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A literature base to promote peer discussion groups in a third-grade reading program

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A literature base to promote peer discussion groups in a third-grade reading program

Abstract

A decided trend in the literature-based reading program movement in the elementary school is the discussion of ideas that have been generated during the reading process. These interactions with peers and teachers can assist children in constructing meaning from the text and in considering alternative interpretations of the text, thus extending their thinking-language abilities.

To extend discussion in a third-grade classroom, an annotated list of picture books to accompany some of the designated themes of the reading program have been developed. An example teacher-directed lesson to promote inference-making through discussion is also included.

A Literature Base to Promote Peer Discussion Groups in a
Third-Grade Reading Program

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by

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Abstract

A decided trend in the literature-based reading program movement in the elementary school is the discussion of ideas that have been generated during the reading process. These interactions with peers and teachers can assist children in constructing meaning from the text and in considering alternative interpretations of the text, thus extending their thinking-language abilities.

To extend discussion in a third-grade classroom, an annotated list of picture books to accompany some of the designated themes of the reading program have been developed. An example teacher-directed lesson to promote inference-making through discussion is also included.

Fully functioning citizens in our contemporary society need to be able to listen carefully and critically and communicate clearly their thoughts and feelings (Langer, 1995). In response to these societal needs, schools need to offer students many language opportunities that will enable them to develop into competent, literate citizens.

Business and industry repeatedly tell schools that superficial literacy is no longer enough in our increasingly complex and technological society (Almasi, 1995). Unfortunately, much of conventional schooling does not energize students to connect their abilities and background experiences to school programs. Too frequently, teachers question students with the correct answer already in mind, thus promoting shallow responses and negative attitudes toward school in general (Eeds & Peterson, 1997).

Literature-Based Reading Programs

In the case of literature-based reading instruction, professional literature abounds with theoretical formulations of how children learn language and how to develop literacy programs that will foster personal-social and thinking-language abilities. Literature-based reading programs are highly recommended. Such programs nurture literacy by emphasizing that children create meaning while engaged in the language processes (Goodman, 1986; Routman, 1991).

In a literature-based program, the classroom offers a print-rich learning environment filled with quality literature representing the

different genres. Such an environment extends the dimensions of learning by offering many models of language and in-depth experiences with content (Langer, 1995). Furthermore, literature experiences enhance children's personal-social abilities by developing their imaginations, giving them new perspectives of their own lives and of the world and showing them how others live and have lived (Huck, Hepler, Hickman & Kiefer, 1997). Coupled with a print-rich environment, a literature-based program should offer developmentally appropriate experiences that are naturally appealing to a particular age group. In such an environment, students can learn to make meaningful choices for learning experiences and to take charge of their learning (Routman, 1991).

To facilitate a literature-based program, longer periods of time need to be provided so children will be able to extend their ideas and make connections among the language arts and graphic and performing processes while involved in meaningful expressive activities. Other important factors need to be considered in order for the maximum amount of student achievement to be gained, such as flexible grouping that includes individual activity and small and large groupings of students.

The teacher's role in a literature-based reading program is significant as in all programs. First, the teacher needs to be knowledgeable of quality children's literature from the different genres that is developmentally

appropriate. From this store of knowledge, the teacher needs to develop and maintain a print-rich environment that is secure and predictable, provides many options for learning, connects the processes of learning, and encourages student response (Camborne, 1988; Huck, et al., 1997; Routman, 1991; Harms & Lettow, 1998).

The teacher must realize that individual growth, not achievement of absolute levels, is the goal of a literature-based reading program (Smith, 1995). Observing children who are actively responding to literature is a valuable source of assessment. Informed decisions can be made about further instruction based on these observations (Kooy & Wells, 1996). Other forms of qualitative assessment, such as portfolios, student journals, teacher logs, student-teacher conferences and checklists, assist the teacher in planning activities and discussions that will meet the students' needs.

When teachers serve as facilitators, discussions are more productive (Commeyras, Sherril & Wuenker, 1996). Such a role places the responsibility of the discussion upon the students. By watching students interact, a facilitator can learn the nature and level of a student's involvement.

Small Discussion Groups in a Literature-Based Reading Program

Discussion groups support literature-based reading programs and naturally allow children to explore their thinking. The language processes

develop naturally through interactions with adults and peers. Discussion groups are interactive events in which individuals collaboratively construct meaning and consider alternate interpretations of the text in order to arrive at new understandings (Almasi, 1995).

