Breaking Tradition: One Special Educator's Journey Towards a Meaning-Based Instructional Program

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Breaking Tradition: One Special Educator's Journey Towards a Meaning-Based Instructional Program

Abstract
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BREAKING TRADITION: ONE SPECIAL EDUCATOR'S 
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Breaking Tradition: One Special Educator's Journey

Towards a Meaning-Based

Instructional Program

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Breaking Tradition

Abstract

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Breaking Tradition

**Educating the Child with a Learning Disability**

The most beneficial way to educate students with learning disabilities has been a controversial issue for many years. Children with learning disabilities are often described as dependent, distractible, disorganized, passive, or oppositional (Scala, 1993; MacInnis & Hemming, 1995). Instruction for students with learning disabilities often focuses on remediating learning deficits through isolated drill and practice before any other learning may occur (Zucker, 1993; Salvage & Brazee, 1991). Many special educators are becoming frustrated with this philosophy and are looking for an alternative way to get students in special education engaged in the learning process. Recent research has indicated that there is another choice for instructing the child with a learning disability. These researchers have looked at employing meaning based methods to instruct children with learning disabilities in order to facilitate the learning process and address their learning needs (MacInnis & Hemming, 1995; Salvage & Brazee, 1991; Scala, 1993; Zucker, 1993).
Whole language focuses on the natural linguistic development of children by creating meaning through reading and writing (Ken Goodman, 1989; Yetta Goodman, 1989; Altwerger, Edelsky & Flores, 1987). The key theoretical premise for Whole Language is that, the world over, babies acquire a language through actually using it, not through practicing its separate parts until some later date when the parts are assembled and the totality is finally used. (Altwerger, Edelsky & Flores, 1987 p. 145). Reading and writing are viewed as whole processes, not a cluster of isolated skills that are mastered individually and then put together (Ken Goodman, 1989; Salvage & Brazee, 1991). Focusing on isolated skills in order to learn to read or write is an unnatural process, yet we expect the child with a learning disability to learn in this very way (Keeie & Keefe, 1993). All children linguistically develop and learn to create meaning through experiences with authentic language encounters. Children with learning disabilities merely require more of these encounters and need more time to process the
Breaking Tradition

information presented in order to create meaning (Salvage & Brazee, 1991).

Some benefits of engaging in practice that reflects a whole language philosophy have been noted. Keefe & Keefe (1993) found that when students with learning disabilities are placed in an environment that is not oriented toward discrete skills, but rather learning is kept whole, risk taking is encouraged, and prior knowledge and abilities are used as a foundation for learning, the students become successful learners. Additionally, Zucker (1993) found that the whole language philosophy permits multisensory language learning experiences that are meaningful, varied, and fun. Further, Macinnis & Hemming (1995) state that when a child-centered orientation is central to the curriculum there is a greater likelihood that the student with a learning disability, like all learners, will be able to relate the new experience to his or her existing knowledge. Finally, Salvage & Brazee (1991) conclude that all learners learn best when learning is personally relevant and meaningful to them. Therefore, utilizing teaching that builds
Breaking Tradition on children's knowledge, uses real writing and reading for meaningful purposes, and engages children in authentic language experiences is an effective approach for all children, including children with a learning disability.

Changing Instruction in One Special Education Classroom

As a teacher of children with learning problems, this research gave me a new perspective on teaching. My classroom consists mainly of fourth and fifth grade resource students. I work in the areas of reading, language arts, and math. My largest concentration is in the area of reading. Traditionally, I had utilized a scripted reading program that focused on decoding and isolated skills which didn't help children create meaning. Because of this traditional method of teaching I have seen several children become disinterested, rote readers. Reading for these children had become like memorizing math facts, boring and unadventuresome. My students became so good at a scripted reading lesson that they knew what I was going to say before I spoke. For instance, when I was doing a
Breaking Tradition

lesson on word attack skills I began to ask a student to say an isolated sound in a word and then read the word. The student, however, began saying the sound before I had given him any instruction. I knew then that I needed to make reading more authentic for these students.

**Time as a barrier.** One problem I knew I had to overcome was time. I only saw my students for a limited amount of time and had always rushed to get a reading lesson done in as little as fifteen minutes. I needed to let go of this time schedule and tell myself that the students could have as much time as they needed in order to meet a reading goal. This was difficult to do. I still needed to make sure that each child's individual needs were being met, and that I was still teaching all of the "skills" of reading.

As I began to let go of time as a barrier, I felt myself and my students begin to relax. We took our time reading and discussing what we were reading. We began to read for enjoyment. My students could relate with stories and could begin to use their background knowledge to bring these stories
Breaking Tradition

to life. Reading became more real to my students. I even saw a few smiles and heard the question "Can we read more of that book today?" My excitement toward teaching reading began to grow right along with theirs. Teaching reading was becoming more interesting and fun to plan.

**Changes in presentation.** One big change I made was the manipulation of the book. I began to let go of the teacher as leader role, and allowed the students to hold the books, turn the pages, and scan the books at their own pace. Making sure each student had a book was sometimes difficult. I asked several of my co-workers to borrow books as well as the libraries, both in school and out. Eventually, there were enough copies for everyone. This allowed the students to feel some leadership and control of their own learning.

Once I established using authentic literature, (actual children's literature) I had to ensure the students were gaining all of the "skills" necessary. I started by looking at each students individual education plan (IEP) and I did some research on the higher order thinking skills (H.O.T.S.). After I
established what direction I was moving, I began planning lessons to fit my students and to encourage them to work within their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1962).

