Thematic extension of the basal reader series

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Thematic extension of the basal reader series

Abstract
The importance of literature as the basis for the reading instructional program has long been advocated; yet through the years, reading instruction has been systemized into a hierarchy of skills lessons fragmenting the language process. This approach to reading instruction ignores the natural functions of language and thwarts the development of thinking-language abilities and lifelong interests in reading for pleasure and continued learning. Because reading is an essential tool for functioning in a democratic, literate society, both educators and the public have been anxious to promote the development of reading abilities in the elementary school. To achieve the goal of educating large numbers of children throughout the many sectors of American society, the majority of school districts have adopted basal reader series that include a scope and sequence of curriculum prepared commercially apart from the school setting. Because of their comprehensiveness, basal reading systems, if followed closely, leave very little room for other kinds of reading activity in the school program. This systematic approach to reading instruction is contrary to the conclusions of current research that indicates that children learn to read and write through involvement in the language processes and that programs should be whole, functional and meaningful to the learners.

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THEMATIC EXTENSION OF THE BASAL READER SERIES

A Graduate Project
Submitted to the
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by
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has been approved as meeting the research paper requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

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The importance of literature as the basis for the reading instructional program has long been advocated; yet through the years, reading instruction has been systemized into a hierarchy of skills lessons fragmenting the language process. This approach to reading instruction ignores the natural functions of language and thwarts the development of thinking-language abilities and lifelong interests in reading for pleasure and continued learning.

Because reading is an essential tool for functioning in a democratic, literate society, both educators and the public have been anxious to promote the development of reading abilities in the elementary school. To achieve the goal of educating large numbers of children throughout the many sectors of American society, the majority of school districts have adopted basal reader series that include a scope and sequence of curriculum prepared commercially apart from the school setting. Because of their comprehensiveness, basal reading systems, if followed closely, leave very little room for other kinds of reading activity in the school program. This systematic approach to reading instruction is contrary to the conclusions of current research that indicates that children learn to read and write through involvement in the language processes and that programs should be whole, functional and meaningful to the learners.

According to Goodman (1988), language is best learned when the focus is not on language but what it is used for. As children
read comprehensible works, they develop strategies for making sense of print. From involvement in the reading process, they develop phonetic rules and come to know words and what they mean in a variety of contexts.

The sequencing of skills in the basal reader series exists not because children learn to read in that manner but because of the logistics of developing a series of lessons that can be taught in sequence and making these lessons more manageable for the instructor. Goodman et al. (1988) report that basal reading series deprive teachers of the responsibility and authority of making informed professional judgments by telling them exactly what to do and say while teaching a lesson.

There is no evidence suggesting that a child can master reading skills in isolation. So much time is taken up in skills instruction that children are given little time to do any reading despite the overwhelming evidence that extensive reading and writing are crucial to the development of literacy. Basal reader series also tend to discourage risk taking because of the emphasis on "the right answer" stifling higher level thinking on the part of the reader.

Children learn to read by making sense through exploring, experiencing, and discovering (Smith, 1983). Involvement in the reading process is not linear but recursive. Readers move back and forth among the aspects of the process as they predict,
evaluate, restate, re-evaluate, and draw conclusions from the reading (Goodman, 1977).

Children need to be given ownership of this process. Harms and Lettow (1986) state that children should be allowed to make decisions within their reading experiences. These decisions include exploring topics of interest and what kind of literature to select, selecting the purpose for reading and the rate the piece would be read, and deciding how to share the ideas gained from the reading experience. It is the role of the teacher to create an environment in which children can own their reading experience and provide opportunities to use the ideas gained from reading (Smith, 1983).

Charlotte Huck et al. (1987) cites conclusions of research studies indicating that wide exposure to literature supports children's language growth. Linked to these gains in language learning through literature experiences were the factors of being read to by teachers and parents, well-written materials being available, time for silent reading, opportunities to select works for oneself from a rich library, opportunities to respond to what had been read through expressive activities and to interact with others concerning these literature experiences, and enthusiastic teachers, librarians and parents as models of readers.
In order to support reading activity as a whole language experience, Goodman (1986) suggests basal reader series reevaluate the components of the system and draw more from contemporary children's literature. He recommends that they also devote more time to reading and less to sequential and controlled formats. Manuals should stop scripting the teacher-pupil interaction; instead they should be offering advice on how to interpret pupil miscues, how to build comprehensions strategies, and what other books and stories could be used to extend learning. Teachers could then be empowered to selectively use the basal reader series to support quality literature experiences rather than the other way around.

