

Writer's Journal

Teacher: John Sinnett

Years Teaching: 23

School: Collins Elementary School, Houston, Texas

Grade: Kindergarten

Class Size: 16 students

Lesson Dates: November 14 and 15

"I want them to start thinking in kindergarten about how they need to make some kind of plan in their head for their writing. I have them draw the picture first, and then we label some of the things in the picture, which brings in literacy—beginning sounds, ending sounds—depending on where the children are." —John Sinnett

Overview

Video Summary

In John Sinnett’s afternoon kindergarten class, literacy routines are front and center. From the “Good Afternoon” song that sets the day’s tone, to a read-aloud about Thanksgiving and a shared reading of the afternoon message, the students continually focus on print and “what good readers do.” The students are exposed to “what good *writers* do” as Mr. Sinnett guides them through independent writing in their personal journals. Students practice reading and writing at their own levels at the classroom’s work stations, or centers. Mr. Sinnett’s routines and classroom management techniques, seen throughout the video, provide a consistent structure for student learning.

Mr. Sinnett’s literacy lessons demonstrate the following:

- Authentic experiences that help students develop a love of reading and writing
- Links between reading, writing, speaking, and listening
- Connections across content areas and with students’ lives and experiences
- Students’ awareness of print in multiple contexts
- Strategies students can use as readers, writers, and learners

“I ask my students what a good classroom should have in it. They have ownership over that. We sign it like a contract. We talk about this at the beginning of every day. I feel that’s part of my community building.”

Literacy Teaching Practices

Read-Aloud

Shared Reading

Interactive Writing

Guided Writing

Putting It in Context

The Teacher and the Class

John Sinnett expects a lot from his kindergarten students at the Collins Elementary School in Houston, Texas. “I feel that the higher you raise the bar, they’re going to come up that high. If you have low expectations, that’s where they’re going to stay.” Through consistent routines, daily discussions, and classroom agreements, Mr. Sinnett encourages students to approach their learning with maturity and seriousness, often reminding them that they go to their work stations to work, not to play.

But Mr. Sinnett is hardly averse to having fun. With his playful sense of humor and hands-on approach, Mr. Sinnett often leads class activities from the floor, sitting among his students. “I want to be in there with them. So if they have questions, I can point things out to them. And I want to bond with them too. Create that sense of community.”

Students enter his class performing at a wide range of levels, some speaking English fluently and some not at all. At first, Mr. Sinnett gives his English language learners time to adjust, knowing that they understand more than they can communicate. As the year goes on, however, Mr. Sinnett expects to hear from them more and more. “When they feel comfortable, they’ll start talking. I had one student who didn’t speak at all for the first two months of school. And then, by the end of the year, she was talking all the time—beautiful English. She had that knowledge; she was just afraid to use it.”

Prompted by his school district’s benchmarks, Mr. Sinnett emphasizes writing, and formally assesses his students’ written work a few times a year. In the third grade, his students will take the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills, or TAAS, a standardized test that includes a writing section. Mr. Sinnett works with his students on particular writing skills, including how to make a plan for their writing—at this stage an illustration of what they plan to write. The New Jersey Writing Project, a teacher’s institute he has taken twice, has influenced his approach to teaching writing.

Day at a Glance*

12:15	Arrival
12:25	Class Meeting
12:30	Phonics
12:40	Read-Aloud
12:45	Morning Message/ Interactive Writing
1:05	Journal Writing
1:30	Students Share Writing
1:35	Turkey Song
1:40	Work Stations/ Guided-Reading Groups
2:30	Shared Reading With Word Study
3:00	End of Day

*In the video, you see excerpts from Mr. Sinnett’s class on November 14 and 15. On a typical day, other content areas are also included in the schedule.

Analyzing the Video

Before Viewing

The following activities prepare you to observe this classroom video, whether alone or with a group.