The first activity we tried was predicting about a text. We first focused on the plot and the characters of the text. This encouraged the use of pictorial clues as well as contextual clues. Together the students and I would read the title page and the first paragraph of the book. We would discuss what we thought was going to happen in the rest of the story. Following this we would scan through all of the pictures and see if any of our predictions would change. I then encouraged the students to write their predictions in a journal. At first, the students wrote very little, (see Table 1) but when they became more comfortable with both prediction and writing their thoughts the entries became longer (see Table 2).

Allowing the students to manipulate the book encouraged them to look more closely at the text and the pictures. The students did a more thorough job of walking through the book, noticing several details. Occasionally, they would notice one of
the details was present on more than one page. If this happened they seemed to focus only on that detail. When the students did this I tried to return their attention to other details by modeling out loud what I saw on the page.

Following the prediction activity, we began to read the book together. Since I worked with fewer than four students at a time it was easy to work on certain skills with the students during the oral reading of the book. For example, if one of the goals of the students was to recognize beginning, middle, or ending sounds I could jot down the sounds he/she recognized when he/she read the words correctly. In addition, I could write down the sounds that student missed when he/she made a miscue. This then gave me a guideline to follow when preparing mini-lessons on sounds.

After completing the book the students and I would compare their predictions with what actually happened in the story. I also used this to check their comprehension of the story. The students would take turns retelling the story while the others read over their predictions. As I listened to each student's
Breaking Tradition

retelling I could again make notes of how well a student understood what he/she had read. These notes helped me in forming mini-lessons to aid the students' comprehension.

The next activity I tried with my students dealt with the H.O.T.S. comparing and contrasting. I first introduced the words comparing and contrasting to get a full understanding of what these words meant, and what my expectations were. Here again, I found as many copies of the books as I could find so that each student could have a copy. I chose an activity utilizing three versions of the Cinderella. The books I chose were *Princess Furball* by Charlotte Huck and Anita Lobel (1989), *The Talking Eggs* by Robert D. San Souci (1990), and *Mufaro’s Beautiful Daughters* by John Steptoe (1993). Before I did the comparing, contrasting activity with the students I asked them to predict about each story, and write their predictions in their journals. We then read each story together. Following each story, we compared them to the customary version of the Cinderella. We put this information on a chart (see Table 3). When we finished comparing the stories, we
Breaking Tradition

discussed how they contrasted. In the beginning I transcribed what the students said onto the chart. As the children became more accustomed to comparing and contrasting I encouraged them to write the information onto the chart. This gave them much more satisfaction and ownership in their own reading and writing.

Finally, I examined the higher order skill of application. I wanted the students to see a need for reading and writing and be able to apply it to their own lives. In order to help them understand application, I had each of the students write his/her own version of a folk tale. The students chose which folk tale they would like to work on and began to write their story.

We utilized the writing process in order for the students to see that writing was actually a multi-stage process rather than a one stage process. When the students' books were in published form, the students read their book to our class. We then compared and contrasted their version to the customary
version. After everyone had a chance to share their book, I asked them to share their stories with another audience.

I prearranged a time with other elementary classroom teachers to allow my students to come into their rooms and share their stories. In general, I chose for my students to share their stories with younger students. The greatest joy I had was seeing my students be successful with reading and writing. The younger students clapped and said they thought these kids were so "cool" because they could read and write so well. The students in my class just beamed with pride.

**Practical Implications.** Seeing these children grow in self-confidence was the greatest reward I could ask for from my profession. So often I have worked with children who lacked in confidence, experience, and self pride. These students had become their own worst enemies as they had come to accept the blame for their inability to read. They needed to realize that they too possessed the ability to read
and could enjoy reading for their own good. Ken Goodman stated it best in his book *Phonics Phacts*, 1993:

"These children need to find reading and writing as relevant, as useful and as interesting as oral language. They need to be involved in using real reading and real writing for their own functional needs."

In addition to the gains in self-confidence, the children and I witnessed a stronger awareness in their ability to read more fluently and comprehend what they have read. They found reading more enjoyable, exciting, and meaningful, and were no longer rote, disinterested readers. They had become more self motivated and eager to advance their reading ability.

Along with my student's growth and advancement, I experienced a growth in self confidence and awareness. I discovered that making reading more meaningful means allowing the students to manipulate the book, using authentic literature, allowing me, the teacher, to let go of time as a barrier, and to really address the H.O.T.S. in reading lessons. This combination of student and teacher activities is critical to authentic learning for children with special and varied needs.
REFERENCES


She had two mean sisters. She had to do all the chores. She had a mean mom. The grandmother takes off her head.
Table 2

The princess lost her mother. In the first picture, princess for ball is dancing to the ball. On the next page, princess for ball is probably serving a potluck dinner.

The king is telling princesses to do something. There is a picture in pg. 5. There's a father in pg. 5 there making dresses in pg. 6. There making it out of big blue and she has black shoes. In pg. 8 she is sleeping in a tree. And in pg. 9 there is a flower at her feet.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Compared to Cinderella</th>
<th>Contrasted with Cinderella</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Talking Eggs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>her mom was mean, she got hit.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>was flown on tooth picking things.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cinderella and Blanche were both very nice girls</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Blanche's wishes came true with the help of Aunty</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cinderella wishes came true with help of the fairy godmother</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>she had to do all of the chores</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>lived happily ever after</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Good overcame Evil</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>her sister is mean</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>she got into trouble</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Blanche didn't marry a prince</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>she got to keep the yold</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cinderella's mother died</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Blanche's father died</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>She tosses the egg over her shoulder and she gold, then only took her into the woods.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>She had one mean sister</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Blanche didn't go to a ball</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Blanche got talking eggs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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