Small discussion groups encourage learners to answer questions, make inferences, and connect to their past learning more so than whole group interactions (Eeds & Wells, 1989). Discussion groups should have no more than 4 to 6 students. Each student needs to become comfortable and familiar with the members of the group. An openness, or willingness, to understand different perspectives and even to disagree or confront ideas needs to be promoted. Langer (1995) found that when these conditions are present teachers will observe increased student growth. Even disagreements help students to gain new insights and a better understanding of the text and of themselves.

Small group discussions allow for greater student involvement and can result in higher achievement. Most students are not accustomed to freedom to share their thoughts openly. In many cases, discussions in classrooms have tended to involve teachers asking literal questions that may not allow for much thinking or interaction among the students. This activity is more correctly referred to as recitations (Almasi, 1996). Gambrell & Almasi (1996) found that many positive outcomes are associated with small group

discussions, such as a deeper understanding of the text, using higher level thinking to shape ideas, and improved communication skills.

Active learners who are engaging in the construction of knowledge produce a lively atmosphere. Traditional classrooms tend to be quiet environments that stifle opportunities to learn through discussions. Eeds & Peterson (1997) found that a child-centered, language-based classroom is “Messy and imprecise and full of opinion and controversy...” (p. 1).

Educators need to have faith in students, trusting them to have meaningful dialogues that develop from their interest in literature and the ideas they have generated while engaged in the reading process. Empowering students with control over their discussions show young readers that their ideas matter, therefore encouraging them to be greater risk-takers and be more involved in their own learning (Almasi, 1995).

Teachers can model questions that lead to meaningful discussion. They can ask questions that will require students to answer with personal interpretations and also those that will lead students to discuss important information, give a summary, ask for clarification of an idea, or prompt a prediction (Gambrell & Almasi, 1996). Almasi found that with ample opportunities to listen to valuable questioning techniques, observe models of discussion groups, and experiment with group discussion as members,

students will evolve into exploratory thinkers.

As students begin to take the responsibility for posing questions for whole-class or peer group discussions, those within a range of reading abilities will be motivated to discuss and relate personal experiences to the literature. The students' interest in discussions will lead them to use higher-order thinking skills. They will begin to identify unstated assumptions, seek alternative viewpoints, and provide reasons for their opinions (Commyras & Sumner, 1995). While they are reaping the educational benefits, they will find enjoyment in what they are reading.

A Literature Base to Promote Discussion in a Reading Program

The focus of this article is on children carrying the responsibility for discussion. For my third grade reading program, I have selected themes across the curriculum that can be enhanced by presenting opportunities for discussion. The following themes and titles are intended to encourage children to extend their learning through discussion. Teachers must learn to nudge children towards seeing the story from a different perspective or thinking of a new idea without leading the discussion as they would a lecture.

Themes and Related Picture Books

Courage

Fox, M. (1987). Hattie and the Fox, P. Mullins, (Il.). New York: Bradbury. Even though Hattie, the big black hen, has warned the other animals of danger numerous times, they ignore it. They are surprised when they are attacked by a fox.

Grifalconi, A. (1987). Darkness and the Butterfly. Boston: Little, Brown. Osa is courageous and curious during the day but fearful at night. The Wise Woman shows her that the small butterfly is pursued by the darkness but flies on. Osa finds the light of her courage will help her cope with nighttime.

McCully, E.A. (1993). Mirette on the High Wire. New York: Putnam. Mirette learns to walk the tightwire from a famous artist who no longer performs because of fear. She helps him return to the wire, and the two perform together.

Yolen, J. (1987). Owl Moon, J. Schoenherr, (Il.). New York: Philomel. One winter night when the moon is full, a father takes his daughter into the woods to observe the great horned owl.

Grandparents

Ackerman, K. (1988). Song and Dance Man, S. Gammel, (Il.). New York: Knopf. A former vaudeville performer re-creates his song-and-dance act for his grandchildren.

Bahr, M. (1989). The Memory Box, D. Cunningham, (Il.). Morton Grove, IL: A. Whitman. During a summer vacation, Zach and his grandparents collect memories of their experiences together as they face the grandfather's progressive illness, Alzheimer's disease.

Dorros, A. (1985). Abuela, E. Dleven, (Il.). New York: Dutton. A little girl imagines what it would be like to fly over New York City with her abuela.

Locker, T. (1984). *Where the River Begins*. New York: Dial.
Two boys and their grandfather go on a camping trip to find the source of the nearby river.

Say, A. (1993). *Grandfather's Journey*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
The author relates his grandfather's story as a Japanese American and then compares this story to his own.

African American Culture

Golenbock, P. (1990). *Teammates*, P. Bacon, (Il.). San Diego: Harcourt.
This real-life story tells of Pee Wee Reese's efforts to ease racial tensions during Jackie Robinson's early baseball career.

