My Guinea-Pig is Innocent

Author: Margaret McAllister
Range: Story with an issue
Theme: Overcoming a bully
Teaching notes authors: Gill Howell and Vicky Yates

Synopsis
Pickwick, the stolen guinea-pig, was bought from Bruiser the bully as a pet by Joe. But neither Joe nor Bruiser realise how valuable Pickwick is to Dr Tucker. Joe helps Dr Tucker in her quest to find a cure for Tucker’s disease and finds out that Bruiser isn’t tough after all.

Group or guided reading

Introducing the book

• Look together at the cover and read the title. Ask the children the meaning of ‘innocent’.
• Read the blurb on the back cover. Ask: What do you think a guinea-pig could be guilty of? Who do you think is the narrator of the story? What does the name ‘Bruiser’ tell you about the character?
• What impression does the story title give you? What sort of story do you think this will be, e.g. serious, funny, sad, scary?
• Ask the children to read the contents list. Have you changed your mind about the sort of story this is?

Strategy check

• Ask the children to tell you which strategies they can use when they meet new vocabulary.
• Point out the word ‘meningitis’ on page 7. Ask a volunteer to demonstrate strategies for working it out.
• Find the sentence on line 3 of page 8, ‘Sometimes it’s hard.’. Ask the children to find the main clause and to describe how the sentence is punctuated. How does the punctuation help you make sense of the sentence?

Independent reading

Focus: Explain that you want the children to think about this question while reading: In what way was Pickwick the guinea-pig valuable?

• Observe the strategies the children use when they meet new vocabulary, and prompt them as needed.
• At the end of some of the chapters, encourage them to recount the main points of the story so far.

Returning and responding to the text

• When the children have read the whole story, ask them to describe what happened.
• Why did Curtis think he could get a lot of money for Pickwick?
• Ask the children to say what sort of story this is. Are there any serious issues in the story?
• Ask the children to turn to page 22 and read the last paragraph. What sort of character is Joe? Does he completely blame Bruce for being a bully? Ask them to describe Bruce’s character.
• What does Joe do that will stop Bruce bullying him? Do you think Bruce has learnt his lesson? Why?
• Ask the children to say how they think the author treats the issues of ‘bullying’ and of ‘animals used for research’.
Speaking and listening activities

- Hold a discussion about Joe and Bruce’s characters in the story.
- Talk about the bullying episodes and the characters’ actions and reactions to the bullying.
- As a class or group, debate what to do if the children are confronted with a bully. Devise a list for particularly effective behaviour children could adopt.

Further reading activities

- Ask the children to reread *The Worst of the Vikings* (TreeTops Level 15 Pack A), *The Mean Dream Wonder Machine* (TreeTops Level 15 Pack A) and *My Guinea-Pig is Innocent* by Margaret McAllister. Ask them, in pairs, to list similarities and differences in the stories and write a paragraph describing the author’s style.
- Ask them to read Chapter 8 with a partner, taking turns to read the paragraphs using an expressive tone for the dialogue.

Suggestions for using ICT

- Using a word-processing program, create a paragraph from the story as unpunctuated text for the children.
- Ask them to add the correct punctuation to make sense of the paragraph.
- Ask the children to use a word-processing program to polish up their writing activity.

Writing activities

- Discuss how Joe behaved when he discovered Bruce's fear of syringes.
- Read the first paragraph on page 88.
- Ask the children to suggest what might have happened if Joe had said what he was thinking, instead of reassuring Bruce.
- Encourage the children to write a new ending for the story, describing what happens to Bruce when Joe exaggerates the blood sample incident.
- Ask some of the children to read their new endings to the class.