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## Facilitating language ability through a literature-based social studies program

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## Facilitating language ability through a literature-based social studies program

### Abstract

Quality literature for children supports the development of their language abilities by providing models of language. A literature-based language arts program extended across the curriculum can extend children's language growth. For this study, a literature-based language arts program has been extended to the social studies area providing opportunities to study content and to engage in the thinking-language processes. The example unit for grade four will be Appalachia. After a review of the professional literature, the unit supported by the different genres offering opportunities to engage in expressive activity will be presented.

Facilitating Language Ability Through a  
Literature-Based Social Studies Program

A Graduate Project  
Submitted to the  
Department of Curriculum and Instruction  
In Partial Fulfillment  
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Master of Arts in Education  
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by

Sharon Bahr

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Quality literature for children supports the development of their language abilities by providing models of language. A literature-based language arts program extended across the curriculum can extend children's language growth.

For this study, a literature-based language arts program has been extended to the social studies area providing opportunities to study content and to engage in the thinking-language processes. The example unit for grade four will be Appalachia. After a review of the professional literature, the unit supported by the different genres offering opportunities to engage in expressive activity will be presented.

#### LITERATURE AS THE BASE FOR INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAMS

##### Value of Literature Experiences for Children

Literature is the imaginative shaping of life and thought into the forms and structure of language. It is concerned with feelings and the quality of life versus facts that are taught primarily in schools. It can offer vicarious experiences and develop insight into human behavior as well as presenting the universality of experiences. Experiences with literature educate while they entertain, involving both the heart and the mind (Huck, et al., 1987).

Literature is a "golden string" that can place the reader in contact with the best minds in every period of history. It helps children to develop insights, understandings, and imagination by

creating new experiences, enriching past ones, and developing a sense of wonder, an appreciation of the beautiful, and a joy in living (Huck, 1982).

Norton (1987) says words are merely words, but real literature is words chosen with skill and artistry to give readers pleasure and help them understand themselves and others. Literature provides form for experiences, for life is a series of stories without order. Fiction makes order of the chaos by organizing, placing relevant episodes into a coherent sequence. It shows life's unity, or meaning; it also may reveal life's fragmentations, sorting out the essential details from the nonessential and making their significance clear.

Literature opens doors of discovery facilitating personal-social development. It provides enjoyment, transmits literary heritage, and encourages understanding and valuing of cultural heritage (Norton, 1987). Literature experiences also provide strong language models by helping develop vocabulary, by sharpening a sensitivity to language, and by fine tuning a sense of writing style (Cullinan, 1987).

Literature can develop and extend at least three major understandings important to living in a multicultural society. First, it can show how people are connected to one another through their emotions, their needs, their desires--experiences common to all. Understanding a common humanity is a powerful

weapon against the forces that would divide and alienate one from another. Secondly, it can help humans understand, appreciate, and celebrate the differences that make each cultural group special and that enrich the larger society. Third, literature experiences can foster an understanding of the effects of social issues and forces on the lives of ordinary individuals. Fourth, children's literature is one of the way values are transmitted to children. Through literature experiences, they can receive an affirmation of themselves and their culture (Bishop, 1987).

Each time a quality piece of literature is read, the readers are changed by the experience: They can see the world in a new way. Literature's capacity to change people's perspectives makes it a vehicle for understanding cultures and experiences different from their own. Teachers who incorporate literature from various cultures into their classrooms can contribute to making tomorrow's world more humane and considerate (Bishop, 1987).

#### Literature-Based Language Arts Extended Across the Curriculum

One way children can use language meaningfully is when they respond to literature experiences that have been extended across the curriculum to the social studies and science. Then listening, speaking, reading, and writing can be integrated naturally, and language abilities can develop as a whole entity rather than as fragments which can be the case in an isolated language arts program. Because all four language modes are based on the same

sound-symbol system, each reinforces the other while being learned. They all share the common cognitive processes that are basic to all learning and form the comprehension-composition connection. Competence in both comprehending and composing then follow naturally. Literature is a natural base from which meaningful comprehension and composition abilities grow (Bromley, 1988).

Smith (1983) concurs, saying that categorizing the language modes is arbitrary and artificial. It is a way of looking at language from the outside, ignoring the fact that they involve the same processes within the brain.

