

“Christmas Inquiry Unit”

“Curiosity is at the heart of inquiry. We discover much information simply by being curious, keeping track of our questions, and taking the time to find the answers” (Harvey & Daniels, 2009, p.148). This inquiry unit stemmed from the natural curiosity of the children in my K1 class. As the month of December was approaching the country of Luxembourg began their winter wonderland celebrations. The kids wondered about the markets in the city, why Santa Clause comes early to Luxembourg, does Santa come again on his sleigh and why does Santa travel with a scary looking man dressed in black?

The immersion stage of open inquiry had begun in my classroom. It is in this stage that as a teacher I want to “invite curiosity, build background, find topics and wonder” (Harvey & Daniels, 2009, p.231). We sat in circle time and enjoyed a “think-aloud” about the Christmas celebration that was taking place in Luxembourg, and also about the Christmas celebrations that took place in their countries and homes. The main question that seemed to be presenting itself was why Santa came so early in December and left presents in shoes, why he looked so different from the Santa they thought of, who is the scary man with Santa, will Santa come back and leave them presents on Christmas day and why is there a party in the city celebrating Santa so early?

Next began our investigative stage of this inquiry in which we “developed questions, searched for information, and discovered answers” (Harvey & Daniels, 2009, p.231). All four of the K1 classrooms decided to collaborate on this inquiry and our classrooms became flooded and unified with information and material regarding Saint Nicolas, Santa Claus, Christmas markets, The Klees’chen and Black Peter. The librarian brought many books that tell stories of Saint Nicolas and Santa Claus and we do “read-alouds” as we model to the children how to listen

and view the story to help answer their questions. Some of the books that were used for “read-alouds” were *Saint Nicolas: The Real Story of the Christmas Legend* by Julie Steigemeyer, *Saint Nicolas: The Story of the Real Santa Claus* by Mary Joslin, *The Saint Who Became Santa Claus* by Evelyn Bence, and *Santa Claus is Comin to Town* by Steven Kellogg.

Reading these books and discussing them with the children is a great way for them to not only learn new information about Christmas celebrations, but also learn new vocabulary. “Involving students in discussions during and after listening to a book has also produced significant word learning, especially when the teacher scaffolds the learning by asking questions, adding information, or prompting students to describe what they heard” (Morrow & Gambrell, 2011, p. 227). In this investigative stage of inquiry it is very important that all the teachers make sure the students are involved and engaged in listening and discussing what we are reading, so they can discover answers to their questions and also increase their literacy levels while doing so.

In addition to reading books and looking at materials about St. Nicolas, Santa Claus and Christmas celebrations we took a trip to the city and spent an afternoon at the Christmas markets. The children all took their journals and were asked to write or draw anything they thought could help answer their questions. We took cameras and Ipads that the children were able to use to take pictures of sights and scenes of these markets. As Harvey and Daniels explained that “the prime determinant of understanding is prior knowledge” (2009, p.23), we want to develop as much background knowledge as possible for the students during this investigative stage. One last thing we did to help with this knowledge is invite students that are from Luxembourg to explain to the K1 classes about Saint Nicolas or The Klee’chen as he is called in Luxembourg.

Our EAL teacher has students that are from Luxembourg and she had three fifth graders make a presentation for the K1 classes about The Klee'chen and Black Peter. The skit consisted of a power point presentation on the smart board with many pictures about the history and story of St. Nicolas. It was during this presentation that the children got to hear about The Klee'chen coming to Luxembourg to see if the kids have been behaving, and if they were good children they got chocolate and fruits left in their shoes on December 6th. They were also finally able to learn more about "Black Peter" who walks alongside St. Nick with stitches for the children who do not have good behavior. This presentation led us to appointing a "Klee'chen" and "Black Peter" each morning to keep track of the good behavior in class and the bad behavior so we could know whose shoes to fill come December 6th.

