

Esmeralda's Nest: Teacher Notes.

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Illustrator: Mandy Foot.

Background

Most people are unaware that a pregnant sow in a natural environment makes a nest prior to the birth of her young. Although this takes place over two or three days before birth, I felt the variety of objects that pigs gather during this process would suit a story format spread over a week. Esmeralda is a maiden sow. A maiden sow spends more time nest making.

What is discarded to be reused by a nesting sow tells its own quirky recycling story.

As a Picture Book I 'see' the story set against a background of changeable weather patterns suggesting the effects of global warming and climate change.

This story is intended to reveal both the pig's desire and what an animal loving farmer feels he must do. A portable farrowing pen is close by. Not a sow stall.

I wanted to show country children in the middle of all this activity and how they acquire an 'instinct' for farming through keen observation of the natural world. The story is meant to challenge children to think about the use of sow stalls compared with a sow being left to her own devices.

The main reason that sow stalls are used is to limit the risk of a sow rolling on her young.

I remember my father building a makeshift farrowing pen with a large gap on all four sides so that the risk of pigs being squashed was minimalised. It was much bigger than a sow stall and the mother pig had plenty of room to move around. Once the piglets were

strong enough the sow was able to move out of the farrowing pen to graze with the sheep and cattle.

I think there is room for guided discussion here about the merits of letting a pig do her own thing and intervening to ensure the maximum number of live births.

Esmeralda was a 'house' pig and very much a pet. She had spent time mixing with sheep and cattle. A certain amount of behavioural imprinting had been learnt so that she did the work of a sheepdog and was able to lead stock from one paddock to another.

But an impending birth always meant a single-minded sow.

Know Your Pig Words

Sow. A sow is a female pig.

Boar. A male pig.

Barrow. A castrated male pig.

Trotters. Pigs' feet.

Snout. A pig's nose. It's a very sensitive organ.

Saddleback. Breed of pig which is mostly black with a white saddle across the forequarters.

Pig facts

A Saddleback pig is usually a black pig with a white saddle across its forequarters.

Esmeralda is a Saddleback pig.

The gestation period for a pig is 112 days. Compare this to sheep, dogs, goats and humans.

Pigs are born both front and rear presentation. I was amazed that the runt was not necessarily the last pig to be born in a litter but it was the one that had to be watched in case the sow accidentally rolled on it.

Piglets attach themselves to the same teat while feeding from the sow.

Pigs can make wonderful pets. Many people believe they are as intelligent as dogs.

Esmeralda could recognise the school bus. Pigs have very good hearing. If Esmeralda was grazing with sheep she'd leave off and walk towards the paddock gate to wait for my sister and myself after the bus dropped us off.

Because pigs don't sweat it's important that they are kept cool on hot days. Esmeralda loved wallowing in the mud on the edge of the waterhole.

Many believe that pigs are dirty animals. If pigs can free range they'll wee and pooh in the same place.

What about your dog?

Curriculum Ideas.

Listening, speaking..... grunting and movement.

Given the age the story targets, creative movement is a useful tool to extend children's understanding of what drives Esmeralda.

This story can be used as an introduction to movement.

I would suggest that the children are familiar with the parts of a pig such as the snout, curly tail, ears, teats etc.

In a classroom or a dedicated activity space ask children to find a space.

Emphasize it's a special space. Their space.

Insist on quiet as there are special words that will help to find 'your space'.

I always start a movement or drama lesson with children finding their own space. If there is a piano that can be used for children to explore the area outside their space this can be a useful tool. If no piano use a tambour or tambourine. Or if you are really keen a grunting sound track that can be easily switched on and off.

When the piano/sound stops children must quickly go back to their spot. I do this a number of times and also get children to move without bumping into anyone else.

Next when the children leave their space and walk around the room tell them they have to listen for a special pig word. When they hear the pig word, they have to hurry quickly back to their space without bumping others.

Let's say the word is TAIL. You say the word after the sound has stopped and then count backwards from ten. The children need to go back to their space and by the time you get to zero you hopefully will have thirty STILL curly tails.

Really praise the efforts here.

If possible, relax the children out of their poses so they can watch those who want to show their tails while still in their personal space.

From here do the same with other body parts and then if the children can handle this extend it into a partner activity with children closest to their own personal space. From here you can increase the number of children per group without using the personal space. I would establish the routine and structure first so that children know their boundaries. It might only be for fifteen to twenty minutes initially.

The key here is the development of listening skills, the prior observation of 'everything pig' and the importance of a personal respectful space.

There'll be lots of noise but if the boundaries are clearly understood and practised that's fine.

I'd also use different kinds of walking when children are leaving and returning to their personal space. As Esmeralda waddles then this could be the movement between spaces you use most often.

Finally use the story to get children to **SHOW** how Esmeralda is feeling. The whole space is used. This is an ideal time to go back over body parts as Esmeralda walks around.

'Make sure your tail is curly Esmeralda etc.'

The previously established personal space is the beginning of each day's nest building activities.

Robert Moore spent much of his early life on a farm in Tasmania. His parents grew raspberries and hops. Sheep and cattle were kept as a sideline. There was always at least one cow to milk and often pigs to feed.

Esmeralda was one of these pigs.

Robert attended Hobart Teachers' College and taught in Tasmania before going to the UK where he attended Rose Bruford College of Speech and Drama. He also taught in Primary and Secondary schools in London.

On returning to Australia he lived in Darwin before settling in Adelaide where he taught Junior Primary children and specialised in Drama in a variety of R-7 environments.

He has also acted in a number of plays, created performance art projects and directed community arts festivals.

He is an author of several children's books and adult titles. He won the initial *Feast Short Story Competition* and as co-writer of *Breathe Easy* a musical play on asthma, he was awarded a Special Commendation from Asthma SA.

Until recently he lectured in Children's Writing for the Professional Writing course at Adelaide College for the Arts.