Holdaway (1979, cited in Bromley, 1988) stated that "More than ever before there is a need to introduce children to a satisfying literature, to use such materials at the center of instruction, and to develop methods of teaching which bring to children the sustained and special joy from the written word that they can experience from no other activity." Bromley (1988) relates that children's literature is a critical ingredient in any language arts program that is integrated with content learning. Hennings (1982, cited in Bromley, 1988) believes that social studies concepts such as freedom, individual differences, change and justice are easily and interestingly taught with children's literature.

Bromley (1988) emphasizes the importance of choosing quality literature, books that endure over time and are lasting favorites with children, from the eight genres when supplementing a curriculum topic. According to Harms and Lettow (1986), children need an opportunity to explore concepts of interest. The use of one text stifles higher level comprehension. Students need to explore ideas in-depth and to be motivated to move on to other pieces on the same topic through the different genres.

"Instead of teaching a body of facts for memorization our goal is to help students learn to think" (Cullinan, 1981, cited in Holmes & Ammon, 1985). Teachers may agree philosophically, but research indicates that they are more concerned with facts than comprehension improvement (Austin, Morrison, 1963, Durkin, 1978-79, cited in Holmes & Ammon, 1985). Durkin's observation of social studies and science classrooms revealed round robin reading of text followed by teacher questions often focused on trivial and sometimes out-of-date facts (Holmes & Ammon, 1985).

In a comparison of trade books, or literature works and textbooks, Goodlad and Klein (1970, cited in Holmes & Ammon, 1985) found that although texts tend to dominate, trade books can be more desirable for the content area teachers. This rationale can support offering a literature base for the content area.

(1) A literature base can provide meaningful learning experiences for the whole range of reading abilities among the

students. A wide variety of literature works on different reading levels facilitates understandings and contributes to discussion.

(2) Through experiences with many works of literature rather than one text, students have the opportunity to develop critical reading skills such as recognizing and evaluating the reliability and authenticity of ideas. In contrast, students tend to accept the textbook interpretation without question (Huck, Wolf, King, 1968, cited in Holmes & Ammon, 1985). Conflicting information increases attention, curiosity, and interest (Festinger, 1957, cited in Holmes & Ammon, 1985).

(3) A textbook is limited in breadth and depth of information and can never answer all of the questions posed by the students (Holmes & Ammon, 1985). Hanson (1987) says a textbook should be used only as a reference book and advocates the use of "real" books. Works of literature offer opportunities to explore a broad range of topics and explore in-depth a single topic (Holmes & Ammon, 1985).

(4) Because of the explosion of knowledge, works of literature can provide more current information because they are not associated with a large-scale edition that takes years to develop and is reissued after many years have elapsed, as textbooks. Textbooks are only purchased every five to ten years (Harste, 1985, cited in Hanson, 1987).

(5) Experiences with literature can emphasize the process not the product and not whether or not the entire class has covered the same information (Harste, 1985, cited in Hanson, 1987). The appeal of quality literature in terms of style makes them an important source of reference in the content area (Holmes & Ammon, 1985).

An interrelated curriculum provides children with an opportunity to explore the language of the social studies and sciences and to develop strategies for understanding and interpreting these subjects. It encourages children to make connections when a particular focus is part of a much broader one. The thematic approach in which literature is the base binds all aspects of the program together and helps develop a relationship between the disciplines as they logically relate to the theme.

#### THE LITERATURE BASE FOR A SOCIAL STUDIES UNIT

This section will present a literature-based social studies unit that facilitates thinking-language abilities and social studies concepts through the different genres of literature. The study will focus on the study of Appalachia. It is intended for students in grade four.

#### Themes and Other Related Literary Elements

The teacher in preparing for the unit on Appalachia themestormed to search out themes and other related literary

elements which could enrich the literature base. They were as follows:

Family life

Growing up

Memories

Friendship

Christmas

Environment

Occupations

Setting

Characterization

Imagery

Then literature which supported these themes were chosen. The works of Cynthia Rylant were particularly important to the study. An annotated bibliography of her works is presented in Appendix A.

Theme: Family life

Related Element: Setting

Picture Books

Rylant, Cynthia. This Year's Garden. Illustrated by  
Mary Szilagyi. Macmillan, 1984.

Rylant, Cynthia. When I Was Young in the Mountains.  
Illustrated by Dianne Goode. Dutton, 1982.

Rylant, Cynthia. The Relatives Came. Illustrated by  
Stephen Gammell. Bradbury, 1985.

Full-length Realistic Fiction

Rylant, Cynthia. A Blue-Eyed Daisy. Bradbury, 1985.