Prepare To Record Your Observations

Make a copy of the Observational Checklist (found in the Appendix) to record your observations, reactions, and further questions that come up throughout your viewing. Copy the KWL Chart (also in the Appendix) and record what you already know and what you would like to learn about teaching writing in kindergarten. Groups can use the KWL chart to generate discussion and questions to consider while viewing.

Consider Key Questions

Consider these questions as you view the video:

- How does the classroom environment encourage students to gain independence as readers and writers?
- How are the diverse needs of learners (language in particular) met in this classroom?
- What forms of assessment are apparent in this classroom, and how does assessment guide instruction?
- How are reading and writing connected in this classroom?

Review Important Terms

Review the definitions of the following Literacy Teaching Practices (page 4): read-aloud, shared reading, guided reading, independent reading, interactive writing, and independent writing.

Review the following definitions of the Essential Components of Literacy Development (page 2): oral language, phonological awareness, word study (vocabulary/concepts and word identification/phonics), comprehension, composition, and fluency and automaticity.

First Impressions

Use the following activities to reflect on the classroom video.

Watch the Video

On your first viewing, use the Observational Checklist to note how Mr. Sinnett implements some of the Literacy Teaching Practices. In particular, note the ways he fosters writing skills in his students.

Review What You Saw

After watching the video, review the Observational Checklist and reflect on what you saw. How do the practices you just watched compare to your own? Think about your classroom and the needs of your students. How are they different from or similar to what you saw in the video?

Relate the Key Questions to John Sinnett's Classroom

How does the classroom environment encourage students to gain independence as readers and writers?

Review the elements of a classroom environment listed on the Observational Checklist. Note how Mr. Sinnett's classroom environment supports literacy instruction. In particular, think about the tone and atmosphere in the classroom. How does Mr. Sinnett model respectful and caring conduct in his relationships with students? How does he foster the three R's emphasized by the Collins School—respect, responsibility, and relationships? What do you think about the three R's? How could you incorporate these into your own classroom?

Analyzing the Video, cont'd.

Looking Closer

Take a second look at John Sinnett's classroom to deepen your understanding of specific literacy strategies. Use the video images below to locate where to begin viewing.

Read-Aloud: Video Segment

Find this segment 2 minutes and 9 seconds after the beginning of the video. Watch for 3 minutes and 49 seconds.

Mr. Sinnett says that an important job of kindergarten teachers is to build students' background knowledge. In this video segment, the students read a book about Thanksgiving, focusing on holiday food.

- How do Mr. Sinnett's questions build student knowledge of text and awareness of print?
- How does Mr. Sinnett model good comprehension techniques? Note, in particular, how he invites students to make connections with the text.
- On your Observational Checklist, note the ways in which Mr. Sinnett incorporates some of the Essential Components of Literacy Development into the read-aloud.

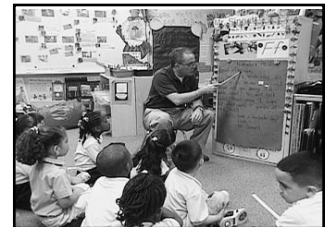


Independent Writing: Video Segment

Find this segment 9 minutes and 42 seconds after the beginning of the video. Watch for 9 minutes and 5 seconds.

Mr. Sinnett takes his students through a careful, step-by-step process for writing, beginning with an illustration. "Your picture is your plan for words," says Mr. Sinnett as he launches a writing activity. Then, Mr. Sinnett and the class write together.

- What are the four distinct steps that Mr. Sinnett takes the students through in their writing journals? How does his discussion with the students support the writing process?
- How does Mr. Sinnett model good habits for independent journal writing? What are some of the examples of directions and explanations he uses when the students are writing? How do the writing procedures connect to what "good readers do" as well? What are the benefits of these procedures for the student as well as for the teacher?
- Finally, how does Mr. Sinnett use the writing activity to create a community of learners in his classroom? How does this add to the overall tone created in the classroom?



