

Africa Projects

By Carol Vaage

“It’s died. Our elephant has died.”

This seems like an exaggerated quote to be using to begin this book, but I believe that readers will understand how powerful that statement is within context of the projects described.

In this book, you will find many stories from projects that were co-created with me and my kindergarten and Grade 1 classes over the years. Africa has always been alluring to young children, and I enabled and supported these quests!

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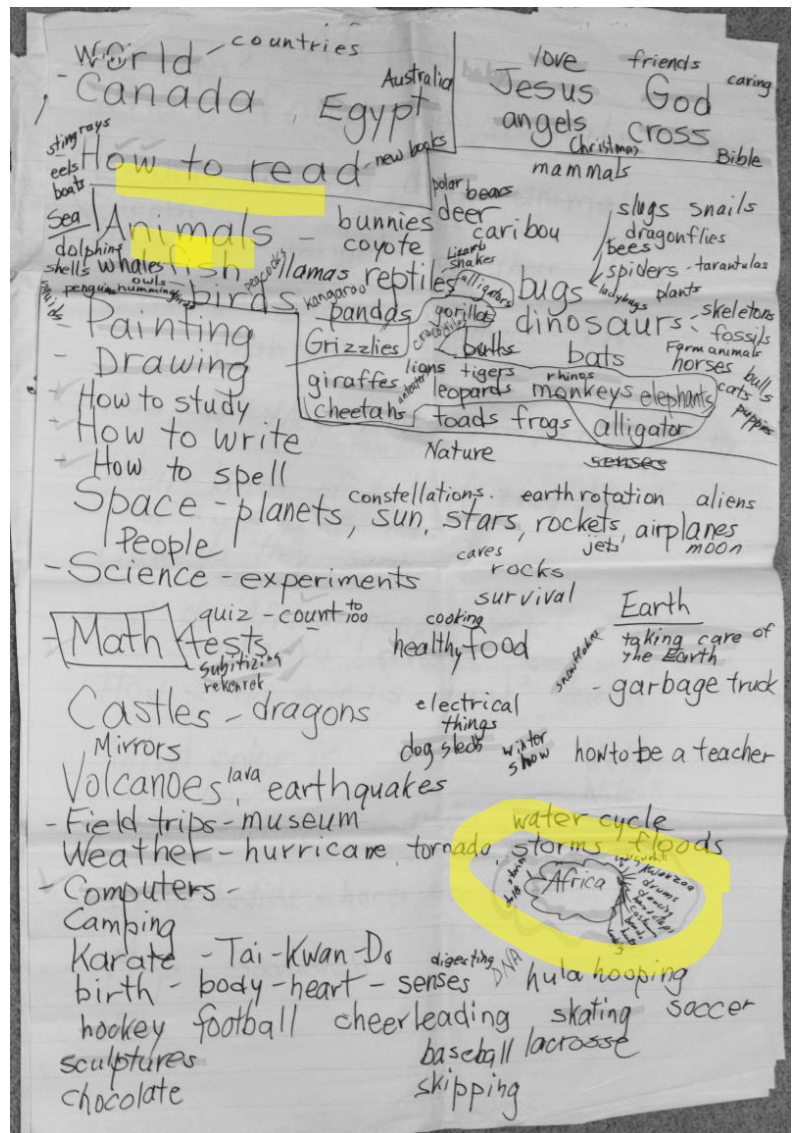
Brainstorming Projects – Africa

A lesson I learned from being a mother of four is that if you want to engage children, it's beneficial to do something they're interested in.

So, every school year, on the first day of school, I would start a Year Plan Brainstorm on topics that the class was interested in learning. "What do you want to learn this year?"

When you see this chart, you might think it was all done in one sitting, but no. We started with the big categories that you see on the left: world, Canada, how to read, animals, etc. These are very broad categories. But the second day of school, I'd ask them "What else do you want to learn?"

Now, more specific topics came out. I continued this for a week, and we began to see clusters of common threads. In this case, I saw many African animals listed, so I started a new topic at the bottom right, called Africa.



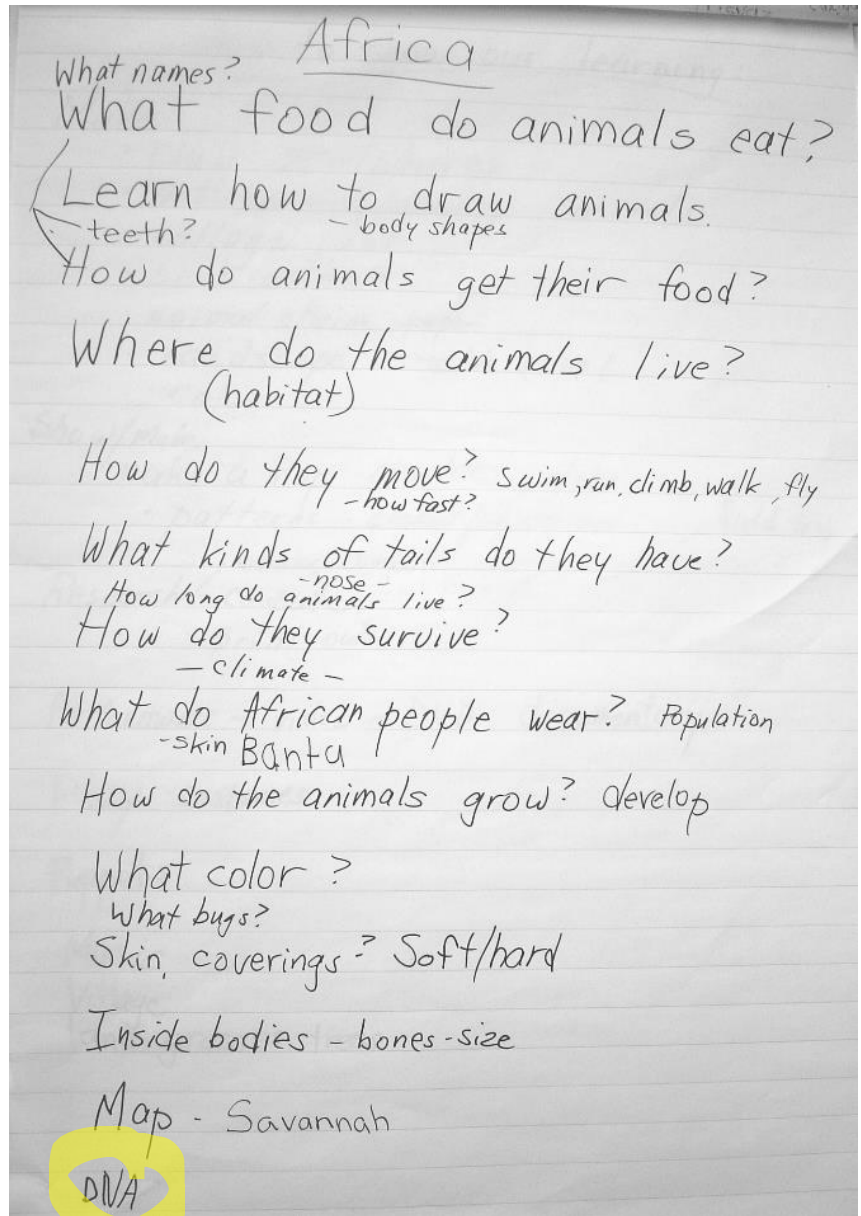
The class agreed that Africa would be a great topic to research and learn about. Some of their initial research questions included generic ones, as shown on this second chart. Food, habitat, animal attributes, people & culture, geographic location.

Also included are ideas that are not as relevant, such as DNA. However, the key rule in my classroom was that it had to be **safe for learning**. That included being able to offer an idea or suggestion without ridicule or condemnation. When the DNA suggestion came in, I wrote it down, the same as the other ideas, but said that it might be out of our scope to go into that depth of study. But that it was a good project idea in itself – to learn about how bodies and genetics work.

At this point, I could predict that we would be learning about animals and drawing them with specific attributes. Also, we'd be looking at the people of Africa and their culture.

We had to dive in further.

With instructions for them to think about more ideas overnight, we tackled this next chart the following day.



This chart is entitled, "How to Show our Learning." In education, we are accountable to give evidence of the learning that has taken place. If we looked ahead to what we wanted to showcase, it would give us a map, or a focus of what we exactly what we wanted to accomplish. Backwards Design is basically looking at the result, then taking steps to get there.

Now you can see some wonderful project ideas emerging - 3D animal art, maps, researching books and online, field trips, creating a DVD documentary, performing a play, creating a village, and specific interest in elephants.

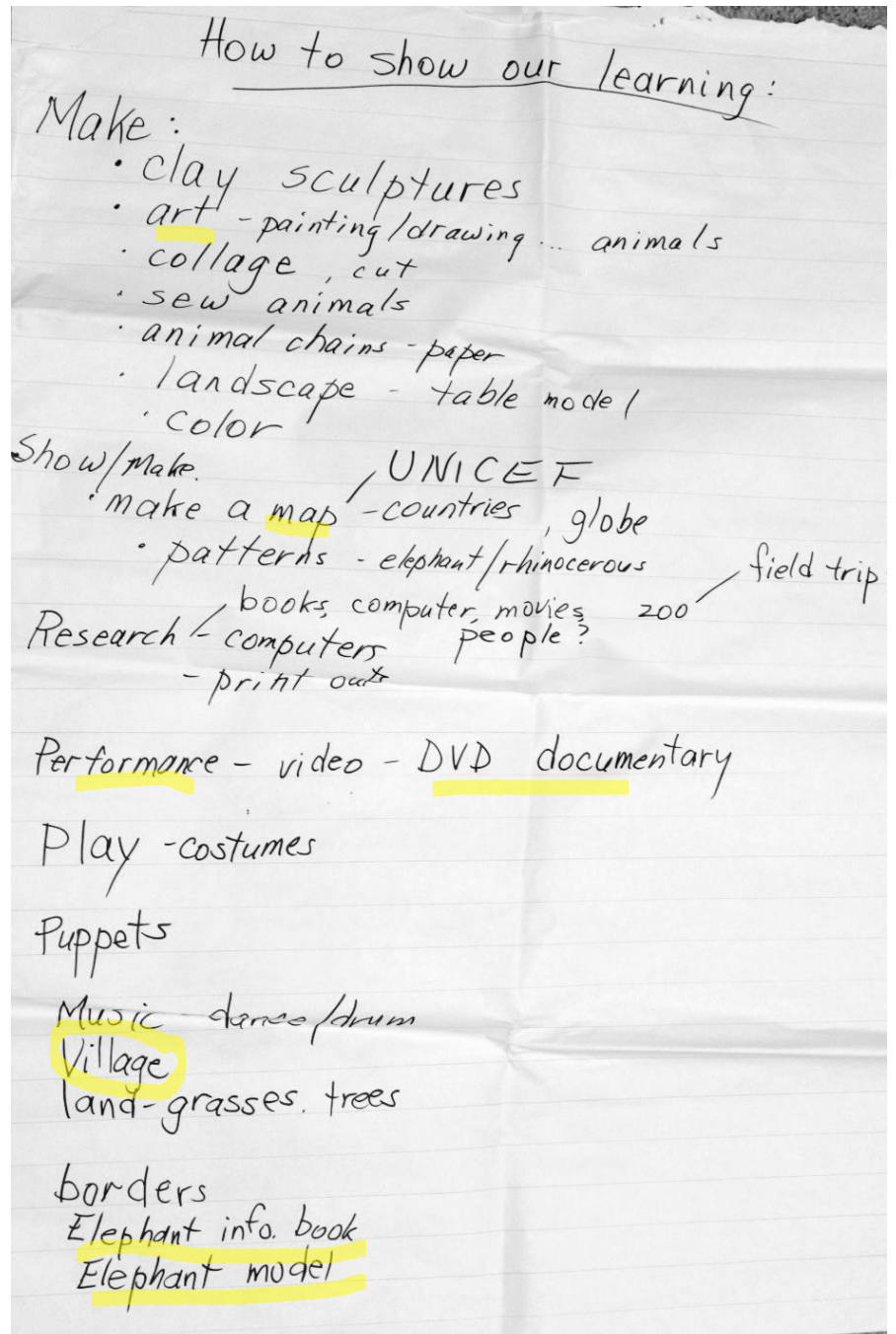
Note that the idea for a non-fiction book for elephants, and elephant model emerged from the children's interests.

