Extending the multi-cultural literature base of a reading program through experience with folk tales

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Abstract
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Extending the Multi-Cultural Literature Base of a Reading Program through Experience with Folk Tales

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Over 150 years ago, Sir John Herschel had this to say in an address at the opening of a library at Eton:

Give a man a taste for reading and the means of gratifying it, and you cannot fail to make him a happy, as well as a better man. You place him in contact with the best minds in every period of his history, with the wisest and the wittiest, the tenderest and the bravest, those who really adorned humanity. You make him a citizen of all nations and a contemporary of all ages (In Huck, 1992, p. 525).

This statement, even though in today's standards contains sexist language, portrays the meaning of literacy and should be the goal of all literature-based reading programs.

Value of Extending the Literature Base of a Reading Program

Extending the literature base of a reading program in the elementary school is one aspect of the whole language instructional concept. Whole language focuses on children creating meaning while engaging in the language processes, supported by a print rich environment. The learning environment offers literature experiences representing the different genres and many types of related expressive activities. Also, within this environment, children are encouraged to be risk-takers and to interact with others concerning the constructs they have generated within the language processes (Spiegel, 1992). The
result of this involvement in whole units of quality literature
and interactions with others over the meanings created through
the reading process is the development of thinking-language
abilities (Goodman, 1986).

Knowledge about literature itself, not just reading, is an
important outcome of instruction in literature-based instruction
(McGee, 1992). Norton (1992a) states that in 1983, the National
Council of Teachers of English published objectives for
literature-based programs.

Students should:

1. Realize importance of literature as a mirror of human
   experience.
2. Be able to gain insights from involvement with
   literature.
3. Become aware of writers--representing diverse
   backgrounds and traditions.
4. Become familiar with past and present masterpieces of
   literature.
5. Develop ways of discussing and writing about various
   forms of literature.
6. Appreciate rhythms and beauty of language in literature.
7. Develop lifelong reading habits. (p. 14)
Value of Folk Literature in Children's Lives

Folk literature is a genre that comes from the common people, traditionally the peasants. These stories have their origins in oral storytelling.

Early storytellers knew how to tell stories with easily recognized plot structures, motifs, settings, and themes. These elements encouraged the listeners to join in with the story and appealed to their personal-social needs (Norton, 1992b). Folk stories have been told and retold, emerging in many versions. They were finally written down by collectors after they had existed for centuries. There is no final and definitive version of a piece of folk literature (Yolen, 1981). Folk stories have been called the "cement of society" binding a culture together. They are the "spiritual history" of humankind because they express the universality of human wishes and needs (Lukens, 1990).

Folk literature is a part of children's literary heritage and lays the groundwork for understanding all literature. People's current language reflects many contributions of traditional literature (Huck, Hepler, & Hickman, 1993).

In order to truly appreciate today's literature, children need to become familiar with folk literature. There are several basic functions of folklore: (1) Provides a landscape of allusion in which traditional stories help children understand modern
story; (2) Offers a way of looking at another culture from the inside out; (3) Presents an adaptable tool for therapy as children can relate many of the motifs in folk tales to their own lives; (4) Provides a tool for the understanding of day-to-day experiences and uses the children’s inherent ability of metaphoric speech to absorb the meanings of these symbolically expressed ancient tales (Yolen, 1981).

Nothing can be as enriching and satisfying as the folk story. Because life is often bewildering to children, they need to be given the chance to understand themselves in this complex world in which they must cope. These tales teach little about the specific conditions of life in modern society since they were created long ago, but they portray the inner problems of human beings and wholesome solutions to their predicaments in any society. These tales start where children are in their psychological and emotional being and offer examples of both temporary and permanent solutions to pressing difficulties (Bettelheim, 1976).

These specific points support the implementation of folk tales as part of the literature base of the school (Routman, 1991; Yolen, 1981).

First, folk tales appeal to children and stimulate their imagination. They are short and fast-moving.
Second, traditional tales have a rich vocabulary and develop important universal themes; for example, good overcomes evil. These two forces are clearly differentiated in folk stories. They can heighten children's awareness of the consequences of behavior and help them connect to the problems of contemporary society.

Third, this genre is a part of children's cultural heritage and can connect them to the values of their parents and grandparents. They also assist in understanding other cultures, thus expanding their sense of universality.

Fourth, in terms of an instructional program, folk tales offer different levels of meaning to children of varying levels of ability. Usually, school and public libraries have collections or single illustrated versions of these stories so that the literature base of a reading program can be easily extended.

