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## Extending the literature base of a reading program through folk literature

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## Extending the literature base of a reading program through folk literature

### Abstract

The report of the National Endowment for the Humanities (1987) stresses the need to present quality literature experiences to facilitate children's personal-social development. Literature needs to be presented as whole units in the form written by the author, not revised to facilitate the teaching of fragments through phonics instruction and to fit readability formulas. Since few basal reader series, the basis of much reading instruction today, focus on quality literature, this humanities group suggests that teachers need to take more responsibility in extending the literature base.

Extending the Literature Base of a Reading  
Program Through Folk Literature

A Graduate Project  
to be 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

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has been approved as meeting the research paper requirement for  
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The report of the National Endowment for the Humanities (1987) stresses the need to present quality literature experiences to facilitate children's personal-social development. Literature needs to be presented as whole units in the form written by the author, not revised to facilitate the teaching of fragments through phonics instruction and to fit readability formulas. Since few basal reader series, the basis of much reading instruction today, focus on quality literature, this humanities group suggests that teachers need to take more responsibility in extending the literature base.

Goodman (1986) supports the statements of the humanities group concerning basal reader programs by relating that basals "fragment the process." Whole language teachers "build their programs around children's literature, often in thematic units" (p. 29). In defense of whole language over basals, Frank Smith (1983) says that studying fragments makes learning to read difficult for children. "Children learn to read by reading, and the sensible teacher makes reading easy and interesting, not difficult and boring" (p. 5). He goes on to say that reading is an inside-out process in which children must start with intention and must bring prior knowledge into the experience to help them predict what is to be read. Basals work on an outside-in process in which children and intent are not considered. Skill work is imposed from the

outside upon the child, but in order for children to create meaning, they must put these skills together. Children need to interact with the print.

The purpose of this instructional development project is to extend the literature base of the basal reader series through folk literature for low-achieving students in grade two. After a review of professional literature related to the nature of the learner in grade two, to the contributions of folk literature in children's personal-social development, and to the value of extending children's reading experiences through expressive activity, the writer will present a summary of the program developed in her classroom.

### Emerging Thinking-Language Abilities

#### Among Second Graders

Charlotte Huck, Susan Hepler, and Janet Hickman (1987) and Raven and Salzer (1971) discuss intellectual development and early reading using Piagetian concepts. Children entering school are in the pre-operational stage of development characterized by the intellectual ability which allows them to look at only one aspect of an experience at a time. Whole language experiences therefore are appropriate at this stage because pre-operational thinkers relate to the whole story rather than to fragments as many of the procedures found in basal readers suggest. When young readers are directed to only one concept at a time, they

miss the meaning in pursuit of perfect pronunciation of the words (Goodman, 1986).

Children entering second grade are beginning to move into the next stage of intellectual development, the concrete operational, in which they can observe more than one aspect. Therefore, their thinking is more flexible and reversible. These children are beginning to conserve an image: they can think about an image in different forms and identify a basic concept even if its form is changed, such as in various versions of folktales. Also, they are beginning to develop a sense of time and are becoming less egocentric so that they can look at things from the point of view of others. Because of these emerging abilities among second grade children, they are able to create much meaning through literature experiences (Huck et al., 1987, p. 56).

#### Contributions of Folktales to Personal-Social Development

The simple plot structure of folk stories is fairly consistent from story to story so children are able to see the basic structure and follow it through in other folktales which aids children's ability to predict and comprehend. The setting, motifs, and basic conflict are presented early in the story. A lively conflict is quickly introduced and moves rapidly to a just resolve (Huck et al., 1987). Often there is a hero or heroine who, through simple virtues and some sacrifice, must overcome

obstacles to achieve a goal which can result in happiness. Patterns of three are frequently represented by motifs, obstacles, and sometimes resolutions. Frequently repetition is used and is associated with patterns of three (Huck et al.).

Noted child psychiatrist, Bruno Bettelheim, believes that experiences with folktales are an important part of developing children's lives. Bettelheim (1977) says that these stories speak to the child's "budding ego and encourage its development while at the same time relieving preconscious and unconscious pressures" (p. 6). He relates that the children identify with the hero or heroine in a tale who is often the poor, mistreated person. In folktales, the principal character, or motif, goes through many trials but in the end is triumphant and wins over evil. Children examine their lot in life, identify with the main motif, and match the good and evil motifs with whomever they perceive as good or evil in their lives. Through experiences with folktales, children acquire hope that they will eventually succeed over the evils in life. This hope can assist children in coping with the pressures of growing up.