This is what makes project learning so exciting!

Every year, parents asked me, "What's the big project for the year going to be?" I'd always answer that I had no idea; that we had to figure it out as a class.

We couldn't realistically accomplish all the items on this list immediately, so we had to prioritize.

This particular year, we had a student teacher, who was willing to head up one arm of the project – the village, while I worked with the children on the elephant information book and model.



My student teacher gathered the children to brainstorm what they wanted to do to make a village. This was a fascinating discussion because the idea grew and grew into an amazing project.

We recorded the ideas on this experience chart paper so that we could address different solutions to the tasks listed.

They wanted 4 mud huts – but soon realized if they wanted to go inside the huts themselves, and not just have table models, they would need cardboard to build them. They compromised by saying they'd paint them to look like mud.

The 4 huts would be for different purposes.

The Fun Hut: games – soccer, stones; animal models – African, farm, insects; the flannel board.

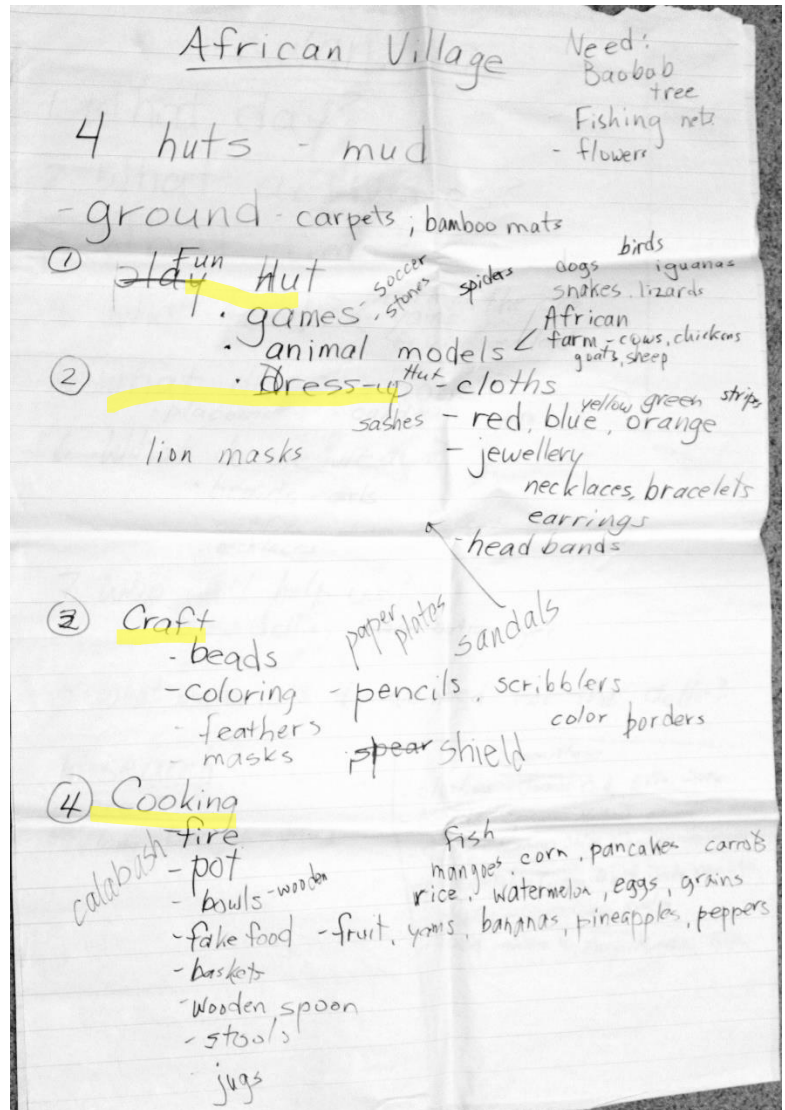
The Dress-up Hut: fabric, jewelry, sashes, masks, costumes.

The Craft Hut: beads, art materials, feathers, paper plates for mask making.

The Cooking Hut: fire, pot, wooden bowls, fake food, fish, stools, jugs, calabash.

By this time, I recognized that the children were using ideas from the African stories I'd been reading. Calabash was a motif in several. They had noticed the colours of African villager dress – Maasai (red), but also yellow, green, blue, orange striped or plaids. Jewelry of all kinds adorned the people they saw in the books – bracelets, necklaces, earrings, headbands. Also, stories referred to food, including yams, coconut and fish.

This brainstorming process continued throughout our African study. As you'll see later, we added a new chart for Kwanzaa, the elephant model, the non-fiction book. We collaborated on the plans and worked together to make decisions on the direction we were taking.



Our Amazing Elephant Information Book

In our study of Africa, the topic of elephants became a very strong interest for the class. There were many non-fiction books to access from my own collection and from the library. Some of the elephant information was too complex to read, other books were too simplified. When complaints were raised that they couldn't find one book that worked for them, I asked, *Why don't you write your own?*

What is an Information Book?

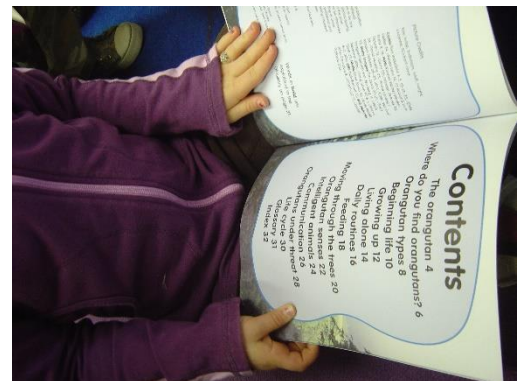
Writing this genre required students to understand what is needed to classify a book as non-fiction. They eagerly reached for the books available and started to list what they noticed. Table of Contents, Index, facts, photos, illustrations.

They decided they should have the facts first before tackling anything else. As they looked through the research, they began to pull out the facts and verbalized the information. I typed their words into the computer, and they watched the amount of information on the TV monitor. Sometimes an extra detail fit in with the previous typed information, so we edited text as we went along. This continued until they were happy with the book content - text and order. The completed text dictated by the children is found separately in this chapter.

Table of Contents

Creating a Table of Contents was challenging. The class realized that they had to cluster the individual facts into a more generic subject. As they examined non-fiction books, they realized that not every page is listed in the Contents – that some topics cover several pages.

I printed off the different pages of text and we went through each page and decided what topic it covered. When all the pages were accounted for, we had a list of topics for the table of contents and could arrange them in a suitable order.



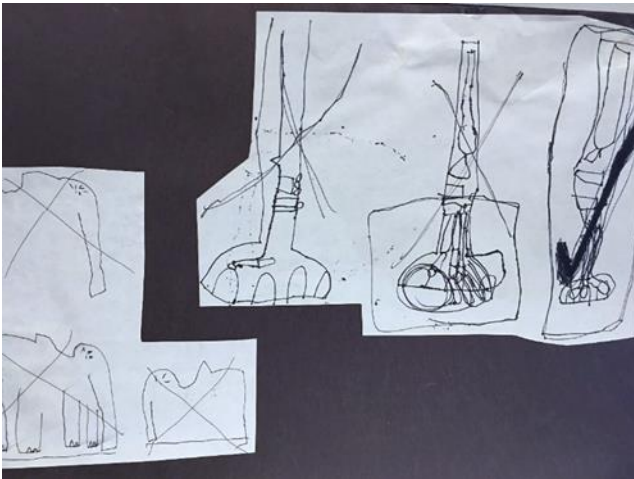


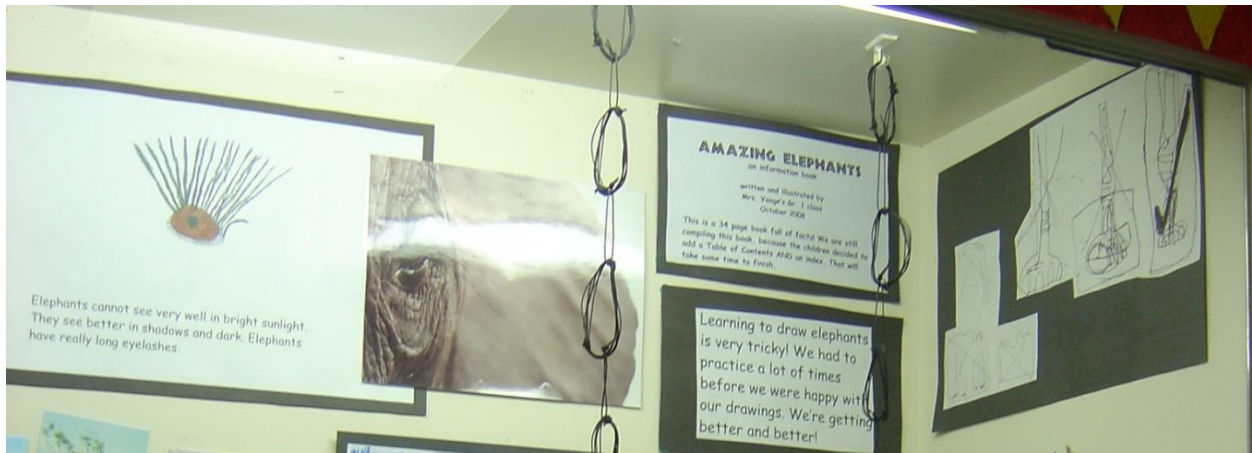
Book Illustrations

Each child was responsible for illustrating one page of the book. They used a multitude of images to search for one that could be used as an inspiration to illustrate the text.