BASAL READER SERIES AND LITERATURE-BASED PROGRAMS

Many schools are mandated by school policy to offer a basal reader series as the core of their reading program. Teachers, though, can select themes from the readers to extend the reading experience and can cull the skills lessons to provide a more extensive literature-based program. The program can be enriched through experiences with the different genres and related expressive activities. Literature works can be presented through teacher presentations and centers with many opportunities to react to one's thoughts and to share these ideas with others.

In developing a thematic unit, quality literature works that beckon the reader to return, need to be selected. Reference
sources as A to Zoo: Subject Access to Children's Picture Books, Second Edition, by Carolyn Lima (1985), can assist teachers in compiling bibliographies. The literature works can be experienced through viewing, listening, and reading. Alternative modes of expression need to be suggested for the related activities so children can respond with meaning and ease.

A LITERATURE-BASED THEMATIC UNIT

Based on the review of professional literature, the writer chose to base a thematic unit on grandparents for grade two. Huck et al. (1987) states that children from ages six to eight have a continued need for warmth and security in family relationships. Many children have background experiences with their grandparents from which to draw. The selected picture books representative of several genres offer many meaningful experiences for the children.

A literature-based program can be introduced to children through teacher presentations and through activities in two types of centers. Sustaining centers are those that remain in the classroom the entire school year with the format remaining the same as the units change. These centers offer a predictable learning environment, facilitating a comfortable transition from one unit of study to another. They can provide experiences with the different literature genres and can extend opportunities for children to be involved naturally with the language processes.
Centers specific to the thematic unit are the second type of centers used.

The theme of grandparents and the related literature works and expressive activities have been selected for a second grade reading program with homogeneous grouping. The children work in groups ranging in size from two to five. They can also work individually if they so choose. The center activity is introduced to the children after the initial introduction of the unit by the teacher. Time is allotted during the language arts block for the children to read or listen to stories and then prepare their responses. Sharing is also provided for during the language arts block of time. Because the children are working on their projects, the teacher is free to give more attention to individual needs or to conference with individuals or small groups.

Introduction of Theme

As part of the introduction to the theme of grandparents, Oma, by Peter Hartling (Harper & Row, 1975), a full length realistic fiction work, was started as a read aloud experience by the teacher. To relate this experience to the children's backgrounds, questions about what the children call their grandmother and how they came up with some of the more unusual ones was discussed. Oma is a German name for grandmother, and the children inquired if the name they used for their grandmother was based on another language.
Sustaining Centers

Reading/Listening Center

This center was filled with literature that represents all genres. Picture books and full-length books were included. Opportunities to hear the beauty of the English language was provided with accompanying teacher-prepared tapes. It has been found that one story on a tape is more manageable. Puppets or flannelboard figures accompanied the tape and book. Examples from different genres that were included in this center are:

Nonfiction

Grandpa Doesn't Know It's Me, by Donna Guthrie (Human Sciences Press, Inc., 1986).

Realistic Fiction--Picture Books

Now One Foot, Now the Other, by Tomie DePaola (Putnam, 1980).
Granddaddy's Place, by Helen V. Griffith (Greenwillow, 1987).
Folklore--The Elder's Wisdom

This includes works that share the heritage and wisdom of the elderly. Examples are:

_Ming Lo Moves the Mountain_, by Arnold Lobel (Greenwillow, 1982).

_It Could Always Be Worse_, by Margot Zemach (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1976).

**Author/Illustrator Center**

This center enabled children to see how authors/illustrators are influenced by their life experiences and how they engage in the language processes. It contained information on the author/illustrator and selected works. The author, Cynthia Rylant, was selected for this unit, because she was strongly influenced in her early life by living with her grandparents. To enhance the layout of this center, the title pages from the listed books were copied and included in the center. A picture taken from one of the covers was also blown up and displayed. The following books were included:

_Miss Maggie_ (Dutton, 1983).

_The Relatives Came_ (Bradbury, 1985).

_When I Was Young in the Mountains_ (Dutton, 1986).

**Interesting Objects Center**

This center contained a collection of articles providing different types of sensory exploration. A whole array of objects
furthered the awareness of different features of the environment. To coincide with the theme of grandparents, the children added to this center by gathering objects from their grandparents. Most of them brought toys from the past. The teacher started the collection with a group of old toys--jacks, tops, puppets, yo-yos, a puddle-jumper, and pop-up books. These items were used in oral language discussions and as story starters or props in dramatizations.

