

1999

## A thematic unit for a reading program in grade two oral history

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### Recommended Citation

Daugherty, Tracy M., "A thematic unit for a reading program in grade two oral history" (1999). *Graduate Research Papers*. 361.

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### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present the benefits of a literature-based reading program. Included in this paper is an example of a literature-based unit presented to a second grade class. This instructional development unit included several components for student learning.

**A Thematic Unit for a Reading  
Program in Grade Two  
Oral History**

**A Journal Article  
Submitted to the  
Department of Curriculum and Instruction  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Education  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA**

**by  
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December, 1999**

This Journal Article by: Tracy M. Daugherty

Entitled: A Thematic Unit for a Reading Program in Grade Two

Oral History

has been approved as meeting the research article requirement for the  
Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

12/30/99

Date Approved

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to present the benefits of a literature-based reading program. Included in this paper is an example of a literature-based unit presented to a second grade class. This instructional development unit included several components for student learning.

In recent years, the media as well as concerned citizens have been paying attention to the condition of the American school system. The increased discussion of the whole-language vs. phonics debate has sparked a political issue. Whole language is a threatening idea for those with a vested interest in the status quo. It counters the established system so deeply that it has the power to affect economic and political aspects of education as directly as it affects the learners and teachers (Edelsky, Altwerger, & Flores, 1991).

Whole language is surrounded by confusion. It is often described incorrectly by educators who proclaim to be whole language advocates. It is a concept that is difficult for many teachers, parents, the general public, and students to grasp. (Cambourne, 1988). The term "whole language" is also used as a marketing technique to sell educational materials that have little to do with this approach to learning (Edelsky et al., 1991).

To clarify the confusion over what whole language is, a definition that seems to aid people in understanding it is that whole language is an instructional development concept that has many components. In many cases, the public as well as educators have not thoroughly studied how the components are related. The whole language concept is child-centered and literature-based focusing on children creating meaning through involvement in the language process (Edelsky et al., 1991;

Froese, 1991; Goodman, 1986; Newman, 1985). Meaning is created through a transaction with the whole, meaningful text. It is a fusion of the background knowledge the reader brings to the text and what the text itself offers (Edelsky et al., 1991; Goodman, 1986). If children are involved in language functions that are closely related to their own purpose, they experience language learning as natural and meaningful (Goodman, 1986). Through reading and interacting with others over the meaning created, comprehension abilities are developed (Routmann, 1991; Smith, 1988).

In developing reading programs, some educators subscribe to the notion that once a child has decoded a word after applying phonics rules meaning will follow. Rather than viewing reading as "getting the word," teachers who implement the theoretical base of the whole language concepts into their reading programs view reading as a process of creating meaning.

### Whole Language and Basal Reader Series

Many teachers are required to teach from a basal reader series selected by the school. Too many times these series approach reading as if it was a hierarchy of skills to be taught through isolated exercises. Unfortunately, many basal programs do not look at the reading as a whole

unit of meaning. They focus on letter-sound relationships and accurate word identification. Some programs have fragmented language into small units causing learning to read to be more abstract, thus more difficult. This approach can cause children's interest in reading to decline. The assumptions made by the creators of such reading programs do not follow what we know about how language functions and how it develops (Newman, 1985).

Goodman (1986) suggests that those responsible for developing basal reading series reevaluate the components of their systems and focus more on whole units of quality literature. He recommends that more time be devoted to reading and less time to sequential and controlled formats.

#### Literature-Based Approach to a Reading Program

One way a teacher can extend a reading program is through literature-based thematic units. These units, selected by the teacher, can allow students to gain valuable insights into reading through experiences with many different genres, topics, and related options for expressive activities presented through learning centers (Langer, 1995; Harms & Lettow, 1998).

Such a print-rich learning environment is an important factor in extending the reading program. It can allow children to take ownership of their reading experiences as they are provided with opportunities to use the ideas gained from their reading (Smith, 1988). Children need opportunities to choose literature experiences and have options for extending the ideas gained in their reading experiences, such as retelling a story through story cards, puppets, or a rebus; illustrating a favorite part; or constructing a book (Harms & Lettow, 1998). Children's comprehension of stories is strengthened through interactions with peers in pairs, small groups, or whole class experiences (Routmann, 1994). These experiences also give the teacher insight into the children's thinking—language and personal—social abilities (Cambourne, 1988; Huck, Hepler, Hickman, & Kiefer, 1997).