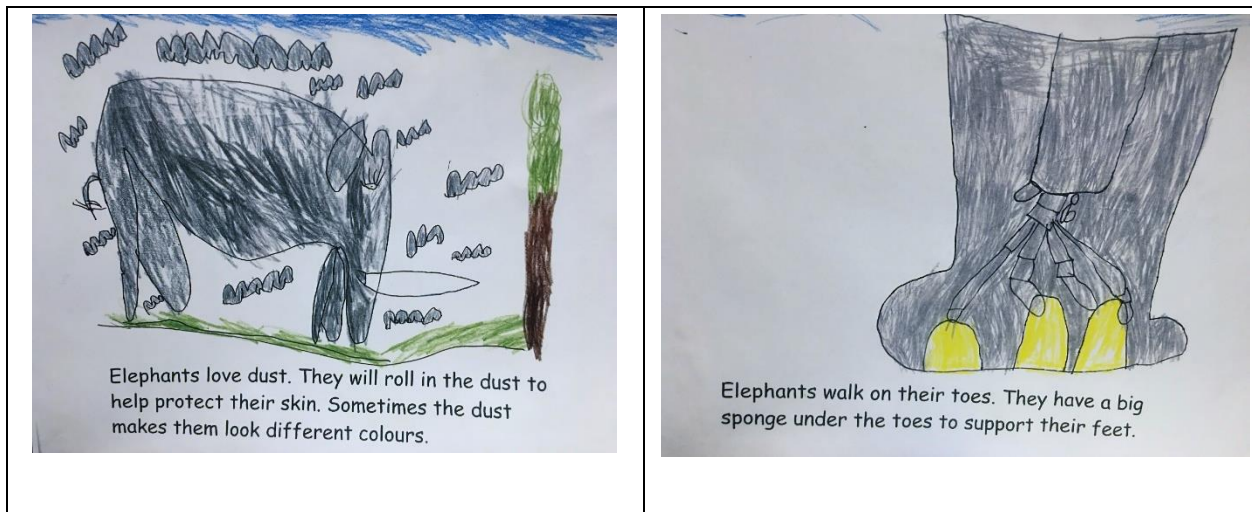
They used fine line black markers and had the option to try the drawing several times until they were happy with it. When the drawing was to their liking, they added colour. This last image shows that the children needed to practice their drawing to get an image that satisfied them as to its authenticity in representation.








The text in this documentation says: *Amazing Elephants: an informational book. Written and Illustrated by Mrs. Vaage's Gr. 1 Class. This is a 34-page book full of facts! Learning to draw elephants is very tricky! We had to practice a lot of times before we were happy with our drawings. We're getting better and better! On the right side you see several attempts to draw the elephant foot with the cushion under its toes.*

Here are some close-ups of a few pages.



 <p>Elephants cannot see very well in bright sunlight. They see better in shadows and dark. Elephants have really long eyelashes.</p>	 <p>Baby elephants are very cute. They learn to stand up $\frac{1}{2}$ hour after they are born. They have red hair on them when they are born, but it soon falls off. They have milk teeth and milk tusks which fall out to make room for adult teeth and tusks.</p>
	<p>Once the children completed illustrating and ordering the pages, we added the page numbers to them. The only task left to do was make the index. Once more, the children researched to see what other indexes contained.</p>

My reflection: As a teacher, I had no idea of how to scaffold this learning experience of creating an index. Publishers could use technology to assist them, but our book was hand made.

But teachers do not have to be answer-giver for problems like this. The classroom is a dynamic community of learners, collaborating and inquiring. This was a time to build metacognition, where children think about their thinking - a higher order thinking skill.

Creating an Index

I had to be honest and tell the class I did not know how we could do this. I had the word “Index” on our brainstorming paper, but I was flummoxed as to the next step.

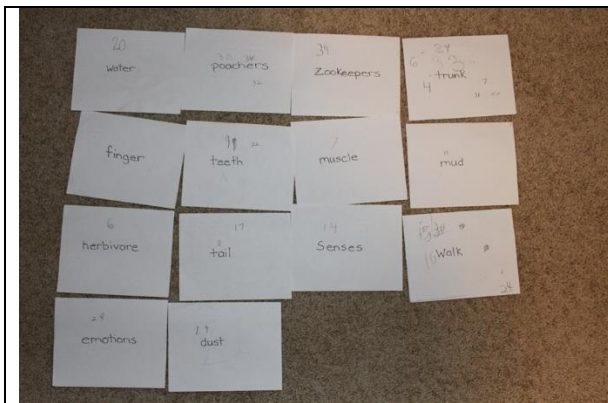
However, when I asked the students what they noticed about the indexes, they said it had important words and the pages that you could find them on.

I asked them how we could do that for our book...

Silence.

Sometimes problem-solving works like that. You just need to let your brain think. To ‘push your brain,’ to think outside the box. I sat down, and it was quiet while we were all thinking.

I don’t even remember whose idea it was, but we finally figured out how to do it.



We would list the important words, and then look at all the pages to find out which pages they were on.

We put each illustrated page on a desk. The words were divided among the class so that children could work in pairs. They took the key word cards and read every page for the word that would be in the index. If the word was found, they wrote the page number on the card.

To organize the index, the children told me the words needed to be in alphabetical order, so we completed that as a class. Here is our index:

dust 19
emotions 28
herbivore 6
mud 18
muscle 7
poachers 32, 34
senses 14
tail 11, 17
teeth 9, 22
trunk 3, 4, 6, 7, 20, 31
walk 10, 24
water 20
zookeepers 34

My reflection: As with every class project, this Amazing Elephant book went into the class year end draw. So, it went home with one lucky student.

I wish I had a photo of every page because the drawings were fantastic.

The huge win, however, was the process that we went through to create our own non-fiction book.

It was a show piece that each child was proud to share with their parents in demonstrations of learning.

Amazing Elephant Information Book

Here is the text the children dictated to me from their research.

Amazing Elephants Information Book

by Mrs. Vaage's Grade 1 Class

Elephants are the largest and heaviest land mammals on earth.

People love elephants. We help care for abandoned babies and then help them back into the wild. Zookeepers take care of them. We make laws to protect elephants from poachers.

Baby elephants are very cute. They learn to stand up ½ hour after they are born. They have red hair on them when they are born, but it soon falls off. They have milk teeth and milk tusks which fall out to make room for adult teeth and tusks.

Elephants cannot see very well in bright sunlight. They see better in shadows and dark. Elephants have really long eyelashes.

Elephant tusks are very interesting. Only 2/3 of the tusk shows. The other 1/3 is hidden under the elephant skin. The longest tusks found were 3 ½ meters long. Elephants use tusks to dig and lift. One tusk might be the favorite one and get worn down more than the other. Tusks are ivory.

The mammoth is the prehistoric relative of the elephant. Modern relatives include the manatee, furry hyrax, and the dugong.

Elephants walk on their toes. They have a big sponge under the toes to support their feet.

Elephants love dust. They will roll in the dust to help protect their skin. Sometimes the dust makes them look different colours.

Elephants love mud. They love to roll in the mud and wallow in the mud pools. The mud helps keep the insects from biting them. Also, the mud goes deep in the wrinkles, evaporating slowly to help keep the elephant cooler.

Elephant trunks are amazing. They have between 40,000 – 100,000 muscles and tendons in their trunks so they are very flexible. Trunks are used for breathing, smelling, eating, pushing, drinking, touching, picking a leaf or a flower or logs. Trunks can suck up and blow out. Elephants' trunks are both gentle and strong. When an elephant is tired from carrying his trunk, he might rest it on his tusks.

Female and child elephants live together in herds. The oldest female is the boss of the herd. She is the matriarch. When there is danger, the adults make a circle around the babies.

Male elephants live by themselves and are not part of the herd. Male elephants are very unpredictable. Sometimes they are gentle and calm but then they can suddenly turn violent and aggressive.

Elephants help each other. They support sick elephants by walking beside them. They watch each other's babies. They will even adopt elephant orphans.

Elephants are very intelligent. They remember the migration routes and travel the same way every year. They even remember when their favorite mango tree ripens every year. They have been known to return to the same place to die.

Elephants often travel in a line. Babies will hold their mother's tail when they walk so they stay safe.

Elephants have emotions. They can feel sad when an elephant from their herd dies. They also feel happy when there is a new baby in the herd. All the elephants touch the new baby and makes lots of sounds to celebrate the new birth.

Elephants can live a very long time – up to 70 years of age.

Elephant have very interesting teeth. The front two teeth are tusks. The other teeth are very big. Elephants only use 4 teeth at a time. Elephants only get 6 pairs of teeth in their lifetime. When they lose their teeth, elephants die because they starve to death.

Elephants walk, run and swim. But elephants do NOT jump – their legs would be crushed if they did. Elephants can walk up to 100 miles in a day. They can run up to 36 kph for short distances.

Elephants are herbivores. They eat flowers, fruit, grass, leaves, bark and roots. They grab the food with their trunk and then put it in their mouth. Elephants only digest half of their food.

Elephants use all five senses. They see, touch, hear, taste, and smell. Their most important sense is smell. They can even smell things that are 5 miles away.

The elephant has very wrinkled skin. The wrinkles are very deep. The fronts of the elephants' legs are always unique – it's like their fingerprints. When elephants get old, they may get skin spots which are pink or white.

Elephants have very big ears, which help them to hear. They also use their ears to cool down by waving them.

Elephants use their tails to swat at insects that are biting them. The hair in the elephant's tail is as thick as wire. People wear elephant tail hair bracelets.

Elephants communicate with each other in different ways. They use sounds like trumpeting, rumbling, roaring to talk to each other. They also touch each other with their trunks. They also have a scent from glands that gives other elephants information too. They like to intertwine their trunks to greet.

Females can have babies when they are 12 – 15 years old. They only have one baby at a time.

Elephants are predators. In Africa, lions, crocodiles, and cheetahs are predators. In Asia, tigers are predators. Human poachers are enemies to all elephants.

African elephants are the largest of the elephants. They have a smooth head and a dip on their back. Their ears are very big. Both the male and female elephants have tusks. They have two fingers on the tip of their trunk. Their wrinkles are deeper, and their skin is rougher. Their eyelashes are thicker.

African forest elephants are smaller than African elephants. They live in the rainforests. Their tusks point down, so they don't get tangled in the trees.

Baby elephants are mischievous, playful, and sometimes naughty. They play fight with each other. They will crawl over to their parents. Babies are ticklish. They drink their mother's milk until they learn to eat at about age 2 or 3.

Building our Own Elephant

It seemed a natural outcome that the children would want to build their own elephant. After all, they had completed so much research to finish their non-fiction book.

My reflection: There's a moment's pause in all honesty, for me, the teacher, to support their wish, or try and sway the group to a less messy and time-consuming project. It was a mindful battle of honoring their desire to show their learning in this way, versus the knowledge of how much of my energy this would take. My teacher mantra came to the forefront of my thinking – to help children know that they can learn anything they want to. That made my decision easier. If I rerouted their passion into a new direction, I would plant a seed that some things are too hard to try.

Brainstorming:

The first step was to brainstorm all ideas of how we could make this elephant sculpture. Questions like what size, what materials, what elephant attributes needed to be showcased.

The elephant would need to be young and have:

- the sway in the back (to show it was an African elephant)
- a round belly
- a round head
- tusks
- trunk
- a tail with hair
- eyes with long lashes
- ears that could flap

Gathering Materials:

I sent out a plea to the parents for large boxes for the cardboard legs, while I headed to the hardware store to look for tusk, trunk, ear, and body materials. Wandering through the aisles, I searched the materials till I found chicken wire for the body, a dryer vent hose for the trunk, and in the plumbing section, the grey pipe coverings for the tusks. Inspiration struck when I saw screen material that would be perfect for flappable ears. The head shape would cause a problem because it had to be almost perfectly round; but then I remembered a deflated beach ball I had tucked away in the classroom. It would be lightweight enough to balance the body yet give us enough strength to paper maché.

