for the three guinea pigs offered the occasion to introduce persuasive techniques and propaganda. The students interacted with each of the guinea pigs and then chose one pig for which they suggested a possible name. Students created a poster that included a color photograph of their selected guinea pig, the proposed name, and a rationale meant to persuade others to vote for the suggested name. The posters adorned the walls of the classroom for a couple days as students presented their posters and gave a two-minute speech on why their proposition was the right choice. On the Thursday of week three, the students practiced their classroom right to vote. During this time, conversations arose about respecting others’ choices and the appropriateness of agreeing to disagree when done so in a civil manner.

The next day, the students and guinea pigs participated in the Naming Ceremony. The large, tan and white, male guinea pig’s name was declared Gucci. The medium-sized, black and white, female guinea pig was pronounced Oreo, and the tiny, brown-haired guinea pig with a puff of white fur on her head was given the name, Angel.

In the process of naming the guinea pigs, students were actively engaged as they learned about persuasive techniques, applied their learning through the form of propaganda and speeches, as well as participated in a democratic process wherein all were afforded the opportunity to be heard and have their vote counted. Again, the Common Core State Standards guided instruction as the anchor strand for writing arguments and supporting claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence was used to frame the task. Likewise, two anchor standards within the speaking and listening strand were addressed as students presented their ideas. Agreeing on names for the guinea pigs positioned students as active learners as they successfully accomplished collaboratively a task rooted in rich literacy learning.

Learning with reading buddies

While the first two literacy lessons—researching about guinea pigs and using persuasive techniques to name

the guinea pigs—were carefully constructed in terms of instructional utility and community building, the guinea pigs’ roles as reading buddies emerged as sheer serendipity. The sixth graders in my fourth period reading/language arts block were less-proficient readers. Some struggled with fluency, others with comprehension, and still others were more resistant readers struggling with motivation rather than decoding or comprehending texts.

After weeks of consistently encouraging several individuals to read during Free Reading, they continued to invoke their highly-developed avoidance strategies. These students preferred listening to me read to them, and some would read to me if done in a one-on-one format. While modeling positive reading behaviors for students through read aloud is a sound instructional practice (Ivey & Broaddus, 2000; Lesesne, 2006; Pitcher et al., 2007), the students needed to take an active role as readers. I knew from my years of working with young adolescents that choice is a significant factor in student motivation (Gaskins, 2008; Guthrie & Alao, 1997; Ruiz, 2012). In reading education, choice is crucial (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999). Although students were allowed to choose a text that interested them and were told they could read the text in any manner— independently, with a partner, in small groups, silently or aloud—they still responded in one of three ways: read out of compliance, pretended to read, or outright refused to read. As I continued to push them to take ownership of their personal reading and they continued to resist, the level of frustration escalated for all.

In a moment of complete frustration, Chamia shouted out, “I am NOT going to read to myself or to him, or him, or her, or him (pointing to each student in turn)....So, now what do you want me to do?” In absolute exasperation, I retorted, “Well, then go read to a guinea pig!” That one sentence, a sentence that poured out of my mouth in a moment of complete desperation, ignited a fury of excitement that changed the mood of the classroom and the students’ attitudes toward reading for the rest of the year.

Chamia boldly stomped across the room to Oreo, calmly removed her from her cage, proceeded to the library area, selected a picture book, returned to the table, and began to read to Oreo. Immediately, students began asking if they, too, could read to Gucci or Angel. Artron quickly grabbed Gucci while Key was first to get to Angel. For a few moments students negotiated the order and rotation of the guinea pigs within the parameters of

two rules: (1) reading to the guinea pigs was an option during Free Reading time only; any other time required permission, and (2) a student had to be engaged in reading to be eligible to read to a guinea pig. Students started going to the classroom library to find books that they were genuinely interested in, so they would be eligible to read to their selected guinea pig when it was their turn.

The students took reading to the guinea pigs seriously. They believed the guinea pigs were being attentive to their readings and making sense of the experiences. D’Evans declared one day that Gucci, Oreo, and Angel were going to be the smartest guinea pigs ever since reading was the key to learning and the guinea pigs were being read to every day. Through conversations with students, I realized that these sixth graders were basing their text selections on what they believed their guinea pigs wanted to know and would enjoy. Some chose short stories from their anthology textbooks, others selected picture books, newspapers were often given preference, and occasionally a young adult novel was shared. Watching the students read one-on-one to the pets underscored the importance of an authentic and nonjudgmental audience. Further, it illustrated a significant benefit of literate acts not often highlighted by standards and high-stakes tests in the sense that a common love of a text forms a strong bond and thus creates community.

One day I overheard Cedric say to Gucci, “Today I am going to read you a book that is all about you and your friends.” Later, he called me over, and when I got to his table he stated in the most serious voice, “I don’t get it. What does the longest limo have to do with guinea pigs? They don’t drive.” I had him show me the cover of the book and read the title to me. He read, *The Guineas Book of World Records*. I wrote the word “Guinea” on a piece of paper and placed it next to the word “Guinness.” We compared the two words in terms of structure, and I then told him the *Guinness Book of World Records* was a book that listed facts for a wide variety of questions. He nodded at me and said to Gucci, “Man, this book has nothing to do with guinea pigs, let’s go get you a different book.” Gucci never once laughed at Cedric for decoding Guinness incorrectly or for asking for clarification about a confusing part of the text; instead, he sat patiently as Cedric read to him. After weeks of avoidance, the students were finally engaging in reading and enjoying the process without worrying about encountering an unknown word or struggling to make meaning from a section of text.