Theme: Growing Up

Full-length Realistic Fiction

Rylant, Cynthia. A Blue-Eyed Daisy. Bradbury, 1985.

Theme: Memories

Picture Books

Rylant, Cynthia. Birthday Presents. Illustrated by  
Sucie Stevenson. Orchard, 1987.

Rylant, Cynthia. When I Was Young in the Mountains.  
Illustrated by Diane Goode. Dutton, 1982.

Poetry

Rylant, Cynthia. Waiting to Waltz: A Childhood.  
Illustrated by Stephen Gammell. Bradbury, 1984.

Theme: Friendship

Related Element: Characterization

Picture Books

Rylant, Cynthia. Miss Maggie. Illustrated by Thomas  
DiGrazia. Dutton, 1983.

Theme: Christmas

Realistic Fiction (Short Stories)

Rylant, Cynthia. Children of Christmas: Stories of the Season. Drawings by S. D. Schindler. Orchard, 1987.

Theme: Environment

Related Element: Imagery

Picture Books

Rylant, Cynthia. Night in the Country. Illustrated by Mary Szilagyi. Bradbury, 1986.

Rylant, Cynthia. Henry and Mudge. Illustrated by Stevenson. Bradbury, 1987.

Rylant, Cynthia. Henry and Mudge in Puddle Trouble. Illustrated by Sucie Stevenson. Bradbury, 1987.

Rylant, Cynthia. Henry and Mudge in the Green Time: The Third Book of Their Adventures. Illustrated by Sucie Stevenson. Bradbury, 1987.

Rylant, Cynthia. Henry and Mudge Under the Yellow Moon: The Fourth Book of Their Adventures. Illustrated by Sucie Stevenson. Bradbury, 1987.

Realistic Fiction (Short Stories)

Rylant, Cynthia. Every Living Thing. Bradbury, 1985.

Other related Appalachian works to extend the literature base were offered.

Theme: Family Life

Picture Books

Marzola, Jean. Uproar on Hollercat Hill. Illustrated by Steven Kellogg. Dial Press, 1980.

Griffith, Helen V. Georgia Music. Illustrated by James Stevenson. Greenwillow, 1986.

Griffith, Helen V. Granddaddy's Place. Illustrated by James Stevenson. Greenwillow, 1987.

#### Poetry

Kennedy, X. J. "Family Reunion." Thanksgiving Poems. Selected by Myra Cohn Livingston. Illustrated by Stephen Gammell. Holiday House, 1985.

#### Full-length Realistic Fiction

Armstrong, William H. Sounder. Harper & Row, 1969.

Cleaver, Vera & Bill. Where the Lilies Bloom. J. B. Lippincott Co., 1969.

#### Theme: Memories

#### Picture Books

Mathis, Sharon Bell. The Hundred Penny Box. Illustrated by Leo and Diane Dillon. Viking, 1975.

Flourney, Valerie. The Patchwork Quilt. Illustrated by Jerry Pinkney. Dutton, 1985.

#### Poetry

Peck, Robert Newton. "Wood Box." Bee Tree and Other Stuff. Illustrated by Laura Lydecker. Walker & Co., 1975.

Hayden, Robert. "Those Winter Sundays." Celebrations--  
Anthology of Black American Poetry. Compiled and  
Edited by Arnold Adoff. Follett, 1977.

Greenfield, Eloise. "Honey, I Love." Honey, I Love.  
Illustrated by Leo and Diane Dillon. Crowell,  
1978.

Theme: Friendship

Picture Books

Blos, Joan W. Old Henry. Illustrated by Stephen  
Gammell. Morrow, 1987.

Caudill, Rebecca. A Pocketful of Cricket. Illustrated  
by Evaline Ness. Holt, Rinehart, and Winston,  
1969.

Theme: Occupations

Picture Books

Chaffin, Lillie D. We Be Warm Till Springtime Comes.  
Illustrated by Lloyd Bloom. Macmillan, 1980.

Hendershot, Judith. In Coal Country. Illustrated by  
Thomas B. Allen. Alfred A. Knopf, 1987.

Sustaining Centers

Centers that provide a predictable learning environment and assist in presenting literature experiences and related expressive activity for a specific unit were developed.