Body Construction:

The first task was to construct the entire body before beginning paper maché. The four legs were rolled cardboard with the ridges going vertical, so that they could be rounded. The top of each leg was flanged by cutting 2" into the cardboard to provide a resting and taping place for the body.

Meanwhile, the chicken wire was being shaped into the back/belly formation and edges were secured with wire twist ties. The neck opening was left open to stuff the hollow space with crumpled newspaper. They tested the 'fullness' by pushing into the chicken wire. If there was too much give, they knew it wouldn't hold the shape.



To connect the head to the body and the body to the legs, we used hot glue, and packing tape. Next, we attached the extra bits – trunk, tusks, ears, tail. As we wanted the tusks to curl, we tied them to the head to hold the shape.

Paper Maché

For the paper maché day, I had asked for parent help, and they used the paper slicer to cut strips of newspaper about 3 – 4 cm wide. The paste used was a mixture of water and dry wallpaper powder. The floor was covered with a plastic sheet to catch the splots and goop. The children were rotated so that each one had a chance to experience ownership of the project and share the workload.

The tactile experience of dipping the paper strips into the mixture, squeezing off the extra paste, and then laying the strip over the elephant was challenging. Some children found the texture of the mixture nauseating. Others loved the kinesthetic texture of this process.

They were all surprised though, trying to wash off the dried mixture from their



arms, and most ended up picking at missed bits for the rest of the day. Some goop ended up in their hair, or on their shoes. At class dismissal, I heard more than one parent say, off to the bathtub for you! The elephant child received two coats of paper maché to make sure it was strong enough to last. We used duct tape to cover the outer edge of the ears, once we realized how sharp the screen ear edge was.

Painting the Elephant

We decided it would be better to paint our elephant in the foyer just outside our classroom. The African village was being constructed out there, and the elephant would be an added attraction.

It took some time to get the right colour of grey to paint with different experimentations of black and white proportions.

Small groups came out to do the painting until all surfaces were thoroughly covered with grey, and the tusks white.



Lastly, the details for the eyes and tail could be tackled. From our button collection, they chose two matching large black buttons for the eyes. After looking at all our strings,



wires, and threads, they chose a black vinyl lacing jewelry making material for the eye lashes, and tail hair.

Construction was now complete.



Our Beloved Elephant

"It's died! Our elephant died!"

In the last segment, you read about how we built our elephant model to be realistic in size, colour, and shape. We were so careful to represent what we knew about elephants, so it felt *REAL* to the class.

Our elephant settled into its new home in the foyer outside our classroom, so it could be enjoyed and appreciated by the rest of the school community. There would often be a couple class members, being the docents, explaining the art and features to parents, teachers, or students.

No one, however, predicted that it would feel so real to the very youngest children in or visiting our school. They came up to hug the legs, touch the ears, move the trunk. They asked if they could have a ride on it!

After one such love-in session, the class brought complaints filled with frustration about their elephant getting damaged. A decision was made to put a sign nearby that said, *Please DO NOT touch*, with a drawing of a hand with an X through it.

Toddlers do not have that literacy yet, and after one such love encounter, our beloved elephant fell. The class was so upset, but they decided they could mend the splayed back legs by tying them together with twine. But it fell again.

It seemed our elephant had irreparable damage, so they carried it gently to our carpet gathering place and laid it on its side.

Tell me what you see, I said.

- *Paint is ripped*
- *Left back hip is broken*
- *Left front hip is broken*
- *Tail is coming off*
- *Paper maché is coming off the back, trunk, tusks, belly*
- *Both ears are ripping*
- *Right hip is broken*



What can we do? I asked.

- *Recycle it – but it won't fit (in the recycle bins)*
- *Send him home – but probably not*
- *Re-paper maché*
- *Make a new one*
- *Give him to another class – no*
- *Put him outside – no, will get more damaged*
- *Take it apart*
- *Tell a newspaper about our research*
- *Hang it on the ceiling in the classroom*

But as the conversation continued listing all the parts and what it would take to repair it, there came a feeling of consensus, that it was impossible to repair.

So, what should we do with it? I asked.

We HAVE to keep it!

I asked, *Where? How? Would it be safe for our learning environment because of the space required and our emotions?*

No one was willing to come forward with any type of ending plan, so I shared my own thinking, bringing adult wisdom from the outside world into the classroom. *If it were a real, young elephant in Africa, what would happen to it? Would it survive with all these same injuries?*

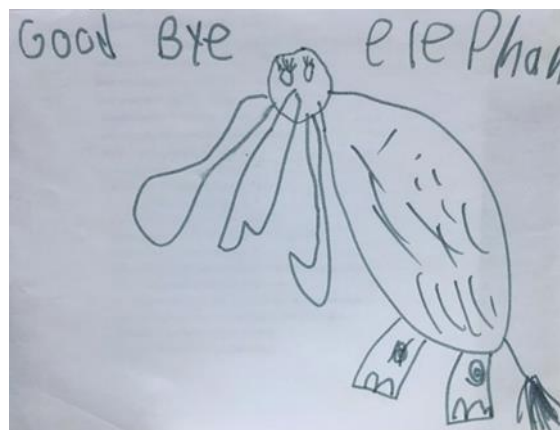
The answers came slowly. *It can't walk to get food; it wouldn't be able to drink because the trunk is broken.* A brave child finally verbalized what the children were aware of now. ***It's died. Our elephant died.***

Shall we have a remembering time? I asked. So, we formed a circle around the elephant and shared bits of stories, thoughts, good-byes.

The recess bell rang, just as we were finishing up, but three children asked if they could stay inside. They made tissue flowers, wrote letters, cards, and mourned and grieved for him by gently patting him talking to him.



This is about the elephant. I loved the elephant so much even though its not real it was a special thing to me and the whole class it would be so sad if it was a real elephant I almost feel like crying it is really a touch my heart thing.



My next question was, *What should happen now?* Children gave suggestions and agreed that we keep it for a little while, and then it could go to the recycle bin. We moved it to the top of our big book box, where it stayed for three days. Children would go by and touch it, look over to it now and again throughout the day.

Finally, on a Friday afternoon, they were ready. As a group, we carried it out to the dumpster for recycling. We lifted it up and had some giggles when it sat askew. There was laughter and smiles.

My reflection: What I learned accompanying the children on this journey, was the necessity to give them time to mourn, to be responsive to their emotions, and to help them bring closure. So often young children are kept outside events with strong emotions.

Some adults of the school community snorted with disapproval, saying that the mourning was bizarre and unrealistic. Others laughed. To me, it was inspirational seeing their emotional understanding of the circle of life. Children had time to process information and respond to it through social constructivism. It was a chance to demonstrate how I valued children's ideas with genuine sincerity and wonder.

The Village

The village project was being completed simultaneously with the elephant project because I was fortunate enough to have a student teacher working with me.

Some of the planning and implementation was done with the entire class, while at other times the class was split between the elephant and the village projects. All children worked on both projects from beginning to end by rotating groups.

Once the children had decided to construct a village with 'huts' tall enough for them to enter, I knew we'd need fridge boxes – lots of them! One set of parents had a connection with an appliance store and provided us with a windfall of huge boxes.



Many volunteers offered to help us round out the flat boxes, and indeed, it took almost the entire class to do it.



All the images we'd seen of village huts showed them as rounded. Here, we had flat cardboard, which needed coaxing to bend in new places. As some of us held the back, other pushed gently persuading the vertical spaces in the cardboard to give.

The sides were taped together, and adults used Exacta knives to cut doors. The hut roof needed to have the shape of grass sheaves, to give a thatched appearance. After experimenting with paper, we all realized that if we cut the cardboard in a circular shape, a peak could be created, with an overhang.

The roofs were painted before being attached with tape to the huts themselves.



Next was to paint the four huts. While some children were working with me on the elephant sculpture in the classroom, others were taking shifts painting the huts.

We used a lot of the surplus brown tempera paint in our school storage cupboards! Everyone helped paint, including parents and teachers.

Meanwhile, the class had been gathering materials to put inside the huts, along with signs to designate the purpose of the hut.

Fun Hut: The Fun Hut included an African flannel board with accessories, the African animals, farm animals (along with small blocks for fencing), stones.

Cooking Hut:

The **Cooking Hut** contained different pots, dishes and play food.

The main problem for the class was to figure out how to make a 'fire' to do the cooking.

They experimented with tissue paper, but it didn't hold its shape and was too fragile.

Real sticks and twigs were agreed upon, but when they were loose, they didn't keep a contained shape.

Their alternative was to create a 'firepit' to hold the sticks. It was also movable, so could be inside the hut as well as outside for communal cooking.



Craft Hut:

The **Craft Hut** was a huge success and was always full. The materials included were feathers, paper plates, beads, scissors, glue, and string. Many necklaces, bracelets, headbands, and masks were created.



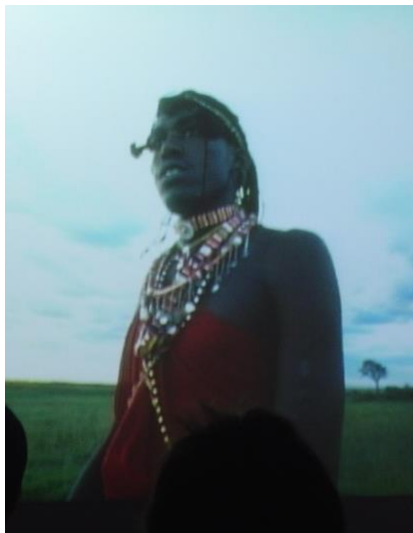
The **Dress-Up Hut** contained fabric, jewelry, sashes, masks (lion), headbands, costumes (elephant, crocodile.) But it was open-ended enough to spark the most wonderful dramatic scenarios.

Here are two hunters fending off an attacking lion.

Here, a crocodile is challenging the warriors.



The village was completed about the same time as the elephant.



To me, the elephant/warrior photo shows the pride that the children had in selecting these two projects to demonstrate what they had learned in their research about Africa. Compare this image to the one provided by one of



the grandparents from his African trip. He brought in his slide projector and children benefited from listening and seeing for themselves.

They continued this understanding in other ways as well – drumming, dancing, and Kwanzaa.

Drumming

In the jungle, the mighty jungle, the lion sleeps tonight...

Sometimes a serendipity project develops just because the materials happen to cross your path. Our sister school had on loan a full set of African drums from Central Services. There were enough drums for our class to play solo or with pairs. They agreed to share the drums with us for two weeks!

Every day we would bring them out from the corner of our classroom and practice rhythms. The first time was a chaotic and frantic exhibition of who could hit the drums fastest or loudest! So, we began with the basics of learning to keep together on a simple rhythm. 1, 2-3. Ta, tee-tee.



I had a drum as well, to model the rhythm, and asked the children to listen until they felt they could join in. They learned they needed to watch me, or they could easily speed up or slow down. It was such a significant celebration when the entire class could keep this rhythm together for 2 minutes. Right, left-left. Repeat.



Before we moved on to more complex rhythms, we practiced by clapping and patting our legs, until we could get the beat.

We used a simple phrase to add a long beat:

This is nice and this is good.

We counted to that – 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7...

Variations were to beat the center of the drum

for every word *this*.

Four strong beats 1 (*wait*), 2 (*wait*)...

We eventually accompanied *The Lion Sleeps Tonight* and *The Little Drummer Boy*, which included keeping the beat and then change ups for the chorus.