#### A Thematic Unit: Oral History

The literature-based thematic unit I chose to develop is oral history. Oral history can be defined as the recollections and reminiscences of living people about their past (Mehaffy & Sitton, 1977). In this unit, the different aspects of the language arts were integrated. The children taped (listening) or took notes (writing) of older people's stories. Then, the tapes

were transcribed, and the notes were edited (writing) for stories to be read (reading).

### Value of the Content and the Process of Collecting Oral History

A major advantage of collecting oral history is that children can explore and begin to appreciate their heritage. Through oral history collections, the students learn to become historians, investigating real events from real people's lives. They are also given the opportunity to examine the same events through many perspectives, maybe even through conflicting reports (Hickey, 1991). Another benefit of oral history in the classroom is that it can be done relatively inexpensively without sophisticated concepts or technical expertise. A cassette tape recorder is generally easy for the children to operate and available in most school buildings (Mehaffy & Sitton, 1977).

Perhaps the most important thing students take away from this activity is the knowledge that they have become better acquainted with someone who is older than they and that they truly have come to value that person's experiences. Also, those who have been interviewed have discussed experiences from their past with someone who was interested in hearing about their lives (Johnson & Johnson, 1996).

### Implementation of an Oral History Project

This unit was presented to my second grade class. Oral histories were an interest to this age group because of the close ties these children still maintain with their extended families, which include their grandparents and older relatives (Huck et al, 1997).

#### Introduction of Unit

As an introduction to this unit, I began by reading aloud the picture book, The Keeping Quilt (1988), by Patricia Polacco (New York: Simon & Schuster). After reading and discussing this story, each child was given a cloth square to complete with their family. As a group, we discussed how to design our squares so that they would represent the historical value of our family. Ways in which our ancestors immigrated to this country, early occupations of our relatives, and family portraits were the most popular ideas mentioned. The children took these ideas home, and with their families, they discussed their family history and decided on one event to depict on the cloth square. The families were free to choose any event or person they felt to be an important part of where they are today. The families were encouraged to be creative in their designs. Many children used fabric paint, needlepoint, material scraps, or permanent marker to complete their square. As the squares came back to school, the children

sewed their pieces onto a large piece of material. When the quilt was completed and ready for display, each child shared the story associated with their square. From this experience, the children began to feel the importance and excitement of learning from the past.

### Interviewing techniques

Oral history was explained to the children as the collecting of people's stories from the past as they told them on tape. The information was to be gathered in a question and answer type format. Machart's (1979) suggestions for elementary school students' collection of oral histories prepared the children for the collection process. The pupils could choose to interview elderly relatives and acquaintances, construct family histories, trace histories of local businesses, explore the history and traditions of a local school, or research the history of a particular farm.

Before conducting the interview, the children were to determine specifically what they wanted to learn from the person. A list of possible questions was compiled by each child and then discussed with the teacher and the class. The interviewee could be given the questions in advance so they would be prepared for the interview. The interview was to be done in a comfortable setting and not last more than one hour. If the students did

not have quality tape recorders, they could check out one through the school.

In order for the students to better understand the process, a retired teacher who continues to be active in the school served as a model and was interviewed in a practice session. Questions about school in the “old days” were prepared by the class before the interview. I served as the interviewer and then transcribed the interview from the tape.

### Literature-Based Support for Oral History Collection

To support this theme, several learning centers, for the most part with a literature base, were presented.

#### Sustaining Centers

The centers were available throughout the school year. Their content reflected the present theme study. These centers—listening/reading, author/illustrator, interesting objects, and bookmaking—were a part of the oral history study.

- **Listening/Reading Center**

Literature pieces with accompanying teacher-made cassette tapes offered models of oral history. The works were based on real people's experiences in the past. The stories in picture book form were told in first and third person. A ballad was also included.

### Picture Books—first person

Bigmama's (1991), by Donald Crews, New York: Greenwillow.

Shortcut (1992), by Donald Crews, New York: Greenwillow.

In Coal Country (1987), by Judith Hendershot (Thomas B. Allen, II.), New York: Knopf.

Tar Beach (1991), by Faith Ringgold, New York: Crown.

### Picture books—third person

My Great-Aunt Arizona (1992), by Gloria Houston (Susan Condie Lamb, II.), New York: HarperCollins.

