Winter: a literature-based unit for kindergarten

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Winter: A Literature-Based Unit for Kindergarten

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Abstract

A literature-based program in a classroom can provide many opportunities for children to engage in the language process. As a result, children's thinking-language abilities are extended and their enthusiasm for involvement in classroom learning experiences is enhanced. Literature experiences representative of the different genres add dimensions to the study of themes and topics.

A literature base and related expressive activity for the topic of winter in kindergarten is presented in this article. The subtopics of the unit include seasonal changes, weather, outdoor activities, clothing and changes in animal behavior. Teacher-directed and student-initiated activities through learning centers are presented.
Concern has been raised about the disappearance of childhood (Elkin, 1988). Children are losing the opportunity to engage in developmentally-appropriate activities that are meaningful to them. Such educational opportunities involve activity, or hands-on experience. Children are becoming more inactive and driven by computer and video games. It is possible that modern technology is stifling children’s creativity.

Value of a literature-Based Language Arts Program

Young children’s literacy is nurtured through activity that involves participation in real experiences that are meaningful to them (Holdaway, 1979; Vygotsky, 1962). In such school programs, young children are able to explore naturally the purpose of reading and writing while involved in experiential literacy learning. These learning experiences result in new understandings and extended thinking language abilities (Strickland & Morrow, 1989).

Many factors in a learning environment can enhance young children’s emerging literacy. Print-rich environments offer learners opportunities to explore concepts of print and the meaning of the written message (Clay, 1975). If literature, representative of the different genres and related expressive activity, is available in the school environment, children can be actively engaged in meaningful experiences that connect
with their prior knowledge (Smith, 1994; Harms & Lettow, 1998). They will begin to look at literature as a key component to their learning.

Other important environmental factors are adults modeling of desired language behaviors and opportunities to interact with others considering the meaning created through involvement in the language process. Time, space, and materials also provide opportunities for children to become a part of an active learning community (Morrow, 1997).

Literature-Based Language Arts Extended Across the Curriculum

Literature-based experiences can enhance a kindergarten program. Incorporating the different genres into a study adds to its dimensions (Langer, 1995). Literature experiences evolving around a theme, topic, genre, author, or literacy element can be integrated into the areas of the curriculum, providing content and opportunities to engage in the functions of language. Such a program can offer young children meaningful learning experiences and can encourage them to become independent and collaborative readers and writers (Routman 1994: Harms & Lettow, 1998).

Literature-Based Language Arts Extended to Science

As a kindergarten teacher, I have engaged in the process of integrating literature-based language arts into the science unit of winter. The seasons in Iowa are meaningful to children because their activities are affected by the seasons. In the study, these winter concepts are
explored: seasonal changes, weather, children's outdoor activities, clothing, and changes in animal behavior. The unit includes teacher-directed activities and student-initiated activities presented in sustaining centers and centers specific to the unit.

**Unit Introduction**

The unit of winter can be introduced to the whole group of children as a problem-solving issue. The changes that children see occurring in the environment can be listed on large wall charts. An ongoing list of vocabulary for seasonal changes, weather, outdoor activities, clothing, and changes in animal behavior can be developed. After each word chart is created, the children can choose five words to copy into their winter word books. An illustration can be created as a picture clue for each word. The word books, which are spiral-bound notebooks with wide-lined paper, can be kept at the student's table for reference. Words related to winter can be added to the word books during journal time or throughout the unit study.

Another introductory activity can be the teacher reading aloud, *Winter: Discovering the Seasons*, by Louis Santrey and photographed by Francene Sabin (New York: Troll, 1983). It is an excellent information book that displays the seasons through photographs. The winter concepts of animals in the winter and winter weather are specifically depicted. From
this experience, the children can search at home for magazine pictures and photographs of winter to create a picture wall of winter concepts.

Teacher-Directed Activities

The teacher can present many activities that promote the understandings associated with the strands.

Seasonal Changes

The goal for this strand is for children to be able to observe, discuss, and differentiate between the seasons, drawing particular attention to winter. From the group listed below, the teacher can read aloud many poems that describe the season of winter.


“Snow Toward Evening”


“Snow Storm”


“Winter Swing”


“Old Elm Speaks”


“On the First Snowfall”
"January Thaw"


"River in Winter"

"Snow Grate"

"Snow on the Trees"

"What's Left of Fall"

The poems can be copied onto sheets of large chart paper so the children can follow along with the reading. Individual copies of all the poems can be glued into the children’s poetry notebooks and then illustrated. The children can use the poetry notebooks as a reference of concepts and their spelling as they write, or for reading enjoyment as the unit progresses. These notebooks can be sent home at the end of the unit to extend poetry activity in the family.