Hoffman, M. (1991). *Amazing Grace*, C. Binch, (Il.). New York: Dial.
Grace wants to play the part of Peter Pan in the school production, but some of her classmates tell her that her wish is impossible because she is black and a girl.

Olaleye, I. (1994). *bitter Bananas*, E. Young, (Il.). Honesdale, PA: Boyd Mills.
The boy, Yusuf, living in an African village, finds a solution to the problem of baboons stealing his palm sap.

Winter, J. (1988). *Follow the Drinking Gourd*. New York: Knopf.
Runaway slaves follow the directions in "The Drinking Gourd," a song taught to them by an old sailor, and escape to freedom along the Underground Railroad to the North.

Ecology

Baylor, B. (1975). *The Desert Is Theirs*, P. Parnal

Ehlert, L. (1991). Red Leaf, Yellow Leaf. San Diego: Harcourt.
The sprouting and growth of a maple tree is described by a child whose family buys a sapling at the garden center.

Ryder, J. (1994). My Father's Hands, M. Graham, (Il.). New York: Morrow.
A child's father helps her discover and appreciate small creatures in his garden.

Reading

Bunting, E. (1989). The Wednesday Surprise, D. Carrick, (Il.). New York: Clarion.

Anna and her grandmother have a special surprise for her father on his birthday: Anna has taught Grandma to read.

Fox, M. (1987). Possum Magic, J. Vivas, (Il.). Nashville: Abingdon.
Australian possums search for magic that will change the invisible one into a visible form.

Johnston, T. (1994). Amber on the Mountain, R. Duncan, (Il.). New York: Dial.

Amber finds she is not isolated on her mountain farm when she can exchange letters with her friend, Anna, who has taught her to read.

Stewart, S. (1995). The Library, D. Small, (Il.). New York: Farrar.
When Elizabeth Brown's lifetime of collecting books consumes the space in her home, she donates her house and the books to the town for a library.

A Teacher-Directed Lesson to Promote Discussion

The children can read selections silently based on a common theme and then discuss the ideas generated in peer groups, either done independently of the teacher or with the collaboration of the teacher. Occasionally, the teacher can present a book for discussion with accompanying questions to nudge the students to probe deeper meanings and implied ideas. Such lessons can assist children in inferring meaning

from texts. Studies suggest that children fall short in inference-making probably because they do not have an opportunity to associate their background of experiences with the ideas of the text. Such engagement in the reading process can be extended through discussion directed by the teacher (Johnson, Johnson, Harms, & Lettow, 1997).

The example teacher-directed lesson is based on Mary Hoffman's picture book Amazing Grace (C. Binch, Il., New York: Dial, 1991) from the theme of African American Culture/Courage. First, the teacher can read the book for a pleasurable listening experience. Then, as the teacher rereads sections, he/she can ask questions that require inferring tasks in responding. The questions with the potential for inferring are given below.

1. Pages 1-12 – How would you describe Grace? (Characterization)
2. Page 14 – How does Grace feel now? (feeling)
3. Pages 17-19 – What is Nana trying to show Grace? (Problem-solution, Characterization)
4. Page 21 – Read the first sentence, then stop. What do you think will happen at the audition? (Prediction)
5. Page 21 – How would you feel if you were Grace? (Feeling)
6. What is the message of the book? (Theme)

Other Works Related to the Theme

These books can be read to extend the discussion in another session.

Golenbock, P. (1990). Teammates, P. Bacon, (Il.). San Diego: Harcourt. Like Grace, Jackie has a tremendous talent and will do whatever it takes to overcome any barriers to accomplish his dream. Jackie has PeeWee Reese to encourage and stand by him.

Winter, J. (1988). Follow the Drinking Gourd. New York: Knopf. In this book, Father does what he can to help slaves escape to freedom. His son, Tommy, learns that you must take risks to help others and to stand up for what is right. Tommy shows great courage in a dangerous situation.

Expressive Activity

Each student can share with the class what he/she enjoys pretending and acting out. Using the information, the teacher can find an extensive selection of books for students to browse. Each student can choose a book to read and share in the small groups.

The students can choose favorite parts to act out. They can explain to the class why they chose their book and that particular part.

Conclusion

Discussion is critical to the process of reading. Teachers need to offer opportunities for students to join in lively discussions as they read.

Students need to be encouraged to take risks by sharing their thoughts and feelings about books they are reading. They can enjoy listening and responding to their peers. Also, dialogue based on quality literature can promote a love of reading that will last a lifetime. Opportunities to

respond to carefully selected literature pieces can encourage students to use higher-level thinking abilities.

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