Learning with a broader audience

While finding a way to help students take a more active role in their personal reading was due to pure happenstance, students took the initiative in moving to another level of reading engagement. With 15 students in the class, three guinea pigs, and only 30 minutes of the 110 minute block dedicated to free reading time daily, it was not long before the students decided to take a risk and move from a one-on-one reading experience to partners. Expanding the audience led to students negotiating text selection, sharing ownership of the reading, and engaging in “text talk.” As students became more comfortable reading and interacting with texts in the presence of each other, they began to form larger groups—sometimes with as many as five students reading the same text together. Eventually, the self-formed groups segued into literature circles (Daniels, 2006).

Gucci, Oreo, and Angel not only promoted the students’ active engagement in literacy learning during Free Reading, but they helped me think deeper about literacy learning. Their interactions with the students affirmed the vital importance in reading development of providing students with an authentic and accepting audience. They allowed me to see and allowed the students to experience the success that comes from using an audience continuum—moving from a private audience to a more public audience (Moffett, 1965). In their own quiet and patient way, the guinea pigs validated and encouraged the students to take risks and grow as readers.

Learning about the life cycle

By mid fall, the sense of belonging within the learning community was well established. “Contribute to a safe, positive, learning environment” (NMSA, 2010) was the mantra that guided all interactions. The students even reminded Gucci of the mantra when he would squeak while someone was reading or speaking. The guinea pigs were embraced and considered part of the community of learners.

The students’ love for their classroom pets was never as evident as the day they had to say good-bye to Angel. Alisha and Keosha found Angel in distress in her cage. Although Angel was immediately rushed to the vet, she died. Students stopped by the classroom in between class periods to see if the rumors were really true. My fourth period students were heart-broken and upset that I did not bring Angel back to school for a proper burial. Troy

suggested we have a funeral for Angel. Although my lesson plans had us finishing up *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Taylor, 1991), I knew lesson plans had to be put on hold, and students needed to bring closure to the tragedy.

The students spent the full period planning Angel’s funeral. During that time, I shared with students two genres of writing for occasions such as funerals. While not typically a part of a language arts/reading curriculum, the students learned about obituaries and eulogies. It was not difficult for them to identify and connect with the rhetorical situation, a construct they were learning in relation to exposition as they prepared for the district writing test. After the arrangements were made, Alisha wrote the obituary and received feedback from the class while everyone worked on writing their eulogies and made cards expressing their sorrow for the loss of Angel.

The next day during fourth period, the students held the funeral. Some students came in their church clothes. The room was rearranged to look like a church and not a classroom. The Going Home Celebration for Angel was stunning. Troy officiated the funeral. Roderick led the opening prayer. Aaron and Navontae sang a duet, and Alisha, Malika, and Kevena sang the song “I Will Always Love You.” Every single student shared a eulogy with no one being pushed to do so. Cedric said the closing prayer. Aaron found the song “Amazing Grace” on the Internet, and the class joined hands and sang along. It was a moment like one might never again experience in a classroom.

This group of sixth graders created a safe and inviting environment, one in which it was okay to grieve. Tears and hugs overflowed as students expressed their genuine love for Angel and their empathy and compassion for one another. While they did not realize it, during the process of planning and carrying out Angel’s funeral, they were engaging in literacy learning. Students not only learned how to write in a new genre, but they learned how context impacts word choice and tone in both written and spoken language.

For everything there is a season. While the students grieved the loss of Angel in October, late in November, a fourth guinea pig entered the classroom. Gucci and Oreo had a baby. Her front half was white and tan like Gucci and her other half was black like Oreo. The students aptly named her Patchez. They doted on her as if they were proud parents and created announcements celebrating her birth. Angel’s death and Patchez’s birth allowed the students to experience the pain of losing

someone special and the joy of welcoming new life—all within a safe and supportive, learning environment.

Middle grades teachers can assist young adolescents in moving successfully from the dependency of childhood to the relative independence of adolescence by providing multiple opportunities for recognition and influence among peers.

Listen rather than hear

Gucci, Oreo, Angel, and Patchez were not able to read, write, or speak, but they clearly communicated with the 15 sixth-grade students in the intensive reading class. The power of the guinea pigs was in their inviting eyes, calming touch, listening ears, and accepting presence—all of which provided the comfort of feeling safe. Within the safe environments, the students learned it was okay to care and love and show emotion toward others. They learned how to accept one another, build relationships, and fix damaged relationships. They learned that making a mistake or getting something wrong did not always come with ridicule or embarrassment. They learned to take risks and engaged in literacy learning as they practiced strategies and developed their skills in researching, reading, writing, and speaking and listening.

Listening to the guinea pigs despite their inability to speak taught me lessons as well. I learned middle grades teachers can assist young adolescents in moving successfully from the dependency of childhood to the relative independence of adolescence by providing them multiple opportunities for recognition and influence among their peers. Creating a safe and inviting learning environment in which all students are included and supported provides the foundation for student learning. Emphasizing collaboration and the process of developing competence allows young adolescents the opportunity to experience success. Bridging young adolescents' everyday life experiences to academic learning is not only beneficial but also essential to both student

engagement and student achievement. Finally, I learned that teaching a rigorous, standards-based curriculum is not mutually exclusive from supporting the needs of the young adolescent. The year of the guinea pigs can be summarized succinctly and perceptively as an ideal expression of developmentally responsive education.

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