The children were very excited about what they were learning and finally had more background knowledge about the topic. In these first two stages of inquiry it is very important to "build background so learners can connect new information to what they already know" (Harvey & Daniels, 2009, p. 188). The children were now ready to begin the coalesce stage of inquiry where they would "intensify research, synthesize information, and build knowledge" (Harvey & Daniels, 2009, p.188). As teachers we are supposed to connect what our students are inquiring about to the curriculum. With all the knowledge and information we had been learning about Christmas celebrations we now applied that to thematic units across the classrooms.

When looking at the journals and pictures from the children we decided that we would create our own Christmas market in the common K1 learning area. The children had a "think-aloud" about everything they saw at the markets and what they will need to create their own. They decided they need candy, decorations, ornaments, trees, Santa Claus, hot chocolate, The Klee'chen, music and money to spend at the markets. Learning centers were immediately set up

across the classrooms. It is the teacher's role to plan thoroughly for both continuous and enhanced provision; facilitate the learning; allow students to follow and develop ideas and interests; ask questions to spark ideas, take the learning a step further; and also focus and differentiate the activities and questions to meet the specific needs of students (Morrow & Gambrell, 2011, pp. 412-419).

My classroom will continue to be a "literacy-rich" environment and the centers will all be related to the Christmas theme we are inquiring about. A writing center is available for the children with numerous books about Christmas and they are able to write, copy, or draw pictures depicting their own stories about Christmas. The literacy center consists of books and Christmas vocabulary games on the smart board they can play and match pictures to words. Science, math, and technology are also incorporated into learning centers as the children are preparing money for the market, learning how to care for a live Christmas tree, and using the Ipads to take pictures and reference pictures they have already taken.

The art center has been transformed into making and decorating ornaments for the tree, candy for the markets, faux hot chocolates, presents, and games they saw at the markets. Music class is also involved as the children are learning Christmas songs to sing at their markets. While there are many different aspects of learning taking place in these centers, they are all helping to develop the literacy of the students. This is very important in my classroom because they are young children who are mainly English language learners. It is my hope that while they are going through this inquiry process they will not only learn the answers to their questions, but also will be learning and retaining a lot of new vocabulary and knowledge that will help them in their literacy learning. (Please see Active Learning Area Plan Attachment 1).

All the K1 teachers want to ensure that we have a clear understanding of the purpose and anticipated outcomes of each learning area and their role within specific active learning areas. The role of the students in these active learning areas is to work collaboratively to investigate, solve problems and develop ideas. We also want them to ask questions, negotiate and listen to others, remain focused and persevere with activities and ultimately communicate their findings and understandings (Harveys & Daniels, 2009, pp.165-177). While the children are working in their centers it is important for us to give the children the freedom to work independently, but also make careful observations and notes about how the children are working and when they need some guidance.

In addition to the learning centers that are geared towards creating the Christmas market; the children will also be assigned into various small groups in which they will make posters explaining St. Nicolas, The Klee'chen/Black Peter, or Santa Claus. One of the K1 classrooms will have learning centers that are geared for the small groups to work on creating their posters that explain who they have chosen. Each of these groups will present their posters to all the K1 classes and explain what they have learned about St. Nicolas, The Klee'chen/Black Peter, or Santa Claus. As the students are very differentiated in their English language abilities "the key is to support kids with the level of structure that makes sense for them and to provide the widest possible variety of response models from which they can choose" (Harvey & Daniels, 2009, p.176). Our goal is for all the children to find a way that works for them to display and express what they are learning.

This leads into the final stage of our inquiry unit, which is to go public with what the children have learned. In this phase the students will "share learning, demonstrate understanding, and take action" (Harvey & Daniels, 2009, p. 168). Each small group will

present their posters and the students will also open their Christmas market up to the preschoolers, K2, and first grade classes to come and experience. After all of the small group presentations took place, and the market was up and running the children individually created their own poster of “Christmas” and what they have learned from this inquiry unit. This was a great way to assess what everyone had learned individually throughout this unit.