The concentration and attention this required was intense, but the pleasure and joy they got from performing well together was equally as high.

The question of what young children are capable of comes into play here. I expected and trusted they could learn more than the basics. Because I believed in their capacity, they did as well.



A local priest, Fr. Dan, who emigrated from Africa, came to our school to visit the classes, and when he came to our class and saw the drums, he asked if he could play. He taught us a new rhythm, which we all tried to follow, but it was complicated. The boom and joy of his laughter will stay in my mind forever, as he played drums with the class.



As always, we needed to have a way to demonstrate the learning, and the class decided to perform their drumming skills for their parents, at the Kwanzaa celebration.

African Dancing

Our school administrator was a credited dance instructor and offered to teach my class an African Dance.

She was amazing with my class and used one of the African drums as she told the story. Story in dance was a new form of literacy and movement, but the children learned to retell it.

Dance Story

Here is the story:

1. Waking up, clapping
2. Checking the weather (hand on forehead)
3. Walking down to the water
4. Paddle out (grip paddle; paddle side to side)
5. Catching the fish (throw net; pull fish in)
6. Paddle back
7. Sort the fish (keep & throw)
8. Scrape the fish (rub one arm)
9. Carry the basket (hold arms above the head)
10. Share the fish (hold arms out)
11. Celebrate (arms up & twirl)
12. Clapping (to finish)



Documentation:

When asked how we could demonstrate the learning for this dance, the children said to take photos of each step. Here is a photo of the step-by-step dance documentation.



Dance Costumes:

During our Kwanzaa celebration, the children wore the costumes and accessories they had made and posed for a photo before the dance.



Mapping Africa

None of us had been to Africa. We loved the stories, the animals. The desire to learn more about Africa as a country continued into mapping. We began with the globe and realized that Africa was completely on the other side of the world and that it was huge!

References from Literature:

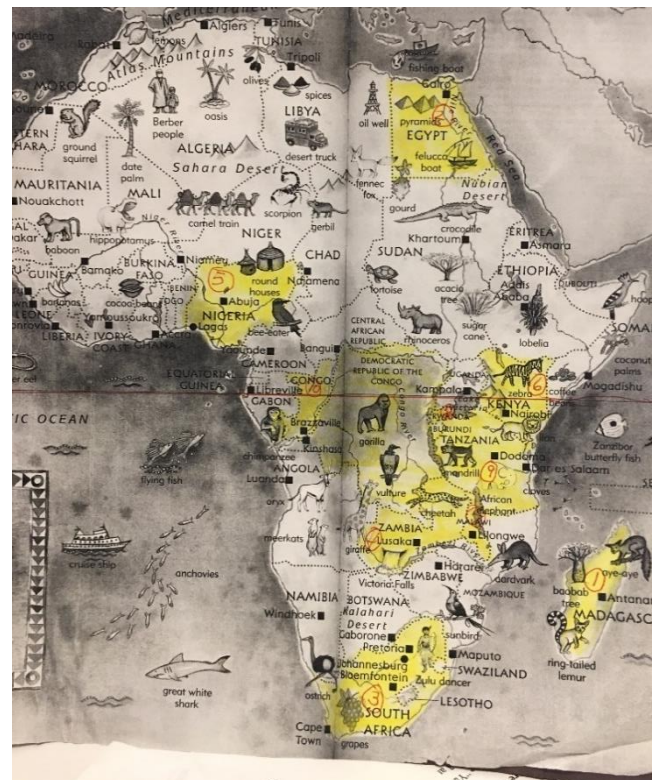
I noticed that children started interrupting story time when I was reading African fiction or non-fiction. They wanted to know where the setting/country of the story was in Africa.



Identifying Places in Africa:

They were so excited when I asked if they would like a map of Africa so that they could mark the story places. They highlighted the country after each story, and then penciled in which story was associated with it.

For example, Tololwa Molle's stories mostly took place in Tanzania.

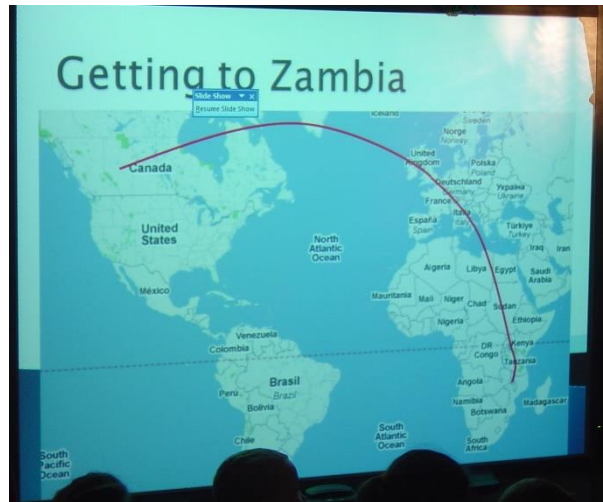
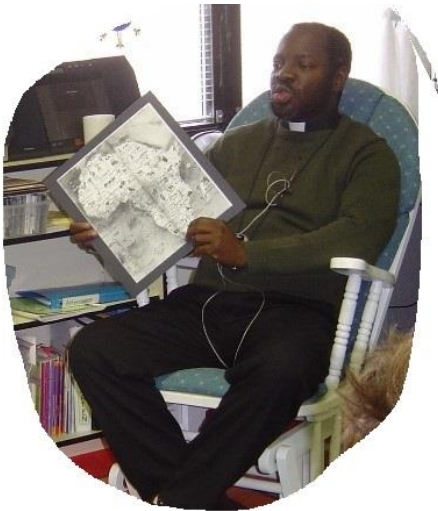


Mapping with Technology:

We also explored Africa with technology. Using Google Maps, we investigated countries with the map option, but also by satellite. In the satellite view, we found villages, herds of animals, cities. We zoomed in many times to explore the geography.

Visitor References:

Our class visitors also referred to maps.



Fr. Dan showed us his home country, and the slideshow Grandpa showed us his flight path to Africa.

These personal connections helped give the children a sense of the global community.

Kwanzaa Celebration

Non-fiction Book:

One of the non-fiction books in our classroom library was about the Kwanzaa celebration in the United States, honoring the peoples of Africa.

Brainstorming:

When we were brainstorming for a way to culminate our African project, the idea of using a Kwanzaa celebration caught on.

Involving children in the planning helps focus attention: when, what, how. It makes it real.

Realizing that the full scope of a Kwanzaa celebration was out of their league, so they chose the parts that they could relate to.

Food – corn on the cob, yams, fruit salad

Decorations – placemat, candles

Apparel – girls (braids), wraps, necklaces, headbands

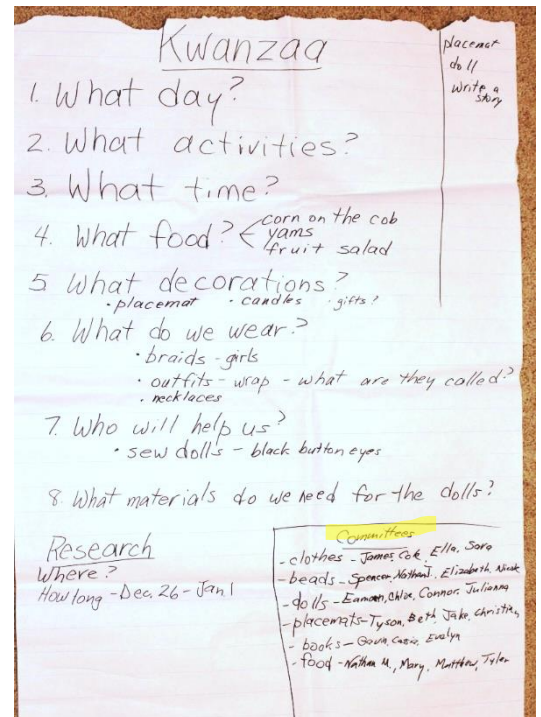
Gifts for children – dolls

Considering that the children were still finishing the village, learning the dance, practicing the drumming, Kwanzaa was a definite challenge to prepare.

Committees:

I introduced the concept of committees, where the class would break into teams so the work could be researched, planned, and preparations made. Children chose which committee they wished to be on.

Each team was responsible for communicating needs for supplies and assistance.



- Clothing Committee searched through fabric donations and found enough fabric. Girls would wear red, boys blue. They practiced tying and pinning to find the best way to wear the fabric drape.
- Bead Committee began to make necklaces, headbands, and bracelets – enough for the entire class.
- Doll Committee sent a letter to the parents asking for fabric, buttons, and yarn. They also asked for assistance to come in and help sew the dolls. We found a simple pattern that could be stitched, stuffed, and then accessorized. The children each had to make their own doll.

At Kwanzaa, children always receive a gift, and the book we had in the classroom showed a similar doll being given to children. One sweet boy made an African doll at home and gave it to me as a gift!



- Placemat Committee brought in and prepared the paper for children to design and then laminated.
- Books Committee went to the library to take out all applicable African books and then displayed them with our own classroom connection.

- Food Committee created a note asking parents to contribute corn on the cob, yams, and fruit salad for our feast.

The day of the Kwanzaa celebration, children dressed in their fabric swatches, donned the beads and headbands. We started with the dance in the gym, then returned to the classroom for the drum performance and finished with the feast!

African Display

Every month, one class in our school was responsible for creating a display in the glassed area by the school entrance. Knowing that our turn would fall during our African study, I asked the children to think about what we should put in there to show what we've been learning.

Investigating the Display Case: We walked over to the display case ahead of time and looked at what we could use to prop our items, and so on. I'd ask, *What could we put here?* covering all the areas – background, case floor, the borders around the case, the top level, the glass shelves, the bottom wall below the case. Ideas were flying!



Borders: They wanted the African patterns and colours.



Display

Display Contents:

- Non-Fiction Book, called the Amazing Elephant: They wanted a couple of pages up to show what they'd researched and created.
- Literature - both fiction and non-fiction books
- Artifacts
- Elephant photos and models
- African mementos
- African map
- UNICEF certificate
- Posters

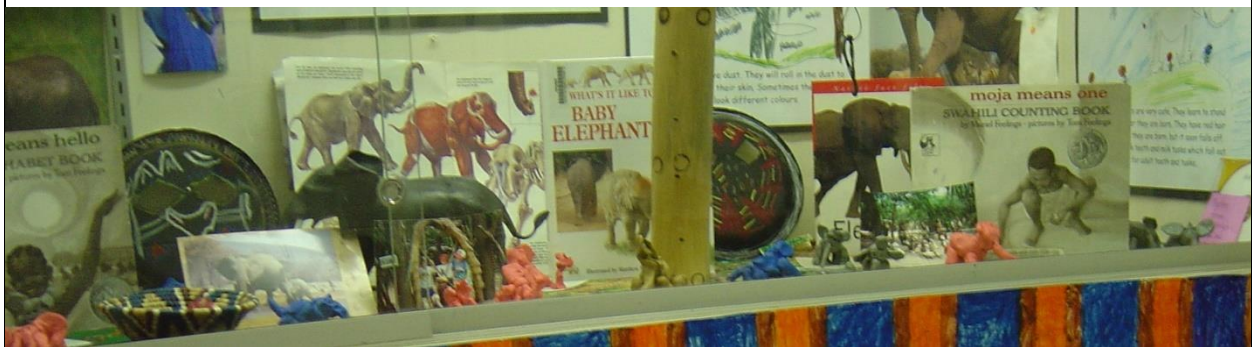


Rwanda UNICEF Malawi

Our class decided they wanted to help the children in Africa and tried to collect money on Halloween. We raised over ~~\$470!~~ ^{\$495} This is enough for:

- School-in-a-box (supplies for a whole school)
- ~~8~~ ⁹ desks
- 1 soccer ball
- 2 class sets of pencils

The class was so proud of UNICEF certificate of appreciation. At Halloween, my class asked to carry UNICEF boxes while they went out trick or treating. In addition, many of them emptied their piggy banks to add to the fundraising. They raised \$495 which was enough for one school-in-a-box, 9 desks, 1 soccer ball, and 2 class sets of pencils for children in Rwanda and Malawi.