The teacher can extend the strand, seasonal changes, with other read-aloud experiences and accompanying hands-on activities. After reading the picture books, *Something is Going to Happen* (1998), by Charolette Zolotow, (Catherine Stock, ll. New York: Harper & Row), and *Snow* (1998) by Uri Shulevit (New York: Farrar), the children can work in small groups, sequencing the five pictures associated with each book in the correct order. They include the approach of a winter storm, snowfall, and the aftermath of a snowstorm on the landscape. The children can look
for clues in the pictures, such as the color of the sky or the amount of snow on the ground. Another children's book that can be presented is *We Be Warm Till Springtime Comes* (1980), by Lillie D. Chaffin (Lloyd Bloom, Il. New York: Macmillan). A discussion can follow the reading of the story that leads the students to see that some type of heat source is needed to keep warm as the seasons change and it becomes cooler outdoors. The teacher also can read aloud *The Five Dog Night* (1993), by Eileen Christelow (New York: Clarion). This whimsical picture book portrays a man using more and more dogs to cover himself up as the temperature drops. The student can make dog stick puppets to retell the story.

**Weather**

The goal of the weather strand is for children to recognize the atmospheric changes, the temperature changes, and the accumulation of moisture known as snow. The children can explore with literature as it relates to measuring various temperatures, snow accumulation, and the climate outdoors. These examples of poetry can be read from charts and added to the poetry notebook:


“Snowflakes”


“On the First Snowfall”

"Frost"

"Snow"

The teacher can read aloud Exploring Winter (1984), by Sandra Marke (New York: Atheneum). This information book gives excellent directions for setting up a classroom weather station outdoors. The weather station can be used to measure snow accumulation and temperatures. The materials necessary for the weather station include a plastic thermometer, a plastic ruler, a thin piece of plywood measuring 18"x24", a drill, and some wire. The thermometer and ruler are wired onto the board. The whole board is then wired onto a steel fence post and placed in the ground. The children can take turns daily checking and recording the data collected from the weather station. The data can be recorded on a large graph on the classroom wall.

This book, Exploring Winter, also demonstrates placing various thermometers in, on top of, and under the snow to compare temperatures. The class can also place thermometers inside winter apparel, such as a mitten, hat, and coat, and compare readings. Temperature readings from other areas of the school can also be collected and discussed.

An additional teacher-directed activity can be presented after reading Snow (1995), by Nancy Elizabeth Wallace (New York: Artists &
Writers Guild). With the help of a guest artist, the students can be instructed in the art of origami and create origami snowflakes from white cardstock and copy paper.

After reading aloud *Snow is Falling* (1986), by Franklyn Brandley (New York: Harper & Row), the children will be directed to see patterns in the winter weather and become more aware of weather forecasts on television and radio broadcasts. On a large wall chart, students can daily chart the symbols created by the teacher for weather conditions, such as snowy, sunny, cloudy, rainy, and windy. The daily temperature from the thermometer in the outdoor weather station and the snow accumulation can also be noted on the chart.

The read-aloud experience with *The Snow Speaks* (1992), by Nancy White Carlstrom (Boston: Little, Brown), can develop an understanding of the water content of wet and dry snow. The students can weigh wet and dry snow. They can record the measurements on a wall chart.

**Outdoor Activities**

The goal of this strand is for children to explore firsthand many activities during snowy weather. The teacher can read aloud *The Snowy Day* (1962), by Ezra Jack Keats (New York: Scholastic). After hearing the story, the children can put on their winter clothing for out of doors and can
participate in activities in the snow. The children can use objects, such as sticks, rakes, brooms, shovels, and their hands and feet to make various tracks and designs in the snow. When the children return to the classroom, they can work in groups of four and use markers on white butcher paper to draw the tracks and designs they had made and observed outdoors. The children also can listen to and chant poems to be placed in their notebooks, such as the poems, “Velvet Shoes” by Elinor Wylie from *Winter Poems* (1995), New York: Scholastic), and “Footprints,” by Jane Yolen from *Snow, Snow* (1998), (New York: Wordsong).

On another day, the teacher can read aloud *Snow Angel* (1981), by Jean Marzollo (Jacqueline Rogers, II. New York: Scholastic), and *Snow Fun* (1981), by Caroline Anne Levine (Tom Huffman, II. New York: Watts). These two books can again lead the class to dress for winter play outdoors. On this outdoor adventure, children can create snow angels, play a tag game called Fox and Goose, and go sledding on a small hill in the schoolyard.