Roxaboxen (1991), by Alice McLerran (Barbara Cooney, II), New York: Lothrop.

Miss Maggie (1983), by Cynthia Rylant (Thomas Di Grazia, II.), New York: Dutton.

The Relatives Came (1985), by Cynthia Rylant (Stephen Gammell, II), New York: Bradbury.

### Poetry

Let Freedom Ring: A Ballad of Martin Luther King, Jr. (1992), by Myra Cohn Livingston (Samuel Byrd, II.), New York: Holiday.

- Author/Illustrator Center

This center gave students an opportunity to gain insight into how an author's writing is influenced by life experiences and how the author engages in the writing process. The author, Patricia Polacco, was featured for this theme because many of her stories are based on her childhood experiences. The center contained biographical information about the author and selected works and related expressive activity.

Literature Experience:

Chicken Sunday (1992), by Patricia Polacco, New York: Philomel.

The Keeping Quilt (1988), by Patricia Polacco, New York: Simon & Schuster.

Meteor (1987), by Patricia Polacco, New York: Dodd Mead.

Thunder Cake (1990), by Patricia Polacco, New York: Philomel.

Expressive Activity:

1. Select two picture books by Patricia Polacco and construct a Venn Diagram comparing and contrasting the two works.

2. In Thunder Cake, Babushka helps her granddaughter overcome her fear of thunderstorms. Write about a time when someone helped you overcome a fear.

3. Think about the events in the book, Chicken Sunday. Have you ever had a special wish? How did you make it come true?

- Interesting Objects Center

This center contained articles used in the past that offered sensory exploration. Objects, such as toys, tools, and clothing, were the most popular items to examine. Because of the size of the equipment, a trip to a farm was taken to view a collection of antique farm machinery. The collector told of the advancements made in the field of agriculture. The items and experiences associated with this center provided exciting discussions and interesting ideas for stories.

- Bookmaking Center

This center contained directions and materials for making books. Information gained through oral history interviews, or items explored in the Interesting Object Center energized the students to write and then to publish in a bound book. These books became a part of the Listening/Reading Center for the peers to read.

Center Specific to the Theme

- Center: Storytelling

Literature Experience: Listen to/read Roxaboxen (1991), by Alice McLerran (Barbara Cooney, Il.), New York: Lothrop.

Expressive Activity: Interview your classmates as they recreate the characters.

- Center: Interviewing

Literature Experience: Listen to/read Miss Maggie (1983), by Cynthia Rylant (Thomas Di Grazia, Il.), New York: Dutton.

Expressive Activity: After hearing this story, imagine the questions an oral historian would have asked Nat. Develop an interview with a classmate. One can be the interviewer; the other can play the role of Nat.

### Completion of the Oral History Project

After reviewing some of the topic choices, the students decided what they wanted to learn more about. They made a brief list of people to interview who would know about the topic. A letter went home to their parents explaining the oral history project and asking them to help their children find people to interview. The students worked with partners or in small groups to develop a list of questions to ask those to be interviewed. With their partners, they practiced interviewing each other using the tape recorder.

As the children brought their tapes back to school, they played their interviews with the class. The class enjoyed hearing the oral histories. Some of the tapes contained stories of the first jobs the older people held.

Many of these jobs were as farm hands. They shared stories of how much work was done by hand, and when they rode their family's first tractor. The number of acres farmed and the number of animals a typical farm raised were also shared. The children learned that many of the older people interviewed owned only one pair of shoes and two pairs of pants when they were children. One tape was the story of how one man began the town baseball league that many of the children were familiar with. At first, the teams played in a farmer's field.

Listening to the questions asked by their peers on the tapes gave the students ideas of what they would like to ask a person in another interview. A parent volunteer showed them how to transcribe the interview from the tape. A thank-you letter was written by each student to their interviewee, expressing appreciation for sharing their story.

### Conclusions

Thematic units based on quality literature nurtures children's interests in reading as well as their thinking-language abilities. The oral history unit presented to these second graders gave them not only the opportunity to appreciate quality literature but to appreciate the historical origins of these stories. Through the experiences in this thematic unit, I observed the students and noted their responses. They looked forward to

each reading class with high expectations for themselves as well as their peers. They were eager to share their stories and were interested in those of their peers. As a result of the unit, the class has started an interesting group of oral histories.

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