Phonemic Awareness and Phonics: Video Segment

Find this segment 18 minutes and 48 seconds after the beginning of the video. Watch for 1 minute and 52 seconds.

Throughout the video, Mr. Sinnett demonstrates that phonemic awareness in kindergarten helps students develop as readers and writers. In this video segment, Mr. Sinnett uses a song to reinforce students' experiences with letters and their corresponding sounds.

- How does Mr. Sinnett help his students to develop phonemic awareness?
- How do these activities benefit the range of the learners in his classroom? How do these activities prepare students for first grade?



Analyzing the Video, cont'd.

Summing Up

Wrap up your impressions of the video with a final reflection.

Reflecting on Your Viewing Experience

Review your Observational Checklist and other notes such as your KWL chart.

- What surprised or interested you?
- What did you find that affirmed what you already knew or had been doing?
- Which segments offered you a new approach or idea?
- What questions do you have?
- After watching the video, do you think differently about your own practices? About the students you teach? About how young students develop literacy?

Making Connections

Apply and Extend

Here are some opportunities to apply and extend what you've seen.

Read This Article

Compare this article on the connection between drawing and writing with what you observed in Mr. Sinnett's classroom.

Da Silva, K. E. "Drawing on Experience: Connecting Art and Language." *Primary Voices* 10, no. 2 (2001): 2–9. Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English.

This reading is available as a downloadable PDF file on the Teaching Reading Web site. Go to www.learner.org/channel/libraries/readingk2/.

Watch These Videos

View the other kindergarten tapes, "Becoming Readers and Writers" and "Building Oral Language," and compare how these three teachers teach writing. How do these teachers' approaches relate to your own philosophy about the development of very young writers?

For more information on these videos, see the chapters on "Becoming Readers and Writers" and "Building Oral Language" in this guide.

Take It Back to the Classroom

Identify one element or strategy from Mr. Sinnett's classroom that you would like to try in your own classroom. List supports or resources that you would need to implement it. Use the Classroom Strategy Planner (found in the Appendix). If you are participating in a study group, share what happened when you tried out the new strategy. Or keep a reflective journal of your experience, focusing on the benefits to you and to your students.

Selected Resources

Resources Used by Mr. Sinnett

Bear, D., M. Invernizzi, S. Templeton, and F. Johnston. *Words Their Way: Word Study for Phonics, Vocabulary, and Spelling Instruction*. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1999.

Pinnell, G. S., and I. C. Fountas. *Leveled Books for Readers, Grades 3–6: A Companion Volume to Guiding Readers and Writers*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 2000.

New Jersey Writing Project: <http://www.njwpt.com/>

Texas Assessment of Academic Skills: <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/student.assessment/>

Texas Essential Knowledge Standard: <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/teks/>

Texas Primary Reading Inventory: <http://www.tpri.org/>

Books for Students in Mr. Sinnett’s Classroom

Ziefert, Harriet, and Claire Schumacher. *What Is Thanksgiving?* New York, N.Y.: HarperFestival, 1992.

Additional Resources

Books and Articles

Cunningham, P. *Phonics They Use*. New York, N.Y.: HarperCollins, 1995.

Cunningham, P., and D. Hall. *Making Words*. Torrance, Calif.: Good Apple Publishers, 1994.

Da Silva, K. E. “Drawing on Experience: Connecting Art and Language.” *Primary Voices* 10, no. 2 (2001): 2–8.

Fisher, B. *Joyful Learning in the Classroom*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1998.

Morrow, L. M. *Literacy Development in the Early Years*. 4th ed. Boston, Mass.: Allyn & Bacon, 2001.

Yopp, H. K., and R. H. Yopp. “Supporting Phonemic Awareness Development in the Classroom.” *The Reading Teacher* 54, no. 2 (2002): 130–143.

For more resources on literacy, see the General Resources section of the Appendix.