On the wall below the case, we created posters to show the African words we had learned. Two classroom books – *Jambo Means Hello*, and *Moja Means One* – were so much fun for the class. They practiced the words and counting, and the charts document what they had learned. The counting integrated with math, and we practiced simple addition and subtraction, counting by twos, etc. in Swahili!





This African display received so many positive comments from children, parents, staff and visiting educators. We often found young children with their noses up close to the glass and taking it all in.

My reflection: A normal assumption would be that the adult in the class would assemble the display after school hours, but I wanted to include the class, as this is part of visual literacy curriculum objective. This is composing a visual display for an audience. It wasn't so much about showing the same item from every child but picking the strong pieces and arranging them so that the eye of the viewer would be intrigued enough to stay and look.

Lions

Whenever a class chooses a project topic to research, I display calendar photos collected over the years. For Africa, here is my wall of photos:



In addition, you will notice the book collection in the A frame, and the African artifacts on the mirror display table.

This project story is about the Lion Class.

Visual Literacy: The project began slowly with fiction and non-fiction books about lions. But it was a little frustrating because the books did not seem to answer the questions children had.

Knowing that print information is not always available, I decided to use visual literacy to expand their research.



Using these two calendar images of lions, I asked the children, *What do you notice?*

As they began to describe the features, I asked them, *If you were to draw this lion, how would you do it?*

So many of them said they wouldn't be able to. So, we began to look at feature by feature, to help them see. Art is about seeing.

We looked at the shape of the head, the eyes, the ears, the mane. Then I asked how they would be able to draw the nose and mouth.

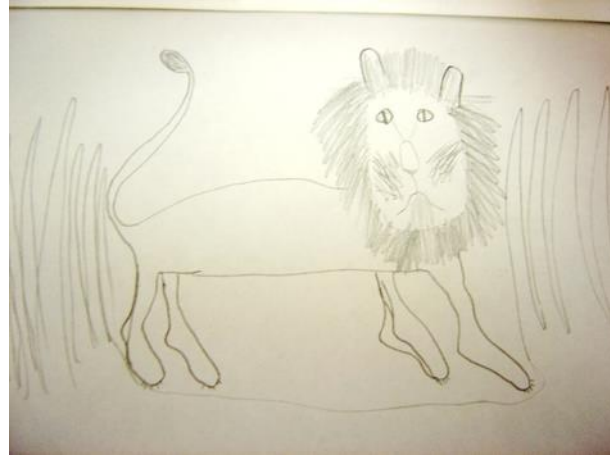
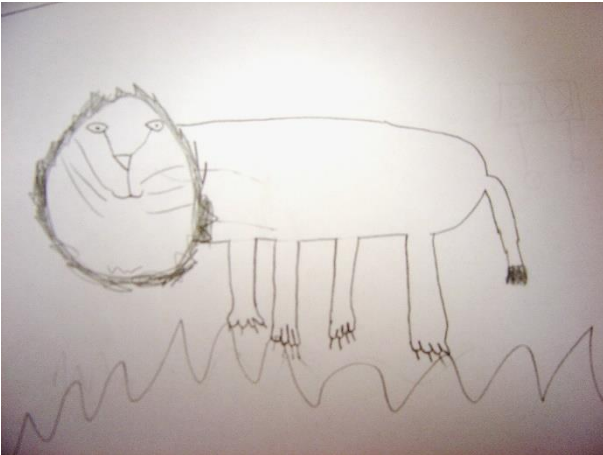
I was asking the children something I was not capable of doing! To try and sketch a lion's head was beyond my capacity, or so I thought.

One brilliant child noticed that the nose/mouth looked just like a wine glass! And suddenly, the lion sketch became something doable.

Here are their first attempts:



[Research lion images](#): We began searching books for other images of lions and the skill level of drawing lions improved. Children were using drawing to understand and know about lions.



As they examined the images in books, they noticed more details: claws, gestural movements, tail, ears, whiskers.

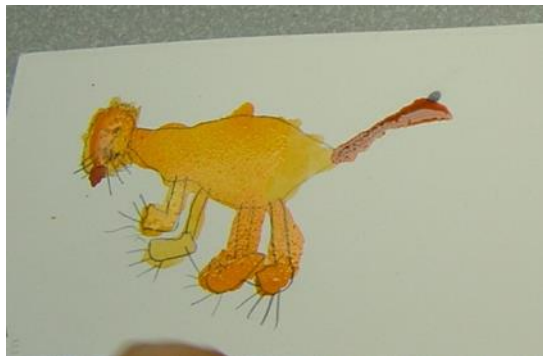
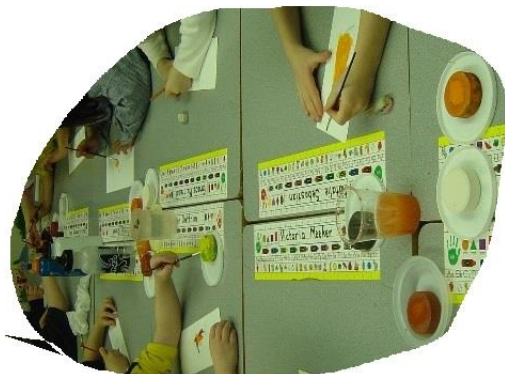
Painting Lions: When they asked if they could paint lions, it presented a new set of problems. For instance, none of the school supplies of tempera paint had a 'lion' colour. Neither did the water colour palettes. The children realized they would have to mix colours.

The tempera blocks seemed to be the most flexible and I placed a set of 4 blocks for each group of painters.

The paper was stiff porous paper, so it allowed water and pigment to mix well.

Children could do several images if they wished.

Colour mixing and art expression are part of the curriculum. Trying to get the right colours for their lions demonstrated the high engagement and learning through exploration.





Lion Mural:

To display their learning, the class decided to make a mural background for their lions. They brainstormed ideas of what to include in the mural: rocks, grasses, mountains, trees, bright sky, water holes. They divided up the tasks, with one group doing the sky, the next the mountains, another the grasslands, another making the trees, another the rocks.

When the background was stapled on the bulletin board, children could choose where to put the trees, grasses, etc. Then each lion was strategically placed as the child wished.

The reasons for placing the lions varied – playing with another lion, hunting, sitting in the shade, going for a drink.





Sewing Lions:

The next step of the project was launched after we read *Jillian Jiggs and her Wonderful Pigs* story. At the back of that book were instructions for how to make your own stuffed pig. Someone in the class declared, *We should sew lions!* *Yah!* was the resounding reply.

Supplies:

We sent a letter home to the parents asking for supplies that we needed:

We have recently been learning about African/Jungle animals and are currently enjoying researching lions. We got an idea from a Jillian Jiggs story to sew our own lions. To assist us with this project we would really appreciate your help to provide a few extra items that we do not have. These are: Brown or tan coloured pantyhose or nylons or knee highs; brown, gold or tan coloured yarn, or brown or gold fake fur.

Supplies came in and so we began our sewing project.

Sewing Process:



The first lesson was how to thread a needle and knot it.

They sewed the end closed for the head and stuffed the inside with fiber fill. After some experimentation we found that tight elastic bands around the neck worked to separate the head from the body.



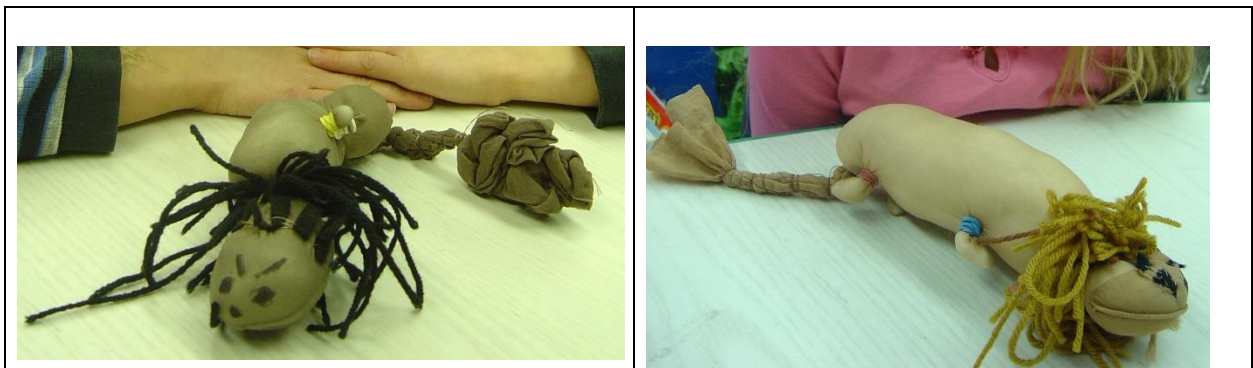
Next, they sewed bits of felt for the noses.

Some used bits of fur for the mane. Others used yarn and slipped them under the neck elastic.



Gallery:

Here is a small gallery of some of the finished lions, each with its own personality!





Documentation: The student teacher doing her practicum with me prepared a wonderful documentation board to share with parents, teachers, and other students.



Curriculum Objectives:

This lion project addressed so many areas of the curriculum – science (research), social (cultural, working together), intellectual (problem solving), creative (art media), literacy (fiction, non-fiction books); physical (fine motor skills), emotional (independence, accomplishment, choice.) Yet, if you asked the children if they felt it was grade one 'curriculum', they would be surprised.

*My reflection: To help children become aware of and think about what they are learning (metacognition), I often asked them, **what have we learned today, or by doing this project. Often, students recognize discrete skills or facts, but not surprisingly, someone will note that we learned how to solve that problem, or we learned that the first attempt at something doesn't have to be perfect. Mostly they recognized that learning can be fun!***

African Sculptures

Over the years, the topic of Africa and African animals, has surfaced. I'd like to share a few images that document the learning.

Cardboard Sculptures

Cardboard is often the first media selected, because children ask to make the sculptures BIG!

Wild Cat Studies



The *Very Hungry Hippo* story prompted this sculpture of the wide-open mouth.



Other Media:

Play clay, clay, and sticky foam are other great sculpting media.



Sometimes, it felt like we were living in a zoo!



Technology in Learning

My classroom always had many non-fiction books, but paper books become outdated. As we researched elephants, we found that we needed more information. We wanted to see how elephants moved, to see close-ups of their attributes, to see the interactions of the herd.

Because my grand learning objective for my class is that each one knows they can learn anything they want to, I did not offer the internet as a choice for them. I asked them, *how can we get more information?*

Their ideas included asking their parents, going to the library, and finding something on a 'dot.com.' When I probed that idea more, the child was finally able to articulate *the 'web' on the computer.*

Webcams:

Our classroom had a big TV monitor as well as a SMART Board, so internet sites could be projected for all to see. The first thing they wanted to see was live elephants, so I searched for elephant webcams.