### Listening/Reading Center

This center provided literature representative of the different genres to support the themes. The teacher's collection of Cynthia Rylant books was available along with teacher-prepared cassette tapes to provide opportunity to hear the expressive language of this Appalachian author and to assist those who still need support in learning visual language. A portable center showing scenes from these picture books with Appalachian settings In Coal Country (Hendershot) and We Be Warm Till Springtime Comes (Chaffin) enhanced this listening/reading area. A picture file of enlarged photographs from Souder (Armstrong) was also available.

### Poetry Center

Poetry unique to Appalachia and its themes were provided at this center including Rylant's Waiting to Waltz: A Childhood, illustrated by Stephen Gammell. These poems were taped as were other poems related to the themes. Part of this center offered a reference of poetry forms with descriptions of forms and example poems.

### Author/Illustrator Center

This center facilitated a comprehension-composition connection by enabling children to see the relationship between the works of authors/illustrators and their background of experiences. For this unit, author Cynthia Rylant and illustrator Stephen Gammell

were featured with photographs of them, samples of their works, folders of biographical information from published collections and journal articles, and teacher-prepared biographical sketches.

#### Bookmaking Center

Directions and materials for the construction of different types of student-made books were provided in this center.

#### Literature-Based Expressive Activity Center

Centers with suggestions for literature experiences and accompanying expressive activities were provided. Examples include art and music experiences. Appalachian Mountain music on tapes and records with accompanying song sheets was available. The directions and supplies for quilting, creating cornhusk dolls, and other mountain crafts, were provided along with literature from different genres as reference for mountain crafts and music.

#### Centers Specific to the Unit of Study

These literature experiences and expressive activities specific to the study of Appalachia were presented.

#### Center: Family Life

- A. Literature Experience: Read or listen to This Year's Garden, by Cynthia Rylant, illustrated by Mary Szilagyi.

Expressive Activity: This story shows the gardening cycle. What happens in each season of the year?

Whose garden is it?

1. Do you raise a garden, or help someone who does? Write about what you do. You may want to make a mini-book with illustrations to show each stage in your gardening cycle.
2. Save your milk carton, fill it with soil, and plant a seed to see how long it will take to sprout. Keep a log of its day-by-day changes.

B. Literature Experience: Read or listen to the story The Relatives Came, by Cynthia Rylant, illustrated by Stephen Gammell.

Expressive Activities:

1. Make a list or a web of your relatives--people who might attend your family reunion.
2. Think about a time when relatives came to your house. Were they from a long distance? Did they stay for a long time? What did you do? Write about their visit. You may want to illustrate your "filled" house or their "packed" car as Stephen Gammell did.

C. Literature Experience: Read or listen to When I Was Young in the Mountains, by Cynthia Rylant, illustrated by Diane Goode.

**Expressive Activities:**

Cynthia Rylant grew up in Appalachia, living with her grandparents. This story tells about the things she remembers about her childhood; many of them were quite ordinary, yet very special to her. What is typical of your family life? What have you come to expect in your day-to-day living? Do Mom and Dad, brothers and sisters, and other relatives always do things in a certain way? If you are gone from home, what things do you miss? Write about your special family things.

**Center: Memories**

- A. Literature Experience: Read or listen to Birthday Presents, by Cynthia Rylant, illustrated by Sucie Stevenson.

**Expressive Activities:**

1. Do you have photographs of you involved in each of your birthdays? Ask your parents to tell you about them. Look in your baby book or a family album.
2. Make a book with photos or illustrations called "My Birthday Book." Write about each birthday, who was there, what you did, gifts you received, etc.

3. Choose one of your birthdays which was more special or memorable than the rest. Write about that day. Tell why it was the best.

B. Literature Experience: Read or listen to the stories in Every Living Thing, by Cynthia Rylant.

Expressive Activities:

1. Animals can touch peoples' lives in many ways. Choose one of the stories to illustrate, showing the relationship between people and animals. You may want to write about it.
2. Which animal had the greatest impact on a person's life? Why?

Center: Christmas

Literature Experience: Read or listen to Children of Christmas: Stories for the Season, by Cynthia Rylant, drawings by S. D. Schindler.

Expressive Activity:

Christmas is not a happy time for everyone. Do you know of someone for whom Christmas might be sad? Write a story about them. You might want to tell how it could become a happy time for them.

Center: Environment/Imagery

A. Literature Experience: Read or listen to All I See, by Cynthia Rylant, illustrated by Peter Catalanotto.

### Expressive Activity:

Use watercolors to paint what you see.

- B. Literature Experience: Read or listen to Night in the Country, by Cynthia Rylant, illustrated by Mary Szilagyi.