**Bookmaking Center**

This center had directions and materials for making books. These books facilitated children's efforts in publishing their compositions.

**Reference Center--Interviewing and Retelling Stories**

Ways to conduct effective interviews and retell the stories (oral, written, dramatization, and art activity) gained from the interview process were presented. Children gathered stories from their grandparents concerning their past experiences.

**Centers Specific to Theme**

These centers presented literature experiences with the theme of grandparents and related expressive activity.

**Center: Sound Elements in Stories**

**Literature Experience:** Listen to/read *Georgia Music*, by Helen V. Griffith (Greenwillow, 1986).

**Expressive Activity:** Add sound effects representing sounds in the country as someone reads aloud this story. You may want to tape your interpretation.
Center: Storytelling

Literature Experience: Listen to/read *Oma and Bobo*, by Amy Schwartz (Bradbury, 1987).

Expressive Activity: Use the pellon material to construct the main characters of the story. Color your figures with the craypas and spray them with the hairspray to protect them. Retell the story on the flannelboard to the others in the workshop.

Center: Memories

Literature Experience: Listen to/read *Grandpa's Slide Show*, by Deborah Gould (Lothrop, 1987).

Expressive Activity: Collect photographs, slides or 8mm movies of your grandparents and parents when they were young. These can be shared with the group on the bulletin board or on the library table.

Literature Experience: Listen to/read *The Quilt Story*, by Tony Johnston (Putnam, 1985).

Expressive Activity: Quilts have stories behind them. Look at the book on quilts and notice some of the different designs. Interview your grandparents and use the information you have gathered to design a quilt square. You can use the white squares of material in the basket on the table and draw with the liquid embroidery pens.
Center: Grandparent's Wisdom

Literature Experience: Listen to/read Through Grandpa's Eyes, by Patricia MacLachlan (Harper & Row, 1980).
Expressive Activity: Write a story on how your grandparent has helped you and how you have helped your grandparent. You may wish to illustrate your story.

Literature Experience: Listen to The Hundred Penny Box, by Sharon Beil Mathis (Viking, 1975).
Expressive Activity: Begin a collection of pennies starting with the year of your birth. Add to your collection for every year you have been alive. Find or make a special box to keep your collection in. If you wish to make a box, follow the directions for making a box that are in the basket.
Expressive Activity: Find a penny for each year of your life. Recall some of your experiences during each year. Select an experience for each year to write about. (You may want to talk with relatives and friends about your first years.) Then you will have a collection of life stories you may want to compile into a book.

CHILDREN'S RESPONSES

As the children began to study this theme, the searching for and sharing of interesting objects which were from yesteryear
created much interest. The clap-board doll that one of the children brought started a whole new appreciation of the toys that their grandparents who were not brought up with television and video games played with. Getting the puddle-jumper to work outside on the playground even involved some of the older children in the building and showed how much dexterity was necessary to use it successfully. That they did not know how a yo-yo worked was surprising and started all kinds of dialogue on how to make it spin the fastest. One of the children brought a game of jacks and taught the others how to play.

Many of the stories written during this unit were related to the toys shared. One of the children wrote a story about a jacks tournament that his grandfather had shared with him. Many children wrote of fishing experiences with grandparents and how they helped their grandparents land fish or drive the boat. Most of the stories were factual, but one imaginative child wrote of an experience in which a little girl helped an older lady who sat on the front porch and shelled peas and overcame her fear of the woman's wrinkled body. (This story sounded somewhat like Miss Maggie.)

Two favorite activities were oral story retelling with flannelboard pieces and taping their own stories. In designing their own quilt squares, many of them tried to use their own idea with some help from the quilting calendar that was present in the
center. The children enjoyed coloring with the pens. Some attractive squares were made. Many children brought pictures of their grandparents, and a few brought very old pictures of them when they were young. They tried to see if they could identify the grandparents through physical traits similar to their grandchildren.

With all of the activity going on in the classroom, it was always humming. There never seemed to be a lull in the interest. Through this activity, the children had an opportunity to consider the special role grandparents play in their lives.

CONCLUSION

Through quality literature experiences and expressive activities, children learn to read and write and come to understand that the natural functions of language are to create meaning. They have opportunities to explore and discover the value of reading and writing. If the goal of reading programs is to produce life-long learners, they need to provide students with the opportunity to own their reading experiences and to engage in whole, functional, and meaningful units of language. Thematic units based on quality literature are an exciting and effective way to accomplish this goal.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