These books, *Sky Dragon* (1982), by Ron Wegen (New York: Greenwillow), and *The Snow Whale* (1996), by Caroline Pitcher (Jackie Morris, II. San Francisco: Sierra Club), can be a part of another read-aloud experience. From these literature experiences, the whole school can be inspired to become involved in a snow sculpture event.
Winter Clothing

The goal of this strand is to identify the different clothing children need to wear to stay warm in the winter and how the materials and fabrics differ from the other seasons of the year. One read aloud book that can be presented by the teacher or on a teacher-made cassette tape is *The Jacket I Wear in the Snow* (1989), by Shirley Neitzel (New York: Scholastic). The children can listen to the story and then discuss the spectrum of clothing the story character wears to play outdoors in the winter. The children can take turns dressing an oaktag child, constructed by the teacher, with felt clothing pieces resembling the ones from the story.

From the experience with the picture book, *The Mitten Tree* (1997), by Candace Christiansen (Elaine Greenstein, ll. Golden, CO: Fulcrum), the children can collect coins, sort and count them, and purchase mittens to be donated to needy children in a local preschool.

The teacher can introduce the concept of winter coats by reading *The Rag Coat* (1991), by Lauren Mills (New York: Little, Brown & Co.) and *A New Coat for Anna* (1986), by Harriet Ziefert (Anita Lobel, ll. New York: Atheneum). Then the students can explore and sort different fabric scraps, such as nylon, cotton, wool, lace, fleece, and silk. Discussion can focus on the best coats for winter and why. The children can glue fabric scraps onto
shoebox lids to show the range of coat warmth from the most warm to the least warm.

**Changes in Animal Behavior**

A final strand in the study of winter is the changes that occur in animal behavior as winter approaches. The goal of this component is for children to become aware of and understand how and why some animals change their patterns of behavior as the seasons change. These two poems, "Waiting for Birds," by David Kherdian, edited by Barbara Rogasky, in *Winter Poems* (1994), New York: Scholastic; and "The Buck in the Snow," by Edna St. Vincent Millay, edited by Barbara Rogasky, in *Winter Poems* (1994), New York: Scholastic, can be read aloud by the teacher, chanted by the children from chart pages, and then pasted in their poetry notebooks.

On a day when the geese are migrating South, a poem by Joanne Ryder from *Inside a Turtle's Shell*, (New York: Macmillan, 1985), which begins "A long flapping V..." and related picture books, *The Snow Goose* (1993), by Pirkko Vianio (New York: North-South), and *Goodbye Geese* (1991), by Nancy White Carlstrom, (Ed Young, Il. New York: Philomel), can be read aloud to initiate an outdoor observation experience. Also, the children can be encouraged to observe other changes in animal behavior
as winter arrives. The teacher can record their observations daily on a chart.

The read aloud experience with the picture books, *Time to Sleep* (1997), by Denise Flemming (New York: Holt), *Sleepy Bear* (1982), by Lydia Dabcovich (New York: Unicorn), and *The Mitten* (1989), by Jan Brett (New York: Scholastic), can lead to the construction of stick puppet images to serve as prompts in retelling these stories. The children also can dramatize Jan Brett’s popular picture book, *The Mitten*, by crawling in and out of a large cardboard box painted like a mitten as a teacher-made cassette tape of the story is played. After listening to *Keep Looking!* (1989), by Millicint Selsam and Joyce Hunt (Normann Chartier, Il. New York: Macmillan), the children can be introduced to the importance of animals maintaining an adequate food supply and also having a warm shelter through the winter. The children can construct bird feeders with pinecones, peanut butter, and birdseed to hang up outdoors to supplement the birds’ food supply.

**Student-Initiated Activities**

Learning Centers can provide options for children’s learning. The sustaining centers established for the school year can provide a secure, predictable, learning environment that reflects the content of each unit of
study. Also, centers that focus on specific experiences of a unit can be offered.

**Sustaining Centers**

The centers that can be made available throughout the school year include reading/listening, poetry, author/illustrator, interesting objects, and scrap centers.

- **Reading/Listening Center**
  
  Picture books with accompanying teacher-made cassette tapes can present the themes of seasonal changes, weather, outdoor activities, clothing, and changes in animal behavior (see the Appendix).

- **Poetry Center**
  
  Poems related to the concepts of winter can be presented on sheets of chart paper so the children throughout the classroom can view them as the teacher reads them aloud and then encourages the students to read lines. These poems can be photocopies for the student's poetry notebooks. At the conclusion of the unit, the poetry notebooks can be sent home with the students (see the Appendix).

- **Author/Illustrator Center**
  
  The reason for author/illustrator Ezra Jack Keats and his works to be the focus of this center for the unit is young children's close identification with his book, *The Snowy Day* (New York: Scholastic, 1962).
It tells of a young child’s experience in the snow. Other works by the author/illustrator can be included.