Value of Offering Folk Tale Experiences in a Reading Program

A unit on folk tales will encourage both efferent and aesthetic responses to literature, allowing the children to read for a definite purpose and also to read for sheer pleasure (Norton, 1992a). These traditional stories are springboards for retelling experiences and can be retold in many different ways: speaking, writing, dramatizing, and illustrating. Through these
retelling experiences, children can also become acquainted with the different storytelling techniques of the various cultures. Retelling stories can foster many interesting interactions that extend the meaning of texts and knowledge of their structures and can develop an appreciation of a culture's heritage (Harms & Lettow, 1992).

A study of folk stories can help integrate the language arts with other areas of the curriculum. Experiences with stories from a specific culture can encourage students to identify cultural foundations, appreciate the language and creativity of the people, explore settings developed through both the text and illustrations, develop appreciation for values and beliefs, compare similarities across cultures, and write original stories (Norton, 1991).

Extended Unit On Folk Tales From Specific Cultures

Our school currently has adopted a basal reading series as the basis of reading instruction. The anthology for grade five is divided into sections on themes and genres, each consisting of only three stories. Because of this limited exposure to literature, the students have little opportunity for in-depth study. This instructional development project explored the process of extending a mini unit on folk tales entitled "Tales of Long Ago," which includes a Chinese, an African, and an American
Indian folk tale. Since every culture has produced a body of traditional literature, derived from the human imagination to explain the condition of the world and its people, it is in order to investigate the three cultures' stories. These stories can provide an understanding of story structure as well as insight into the traditions of these three cultures (Huck et al., 1993).

Goals of the Unit

To develop positive attitudes about and respect for individuals in all cultures, children need many opportunities to read and listen to literature that presents accurate and respectful images of all humans (Norton, 1991). These goals were proposed for extending the short unit on folk tales in the basal reader for grade five: (1) to foster an understanding of story and its elements, (2) to enhance the appreciation of language, and (3) to foster understanding of the cultural foundations of traditional stories.

The folk tales that were chosen to be studied in this unit were intended to be culturally specific: language styles and patterns; religious beliefs and practices; musical preferences; family configurations and relationships; social mores and numerous other behaviors; and attitudes and values shared by the members of a cultural group. They illuminate the experience of growing up as a member of a particular cultural group. The
motifs, setting, themes, and specifics of daily living will be identified with these specific groups (Harris, 1993).

In this unit, the students can explore the nature of folk tales—plot structures, universal themes, and symbolic motifs. These literature experiences offer quality models of traditional literature and related expressive activities that connect the comprehension and composition processes and enable the learners to interact with others concerning the ideas and feelings discovered in the reading process.

Introduction of the Unit

The literature experiences can be presented in teacher-directed sessions or incorporated into sustaining centers. This unit can be introduced through a whole-class discussion about storytelling and the importance of storytelling in every culture. The children can be guided to reflect on their family experiences with storytelling, especially stories told by their parents and grandparents. The students may be amazed at how much they recall about stories that have been told to them.

The discussion can be extended to old tales, or folk stories, that are familiar to the students. Their attention can be focused on the commonality of the elements in their favorite stories. From this discussion, elements of folk tales can be identified, such as beginnings and endings, patterns of three, heroes, magic powers, and supernatural motifs. These elements can
be organized on a chart which is ongoing and can be displayed in the room. From the reading center, the students can choose a folk tale to read independently, noting the characteristics that they find as they read and adding any new ones to the original list. After this general introduction to folk tales, the students can be guided back to the basal reader for the exploration of Chinese, African and American Indian folk stories.

Experiences with Chinese Folk Stories

Laurence Yep says in his introduction for *The Rainbow People* (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1989), "reading these tales is like peeping through a keyhole at the Chinese culture" (p. 2). After the folk tale, *The Weaving of a Dream* (N.Y.: Penguin, 1986), by Marilee Heyer, is read in the basal reader to initiate the study of this culture, the students can write briefly on the topic "What I Know about China." After sharing their responses, the class can participate in a whole-group discussion on stereotypes and how too little information on a subject can lead to incorrect thoughts and beliefs about a culture.