Morrow and Gambrell explain that “it is through using a blend of whole-class, small group, and individual grouping strategies that teachers can begin to effectively address students’ needs, skills, and motivations in becoming readers and writers” (2011, p.419). As the K1 classrooms are very differentiated it is important to include all three of the above mentioned strategies to ensure that all the children’s needs are being met in terms of their literacy education. This inquiry unit stemmed from the children’s natural curiosity about the Christmas celebrations they saw in Luxembourg. I believe that the kids were very engaged throughout this unit and took ownership of what they were investigating and learning.

The K1 classes became collaborative learners and were able to dive deep into Christmas celebrations, in particular what is celebrated in Luxembourg; the country they are currently living in. They came up with the questions, researched the answers, and every student was able to find a way to express their knowledge of what they had learned regarding these questions. It is my hope that this collaboration learning helped the students to have a better comprehension of the unit. Comprehension plays a critical role in reading success, and reading success plays a critical role in literacy success (Morrow & Gambrell, 2011, p251).

“Literacy development begins at birth and grows in the contexts of home, school, and community through authentic experiences” (Morrow & Gambrell, 2011, p.69). Before starting

this unit the parents of all the K1 students received information about what we were going to be doing in the class and suggestions of what they could do at home to help their child have a better understanding of the vocabulary being used for this unit, and the Christmas celebration. Parents were also asked to volunteer in the classroom, on the field trip and in the creation of the K1 Christmas market. By incorporating the unit into life at home, the students will again have a better chance of comprehending the material. This strong start in their early education will hopefully lead them in the direction of becoming motivated readers and writers, and towards a love for literacy at an early age.



Attachment 1

Active Learning Area Plan.

Grade ___K1 Learning Area Focus: Creating Christmas Market Dates: December

Anticipated Understandings	Key Questions	
<p>Communicate amongst their group who is Santa Claus, St. Nicolas and The Klee'chen.</p> <p>Literacy skills by using books and materials for references of markets</p> <p>Knowing their numbers for counting, adding, subtracting</p> <p>Recall of information written or drawn in journals</p> <p>Visual planning</p>	<p>How do I interact within a group?</p> <p>How do I use the right vocabulary?</p> <p>How do I get to a certain number?</p> <p>How do I recreate what I saw and have learned?</p> <p>How many items do we need for market, what are they, and where do they go?</p>	
Anticipated knowledge and skills	Key vocabulary	
<p>Children will have to use proper communications skills by talking and listening</p> <p>Children will count, add and subtract from 0-10</p> <p>Children will have to create decorations, ornaments, and pretend food and drink items they found at markets.</p> <p>Children will have to use vocabulary related to Christmas.</p> <p>They have to plan the market area</p> <p>Fine motor skills used for making and decorating ornaments and presents</p>	<p>Polite language: I would like....., I think it is better to..., that is a good idea.... Please..., Thank You.</p> <p>How much...How many I need to make....because...</p> <p>Use different words like Christmas, markets, Santa Claus, Saint Nicolas, The Klee'chen, Black Peter, snow, ornaments, decorations, hot chocolate, presents, sleigh, reindeer, switch, etc.</p>	
Possible activities	Adult Role	Student Role
<p>They have to write/draw poster presentation explaining Santa, St. Nick, or Klee'chen.</p> <p>They have to make and decorate ornaments, also decorate tree and market stand</p> <p>They have to set the tables of the market with appropriate items they have created.</p> <p>They have to set up cashier for buying food and items at market</p>	<p>Using polite language, give the children an idea how many tables to use in market, how to group items into correct categories, and how to exchange money when buying food or items.</p>	<p>Student use what to buy, how to set the tables and how to decorate the Market. Student explains how Santa Claus, Saint Nicolas and The Klee'chen relate to Christmas and why they are different.</p>

References

Harvey, S. & Daniels, H. (2009). *Comprehension & collaboration: Inquiry circles in action*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Mandel Morrow, L., Gambrell, L.B., Del Nero, J., & Duke, N. (2011). *Best practices in literacy instruction, 4th edition*. New York: Guilford.