While we were watching, I asked them to *tell me what they noticed.* I asked them to make observations considering all their questions. They were mesmerized by this concept of watching in real-time a live elephant who was moving, eating, playing.

They understood videos, TV shows, and movies, but real-time connection was new.



LCD Projector:

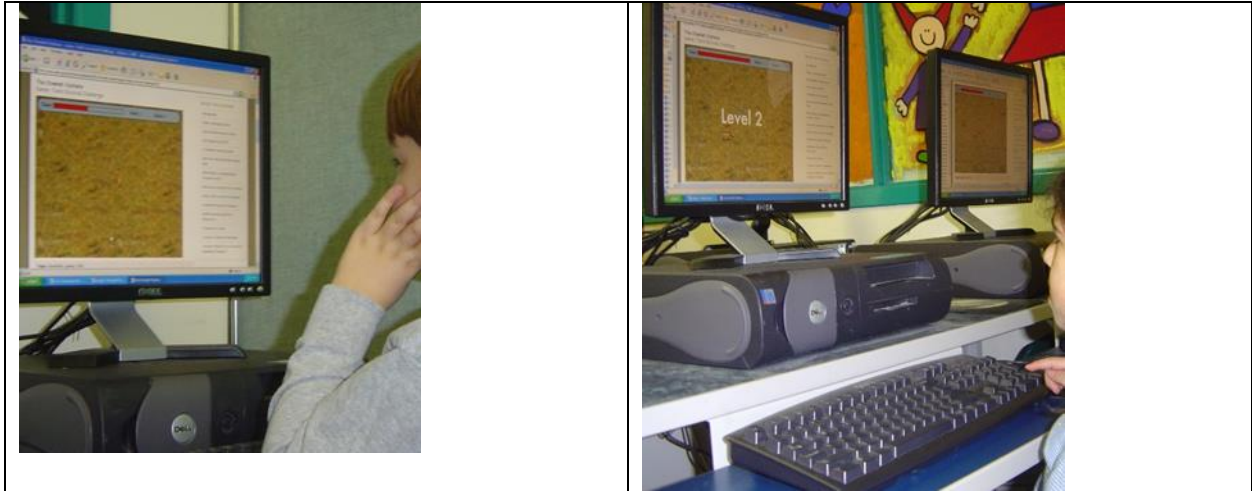
We also utilized the school library which had a big screen for projecting. This was useful for



sharing specific information articles, descriptions, expert information sites that I had previewed.

Interactive Sites:

Interactive sites were saved onto the student lab computers. The one that intrigued them the most was a Serengeti site based on the herds of animals and predators. Students could work at their own capacity and were very engaged.



Technology brought the world into the classroom.

Classroom Environment

Display Table



Threaded through the project stories, elements of the classroom environment have been obvious.

A display table of artifacts can be a provocation for children to explore.

This is an example of one such display. The class was interested in wild cats, so I gathered all the animal models I could find, and rocks that could be built to form mountainous shapes (like *Pride Rock*.)

Spiders were added because of the *Anansi* stories we were reading in class.

It takes a while to accumulate a great collection of animal models. I searched many garage sales and found some excellent animals. But for the specialized ones, like the small baby leopard in the bottom left, those I purchased in science stores.

With this interactive display, children are not only getting to know the different animals, but also handling the rocks - exploring their textures and attributes.

Coconuts: Many of the African stories referred to coconut, and I assumed that the children had never really had the chance to feel and handle a coconut.

I brought in a few coconuts for the class to open, get the white coconut meat, and grate it.

My classroom tool set contained enough hammers for a few to work at a time. The class discovered just how difficult it is to open a coconut!

But after this experience, the children better understood the story references to coconut.



My reflection: I've referred to my wall of calendar photos previously but did not explain how I collected and stored my collection.

This African collection has over 40 calendar pictures, magazine spreads, or posters.

I stored them in my top drawer of my 4-drawer file cabinet, so that I could search through them easily. I used Bristol board separators because file folders were too short.

Every January and February, I would search the bookstores, office supply stores, and look for collectable great images. They were usually on sale then. But often I found them in garage sales as well. Once people knew I collected calendars, they would often donate the pictures to me.

Artifacts:

Artifacts that I collected along the way were stored in cardboard boxes, or prop boxes, which I kept above my classroom cupboards.



You'll notice that I've used an African style fabric for the table, as well as a mirror. When objects are placed on the mirror, they have the reflected image as well. (Reggio idea).

A variety of items that encourage children's curiosity are arranged and rearranged by the children. You'll see a woven basket, coconut shells (saved from previous years' project), an interesting piece of driftwood, cobs of dried corn, small wooden animals, drum, rain stick, maraca, and harp.

Dramatic Play Areas: One year, a student teacher developed a play/project area in the kindergarten 'house.'



The interior of the house was covered in burlap to suggest woven or mud walls. The dolls were sorted. Interesting, patterned fabric was draped.

The display included gourds and a jar of honey. You'll notice the Finger Drum being explored.

These items were a great provocation for creative and imaginative role play.

The stories read also made connections. But those will be shared in a different story.



Literacy in Africa Projects

Reading stories brings new worlds and ideas for children. Books played a key role in every project undertaken.

Classroom Books

My A-Frame book stand always had the project subject books displayed, but here, you'll notice that some books are not related to Africa. These are 'old favourites,' the ones the children go back to over and over. To encourage the pleasure that comes from reading, old favorites are key.

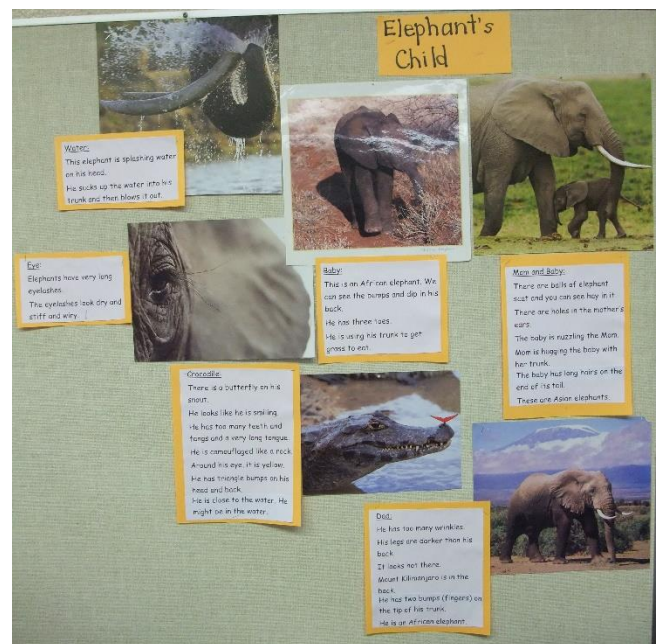
The Name of the Tree, *The Elephant's Child*, *Anansi* stories, *A Story A Story*, are some of my favorite books and became classroom favorites as well.

Even now, years later, I can still hear echoes in my brain, of children chanting, *Ungali, Ungali, the name of the tree is Ungali*.



Elephant's Child

One class loved the *Elephant's Child* so much that they designed a display of photos that corresponded to the story images. They dictated what they noticed in the photos.



Non-fiction books

Non-fiction books are just as important as the well-loved stories. I remember reading research that stated that to bring boys to love books, give them non-fiction. From my own experience, I believe that's true.



Here you'll see non-fiction books alongside the animal models. They're accessible for browsing and to encourage animal drama.

I also had 3 huge coffee table books on Africa. These had to be propped up alongside book displays because of their size. By time I retired, the spines of these books were in bad shape, and pages dog-eared. Children would open one of these books and sit/lay on the carpet and talk with their friends about what they were seeing - developing visual literacy.

Often, though, the non-fiction books are written for an older reading audience. When one of these books were selected by a child for story time, I gave the choice of a 'walk through', or 'one page with every word'. Both options were popular. By the 'walk through,' I would scan the page highlights and images and retell in my own words. *Here you'll notice that... or This page explains about....* For the 'read every word' choice, the child would choose the page, and I would read everything – the text, the photo descriptions, the charts. The vocabulary development and knowledge acquisition were phenomenal.

Creating Topic Specific Texts

Other times, I may develop more readable forms of non-fiction.

For one class interested in gorillas, I created a booklet for each child. We worked through it as a class, page by page, reading the text, and children would draw the illustration for each page.

- Gorilla Booklet:

Gorillas are primates.

Gorillas are the largest primates. Each gorilla has its own nose print. Older male gorillas have a silver back. Gorillas usually walk on 4 limbs, but sometimes, the leader stands on 2 legs to make himself look bigger and stronger. They walk on their knuckles in their hands. The oldest male gorillas have a silver back. They are the leaders of the troop.

Gorillas can communicate.

Gorillas pound their chests with cupped hands. When a gorilla turns its back to another gorilla, it says, "Groom me."

Gorillas live in family groupings.

Adult gorillas protect the baby gorillas. Boy gorillas get sent out on their own when they are 11 or 12 years old. Babies hold on to the hair on the Mom's chest until they are a little older. Then they crawl around and ride on Mom's back. Female gorillas need to be 8 years old before they can have a baby of their own. By age 4, gorilla toddlers can build their own nests.

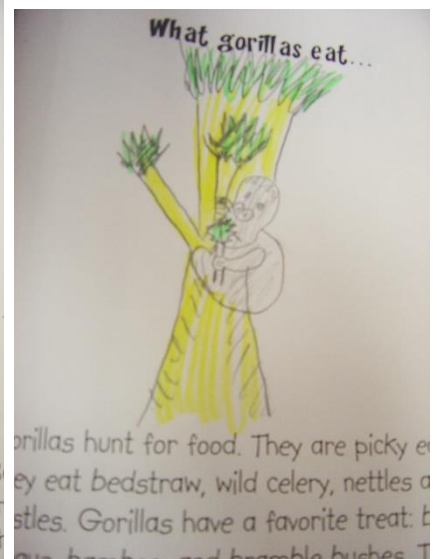
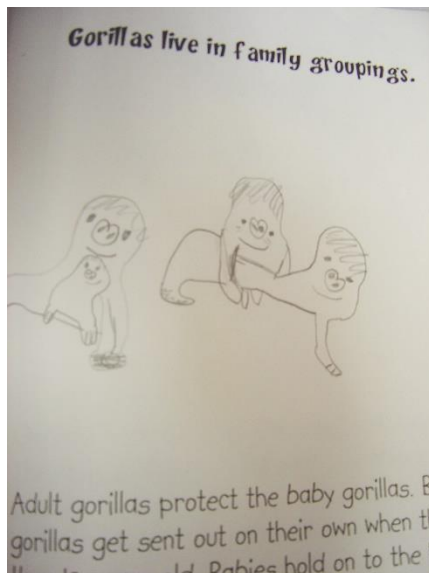
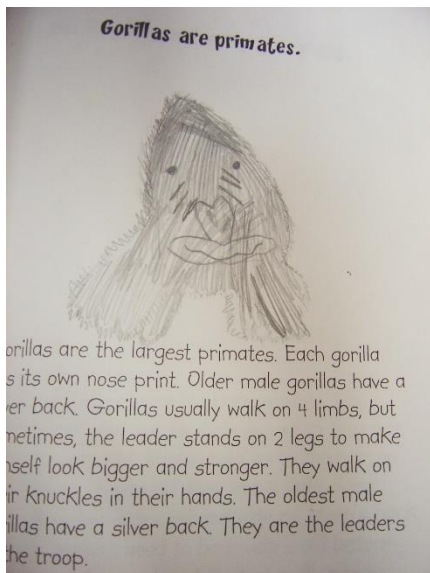
What gorillas eat...