### Expressive Activities:

Cynthia Rylant has described a night in the country using much imagery, or "sense" words.

1. Find the words and phrases that help you to see, hear, feel, and maybe smell or taste the night.
2. The night is very quiet and still--very peaceful. Try reading the book to set the mood. You may want to tape it when you feel you can read it in this quiet, soothing way.

### Summary

In a democracy, it is essential that members learn to respect and appreciate the diversity of all cultures within its pluralistic society. Instead of ignoring differences, schools need to assist children in discovering what is unique to each group of persons, and what is universal to the experience of being human.

Literature experiences can raise the consciousness level of children and can deepen their understanding of cultures different from their own.

Although present society tends to be very mobile and cultural diversity appears to exist everywhere, there are still regions noted for their unique features: The region of Appalachia is one such area (Huck, 1987). Stories of characters from poor but self-respecting families who live in this region foster an appreciation of regional differences; they give readers an understanding of the cultural heritage of these people.

Through a literature-based social studies program that presents quality literature experiences and related expressive activities, children's personal-social horizons can be extended: Children are invited to participate in experiences (active learning) instead of being told about them through a textbook experience (passive learning). Through involvement in the thinking-learning processes, children can further their understanding of what it means to be human. In quality literature, the characters are credible as they face conflict. Therefore, children can come to terms with themselves as they internalize their experiences, and these experiences can be incorporated into lifelong learning.

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## Appendix A

Annotated Bibliography of Rylant Books

Rylant, Cynthia. All I See. Orchard Books. 1988.

A young boy and an artist meet, and the boy discovers the source for the artist's work.

Rylant, Cynthia. Birthday Presents. Orchard Books. 1987.

Presented as a family album, the book depicts seven happy birthdays in the life of one small girl, from the first real one--the day she was born to the times during her sixth year when she gives presents in return.

Rylant, Cynthia. A Blue-Eyed Daisy. Bradbury. 1985.

A realistic fiction novel tells the story of an eleven-year-old girl, Ellie Farley whose father lost his job in the coal-mining hills of West Virginia. Through a series of "cameos," the characters of Ellie and her father are developed.

Rylant, Cynthia. Children of Christmas: Stories for the Season. Orchard Books. 1987.

Six stories of the Christmas season converge to portray the sensitive moods of togetherness, loss, belonging, and privation.

Rylant, Cynthia. Every Living Thing. Bradbury. 1985.

This book is a collection of stories about people whose lives are touched by an animal and how these people are changed and enriched by the experience.

Rylant, Cynthia. Henry and Mudge. Bradbury. 1987.

Henry, feeling lonely on a street without any other children, finds companionship in a big dog named Mudge.

Rylant, Cynthia. Henry and Mudge in Puddle Trouble. Bradbury. 1987.

Spring, for Henry and his dog Mudge, means playing in puddles in the rain and watching five new kittens next door.

Rylant, Cynthia. Henry and Mudge in the Green Time: The Third Book of Their Adventures. Bradbury. 1987.

Summer, for Henry and his dog Mudge, means going on a picnic in the park, taking a bath under the garden hose, and going to the top of the big green hill.

Rylant, Cynthia. Henry and Mudge Under the Yellow Moon: The Fourth Book of Their Adventures. Bradbury. 1987.

In the autumn Henry and his dog Mudge watch the leaves turn, meet with some Halloween spooks, and share Thanksgiving dinner.

Rylant, Cynthia. Miss Maggie. Dutton. 1983.

This picture book is a tender story of age and youth. The story of a boy named Nat and his growing friendship with Miss Maggie, a recluse who lives in a rotting log house.

Rylant, Cynthia. Night in the Country. Bradbury. 1986.

This "quiet" book describes the activities, sights, and especially the sounds of night in the country and is illustrated with bright beautiful color-pencil drawings.

Rylant, Cynthia. The Relatives Came. Bradbury. 1985.

A humorous story tells of a visit from relatives who came in an old station wagon to visit their extended family in the mountains.

Rylant, Cynthia. Waiting to Waltz: A Childhood. Bradbury. 1984.

A collection of thirty poems showing the fears and joys of young adulthood for a girl growing up in a small town in Appalachia.

Rylant, Cynthia. When I Was Young in the Mountains. Dutton. 1982.

This picture book is reminiscent of the author's youthful days spent with her grandparents in the Appalachian Mountains of Virginia.