- Interesting Objects Center

  Many interesting objects related to winter can be displayed for the children to manipulate, thus having many sensory experiences. Objects can include winter clothing apparel, such as hats, scarves, and mittens; toy sleds; foam snowflakes; a child-safe thermometer; snow domes to shake; plastic animals to use in acting out hibernation; and magazine photos of winter activities.

- Scrap Center

  The scrap center can offer materials for graphic expression. Examples of scraps at this center can be thin white foam meat trays, cotton batting, fabric scraps, spools, and buttons. These art supplies can be included: different sizes and colors of construction paper pieces,
tagboard, cardboard, shoe boxes, magazines, magic markers, crayons, glitter, glue, tape, staplers, and writing paper.

Centers Specific to the Science Unit: Winter

The goal of these literature-based centers with accompanying expressive activities is to extend the concepts of the unit.

• Seasonal Snapshots

   Goal: Students will become more attune to the distinguishing elements of each season of the year.


   Expressive Activity: Students will examine and sort out photographs with images of the different seasons and match them with the correct season.

• Outdoor Adventures

   Goal: Students will explore different outdoor activities and create original works of art by cutting, folding and arranging paper to create illustrations.


   Expressive Activity: Students will discuss outdoor activities in the snow. They will use various types and colors of paper as well as different
writing materials to create origamic, or layered, pictures of outdoor winter activities as are presented in the book.

**Winter Sort**

**Goal:** Students will sort out winter and summer clothing items.


**Expressive Activity:** Students can sort out the teacher-made clothing items into two piles, one for summer, and one for winter. The clothing items are made of pellon and can be placed onto two oaktag child figures. The winter clothing includes stocking caps, scarves, mittens, gloves, earmuffs, boots, coats, and snowpants. The summer clothing includes shorts, tank tops, sandals, swimsuits, sunglasses, summer hats and beach towels. As the children listen to the tape of the story, they can use the pellon pieces to dress the child for winter.

**Dressed for Winter**

**Goal:** Students will become aware of their image and other images in a winter environment.

Expressive Activity: The students can use oil crayons to draw full body pictures of themselves dressed for winter weather accompanied by other images such as snow, snowflakes, snow people, and sleds.

• Arctic Fives

Goal: The concept of counting by five will be developed along with the winter images of animals in the Arctic from the read-along experience of *Arctic Fives Arrive* (1996), by Elinor J. Pinczes, (New York: Scholastic). The students can work in groups of four to cut out and assemble from oaktag the puppets representing the animal images in the story, five of each: snow owls, polar bears, ermine, walrus, arctic hares, and musk oxen. The puppets will be used to prompt the counting by fives as the story is retold.

• Polar Bear Paintings

Goal: The images of polar bears are explored through the graphic arts.


Expressive Activity: Students can use tempera paints to create paintings of Arctic polar bears as depicted in the story. When the paintings are dry, torn paper scraps of different sizes, colors, and textures can be glued onto the polar bears.
• Whose Tracks?

  Goal: Students can learn track identification in the snow.


  Expressive Activity: Students can match picture cards of animals with cards of their tracks.

Conclusions

  By utilizing the vast resource of quality children's literature, a classroom can become a highly successful literature-based learning environment. As a result, students can become actively engaged in a unit of study. They can take ownership of their learning experiences and have greater success because they truly have become members of their classroom community. When children see themselves as learners, their confidence grows and so does their ability to gain knowledge.

  In a literature-based unit, students can make connections with their prior knowledge, thus expanding their concept and related vocabulary base. A literature-based unit allows children to choose activities related to their interests and thinking-language abilities. Thus, a literature-based approach in any classroom can provide vast opportunities for student success.
Specific to my own classroom, this unit has much potential for in-depth learning. It will be very exciting and relevant to the children. I am looking forward to launching the winter unit and seeing the activities unfold as the unit progresses. I also am planning to develop units for spring and fall.
References


Appendix

Bibliography for sustaining centers

Seasonal Changes


Weather


**Outdoor Activity**


**Winter Clothing**


**Changes in Animal Behaviors**


**Poetry**


“Canada Geese”

“Winter Swing”


“Avalanche”

“Broken String”

“Old Elm Speaks”

"Lying on Things"

"Like a Giant in a Towel"


"The Snow Fall"


"Snowflakes"


"On the First Snowfall"

"January Thaw"

"The First Day of Spring"


"Night Snow"

"Snowy Morning"

"Winter Dark"

"Winter Cardinal"

"Weather Report"


"A long flapping V..."

"A cold wind..."

“Almost Spring”

“Blizzard”


“January”

“The Snow Fall”


“frost”

“snow”


“Winter Choosing”

“The Cardinal”

“Winter Finch”