In another session, the teacher can read a trickster tale, Yep's *The Rainbow People*. The children can identify the problem and create a trickster story of their own in which keeping one's wits enables the character to survive and gain the desired means.
Experiences with African Folk Stories

The next selection to be studied in the reader is an African story, Tololwa Mollel's *The Orphan Boy* (Ill. P. Morin. N.Y.: Clarion, 1990). A teacher-directed discussion, focused on the region of West Africa, can explore in more depth the idea that many folk tales have originated in this region. Also, the teacher can share Margaret Musgrove's *Ashanti to Zulu: African Traditions* (Ill. L. & D. Dillon. N.Y.: Dial, 1976), and the class can discuss other ethnic groups in Africa.

The class then can be guided through a discussion about the movement of the African culture to the United States through slavery and the rich oral tradition of the African culture. The class then can discuss the importance of storytelling in keeping the African culture alive in the Southern United States.

Experiences with American Indian Folk Stories

The last story included in the reader is an American Indian story, *Her Seven Brothers*, by Paul Goble (N.Y.: Bradbury, 1989). It probably will spark the most interest from the students.

In guiding the children's understanding of American Indian traditional stories, the teacher can present Joseph Bruchac's suggestion to study each nation's stories to truly understand the special heritage of each group (Ford, 1995).

reading experience. American Indians point to this book as an example of an author's insensitivity to ethnic groups due to ignorance. Stereotypical representation of a people and unfair generalizations are the result (Ford, 1995).

After the class is introduced to each of these cultures, they can be given the chance to explore any of these in-depth. Some may choose to write their own version of a folk tale reflecting their chosen culture.

Learning Centers

Both sustaining centers and those specific to the unit can be presented to provide a rich learning environment and options for children's learning. After each culture is presented, students can choose activities from the learning centers.

Sustaining Centers

These centers help maintain a secure, predictable classroom environment as well as extending the literature base.

Reading center. A collection of books and accompanying cassette tapes from the folk tale genre representing the Chinese, African and American Indian cultures can be presented in this center. These references are placed in the bibliography at the end of the paper.
Storytelling center. The students can have opportunities to choose a retelling activity in response to their literature experience:

Speaking: Monologues, group storytelling, dialogues
Writing: Newspaper accounts
Dramatizing: Costuming, narrative pantomiming, reader’s theater;
Illustrating: Simple drawings, book design, filmstrips, mapmaking, story cloth, counting ropes, peep shows, and dioramas.

Author/illustrator center. This center can provide models of how people use language. This center includes biographical sketches of authors/illustrators. Through the study of authors' lives and works, students can see how the life experiences of authors/illustrators influence their writing and illustrating and how authors/illustrators engage in the composition and graphic arts processes (Harms & Lettow, 1992).

Literature Experiences:

Author/illustrator: Paul Goble

Listen to/read:

Expressive Activities:
Design and draw your own teepee, using the designs featured in Paul Goble’s illustrations.

Literature Experience:
Author: Laurence Yep
Listen to/read The Rainbow People, by Laurence Yep.

Expressive Activities
After reading/listening to a story fromYep’s collection, The Rainbow People, discuss or write about the importance of family and family obligations in the Chinese culture.
Choose one of the Chinese tales and evaluate the appropriateness of language and illustration in regard to stereotypical issues.

Bookmaking center.

Instructions and materials for the children’s publishing can be supplied in the center. They are: lightweight cardboard, wrapping paper, construction paper, lined paper, plain paper, wallpaper scraps, pens, pencils, markers, rulers, glue sticks, scissors, and stencils.
Centers Specific to the Unit

Some centers provide cross-cultural experiences with literature. Others provide opportunities for the students to explore a culture more in-depth.

Dramatization across cultures.

Literature Experiences and Expressive Activities

Monologues


Dramas


Reader’s Theater


Common tales across cultures center

Literature Experience

African
Good sibling, bad sibling


Chinese

Little Red Riding Hood


American Indian Cinderella


Expressive Activities

Select one group of tales to compare and contrast. You may want to work with a classmate. Then, make a chart showing the similarities and differences.

**Tricksters across cultures center**

**Literature Experience**

**African**


American Indian


Ask the media specialist for other trickster tales that are available in the media center.

Expressive Activity

Write a trickster tale.

Contribute an image of one of the tricksters to the "Trickster" bulletin board.

Pourquoi stories across cultures center

Literature Experience

American Indian


Ask the media specialist for other pourquoi stories.

Expressive Activity

Write a pourquoi story explaining something in nature or about animals or human beings.


Literature Experience

Expressive Activity

Make masks.

Act out the story.
Bibliography

Professional References


**Children's Books in Reading Center**

**African**


**American Indian**


**Chinese**