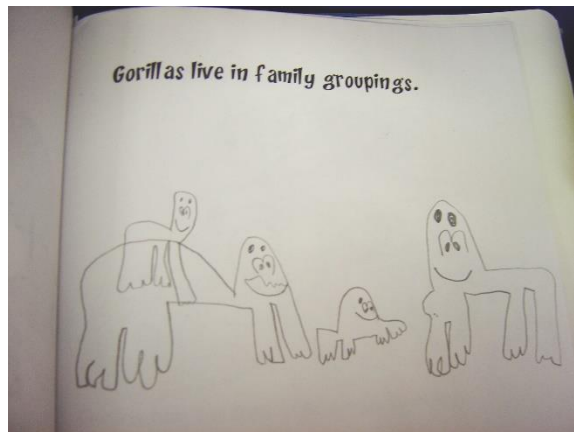
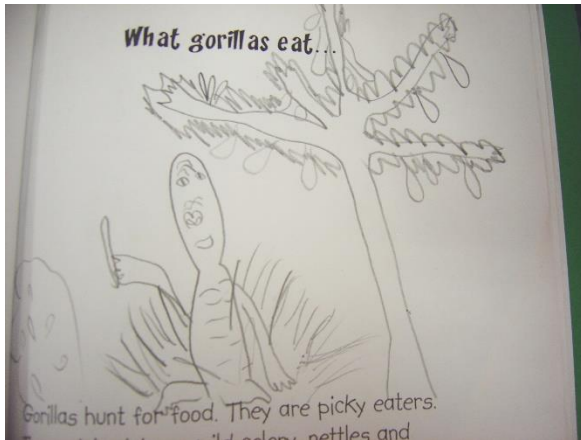
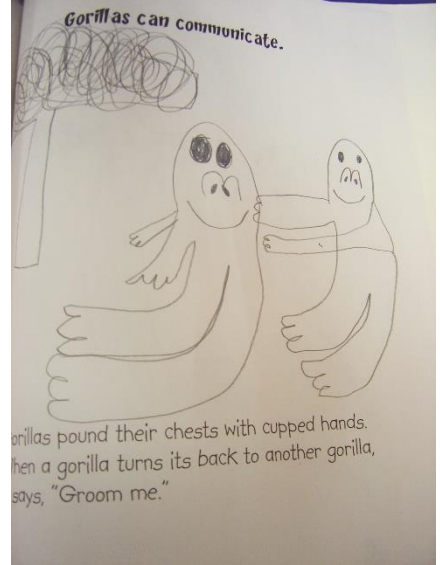
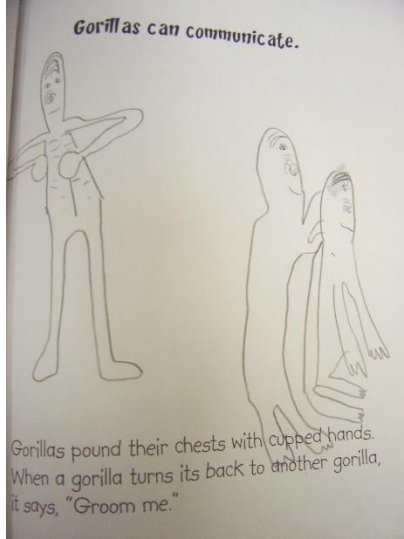
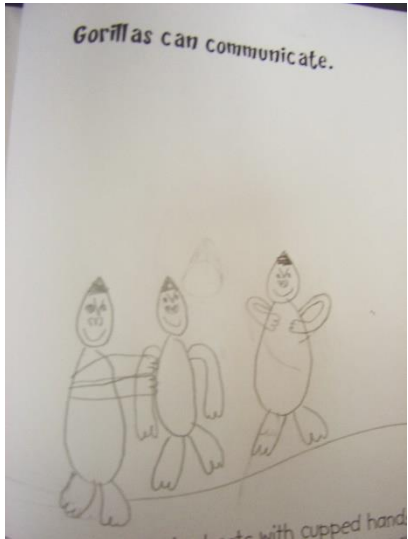
Gorillas hunt for food. They are picky eaters. They eat bedstraw, wild celery, nettles and thistles. Gorillas have a favorite treat: bracken fungus, bamboo, and bramble bushes. They can climb trees to get fruit. When they come to a tree with ripe fruit, they eat until they get full and then they build a day nest to rest for 2-3 hours. Then they move to find another place to eat. Sometimes they just crouch down to eat when they find their food on the ground.

Gorillas are strong.

People used to think gorillas were aggressive, but now they know they are peaceful. A male gorilla may stand up to look fierce because he is protecting his family. Don't look in a gorilla's eyes because he may see you as a threat. In the older days, people used to kill gorillas for trophies or for food. Now they are protected.

Children's Illustrations





To illustrate each page, the children had to know the information. That required research, and often I would do a read aloud from non-fiction books until they could express to me what was needed in the illustration. Drawing these gorillas was a challenge!



Literacy Centers

By creating opportunities for children to read, write, and talk about specific research and interest topics, they were able to integrate concepts across the curriculum.

- Match Game – created by printing clip art and matching words on card stock. Children worked in pairs so that there could be conversation about the images and finding the text to go with it.



To keep these match games separated, I wrote a number on the back of the cards. For example, this set might all have a “4” on them. It made clean up and reorganizing much easier.



- Browsing the Classroom Library was another literacy center. There were many rich conversations and dialogues about book contents. Sometimes old favorites were selected and read orally.



- Story Bags were popular too, as they contained everything needed to retell a story.



- Letter Sets, Stamping, Magnetic Board, and Computer made up other literacy centers. The children were assigned which center to go to on a rotating basis.

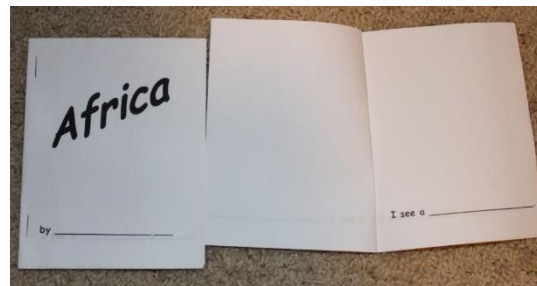
- Independent Reading I often prepared predictable books using clip art. Using a large font and printing on card stock, I'd cut the pages in half to make the book smaller. These books were simple to prepare as they were just stapled at the sides.

I've attached an Appendix with four of the predictable books about Africa.

- *Lions*
- *Leopards*
- *Cheetah*
- *Have You Seen the Zebra?*

Other times, I would create a pattern with blanks for the children to complete. Children would have to complete the sentence and illustrate each page.

I see a _____.



Author Study

A very special part of literacy is getting to know an author. And for Africa project, that author was Edmonton's own Tololwa Mollel. He was invited to attend our school for as a guest author, and so we prepared a special display for him. He was one of our favorite authors, as we had many of his books in our Africa collection.



The children were awed to listen to his voice as he read stories that were familiar to them. His cadence, expression, and accompanying sounds to fit the story enhanced the pleasure of the story.

Concluding Thoughts

I used the examples from our Africa projects many times when doing presentations for other educators. Following are some questions from teachers.

What size is your classroom? Because so many projects are huge, literally, and figuratively, people assume I had an exceptionally large classroom. But, no, I always had a regular sized classroom. We would make space as needed, according to our priorities.

How did you know how to construct these animals? Teachers wondered if I had a reference source to guide me. Again, no. All these projects were designed from the children and I planning and problem solving collaboratively. I knew what materials could be accessed and be realistic, so that was the parameter.

What do the parents think? Support for project learning is earned several ways. Firstly, the administrator must support this work. For that to happen, you need to prove that the curricular outcomes are being met and that evidence for the learning would be provided. Secondly, educating the parents builds their support. On the first *Meet the Teacher* event, I describe what would be happening throughout the year with the children, and explain how evidence of their learning will be shared via documentation, portfolios, etc. But the biggest advocates for building this support come from the children themselves. They are keen, eager, engaged and stimulated to learn. Parents appreciate that.

How do you know what projects to do? I refer to the beginning of the year *What I Want to Learn Chart*, where we brainstorm on more focused topics as interests emerge. Observing and listening to students, I notice more conversation, book choices, and questions about topics, and ask the class if they would like to learn more about it. That often guides us. The project becomes clear when I ask them *How are we going to show what we've learned?*

My reflection: This visit back to the days of the Africa projects has brought joy to my heart as I remember the fun, excitement, pride, and enthusiasm for each wonderful project. There was academic rigor, authentic learning, and globalization. Children experienced culture and life beyond their doorsteps. These projects were in-depth studies and as such helped develop a lifelong disposition for learning. (see Eleanor Duckworth's work.)

Appendix

Four predictable books are included as a sample of how early reading texts can be created to supplement projects. I used clip art to illustrate the text for each page.

- *Have You Seen the Zebra?*
- *Lions*
- *Leopards*
- *Cheetahs*

<p>Have You Seen the Zebra?</p> <p>A Book for Kindergarten</p>	<p>Have you seen the zebra?</p> <p>This is not the zebra. This is the giraffe.</p>
<p>Have you seen the zebra?</p> <p>This is not the zebra. This is the horse.</p>	<p>Have you seen the zebra?</p> <p>This is not the zebra. This is the lion.</p>
<p>Have you seen the zebra?</p> <p>This is not the zebra. This is the donkey.</p>	<p>Have you seen the zebra?</p> <p>This is not the zebra. This is the camel.</p>
<p>Have you seen the zebra?</p> <p>This is not the zebra. This is the elephant.</p>	<p>Have you seen the zebra?</p> <p>This is not the zebra. This is the moose.</p>
<p>Have you seen the zebra?</p> <p>This is not the zebra. This is the rhinoceros.</p>	<p>Have you seen the zebra?</p> <p>This is not the zebra. This is the panda.</p>
<p>Have you seen the zebra?</p> <p>This is not the zebra. This is the hippopotamus.</p>	<p>Have you seen the zebra?</p> <p>Yes! This is the zebra!</p>

Wild Cats – Lions A Book for Kindergarten	This lion is a male. He is the dad.
This lion is a female. She is the mom.	This lion is a cub. It is the baby.
This lion is drinking.	This lion is hunting.
This lion is sleeping.	This lion is the King of the Jungle.

Wild Cats – Leopards A Book for Kindergarten	A leopard has spots.
A leopard sleeps in the trees.	A mother leopard carries her baby.
A leopard hides food in the trees.	A leopard hunts from the trees.
A leopard has sharp teeth.	A leopard is a good hunter.

Wild Cats – Cheetah A Book for Kindergarten	A cheetah has a small head.
A cheetah has spots.	A cheetah has black tear lines.
A cheetah has strong legs.	A cheetah rests in a tree.
A cheetah walks on a log.	A cheetah can run very fast!