The folktale is oriented toward the future. Children, seeing that the folktale motif progresses into the future, moving from an unhappy or static existence through exciting adventures to a happy life, can come to realize that growing up and going out in the world is the way to achieve their own



happiness. Folktales encourage children to strive for a fulfilling life. Bettelheim suggests that children use these ideas in fantasy to achieve their own self-realization. Folktales enhance this fantasy for children by often not using names for the motifs involved. If the motif is not named the children can easily substitute their own names in the heroic role, therefore developing an optimistic attitude toward life and growing up (Bettelheim).

To develop these positive attitudes, Bettelheim states that children must be told each tale many times. Then the tale will become part of their own experience. This reinforces the whole language approach of repetition to develop ownership (Harms & Lettow, 1986; Martinez & Roser, 1985).

Jane Yolen (1981) also supports offering children experiences with folktales, and she believes that folk literature is a part of children's birthright. The child having had experiences with folktales, "accepts them with an ease born of familiarity, fitting them into his own scheme of things, endowing them with new meaning" (p. 20).

Yolen states that folktales have four basic functions in education. First, folktales "provide a landscape of allusion" (p. 15) which deepens the understanding of all literature. The same type of motifs and actions show up in other genre. Children, having a reference point in folktales, can recognize

the heroine, the villain, or the plot structure of more complex literature.

Second, folktales "provide a way of looking at another culture from the inside out" (p. 16). When trying to understand another culture or one's own culture, the study of folktales gives a clue to the values of the culture. Understanding the values assists in understanding why the people in a culture act in certain ways.

Third, folktales are a "tool of therapy" (p. 17). In explaining this function, Yolen refers to Bettelheim whose whole thrust centers around children working out problems by placing self in the role of the motif with similar problems. Folktales help children understand human longings and reflect both the light and dark sides of life.

Fourth, folktales provide a "model for an individual's belief system" (p. 18). Children can come to understand that the major motif has to strive for happiness; it was not given to them without effort on their part. These values help children interpret everyday life so they can set their own goals and standards.

Bettelheim (1977) and Yolen (1981), throughout their discussion of folktales, relate that the underlying theme of striving to achieve is also the basis for different types of literature. Huck et al. (1987) further state that folk

literature is "the groundwork for understanding all literature" (p. 253). These views are also stressed by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Their 1987 report stated that "They [children] need to read great works of literature, thus confronting questions of good and evil, freedom and responsibility, that have determined the character of people and nations" (p. 10).

#### Value of Extending Children's Reading Experiences Through Expressive Activities

Experiences with folk literature can extend the thinking and language abilities of children in grade two. These tightly-constructed, traditional stories allow children to become aware of the structure of a story. Leland B. Jacobs (1987) says that learning about such patterns has a direct bearing on comprehension since an able reader reads meaning within a recognized form (p. 35-36).

Having this background on folktales and their importance to the developing child, the natural connection of using a thematic unit of folktales to extend the instruction of a basal reader through whole language can be seen. Such a unit gives opportunities to read and engage in expressive activities, thus focusing on meaning instead of the fragments and vocabulary control, encouraging risk taking, and fostering much oral and written language (Goodman, 1986).

Charlotte Huck (1982) says that expressive activities help develop critical reading skills and discernment for fine writing. Activities such as retelling, writing letters to story motifs, and constructing dioramas encourage literary appreciation. The social activity of children working on books and activities together develops a community of readers, something a book report cannot do.

Harms and Lettow (unpublished) reinforce these ideas by saying that many modes of expression can be encouraged and developed with literature experiences to support growth in story grammar. These activities help children make the composition-comprehension connection and help them realize the commonality in structure and purpose of both processes. Activities they suggest include preparing flannelboard presentations, monologues, group illustrations, maps, and numerous others. All these help children grasp the theme of the work.

#### Implementation of Folktales into the Reading Program

In the writer's project, nine second graders who read on a first grade level were presented reading experiences and related expressive activities through a unit on folktales to expand their sense of story.

Reading classes were conducted two periods daily. During the study of the folktales, one period was dedicated to this unit, and the other period was used for basal reader instruction.

Much of the instruction in the basal focused on comprehension tasks; the students read passages and discussed them with support from the teacher. The word skill aspect of the basal was kept at a minimum.

The unit on folktales was implemented by expanding on the works presented in the grade two-level reader, The Nitty Gritty Rather Pretty City, in the Addison-Wesley Series (Rowland, 1982). These stories included The Gingerbread Man, The Ugly Duckling, The Last Dragon, Beauty and the Beast, and The Firebird. The teacher and the students chose other folktales which included Cinderella, The Three Billy Goats Gruff, Hansel and Gretel, The Snow Maiden, Little Red Riding Hood, Rumpelstiltskin, The Month Brothers, and Rapunzel.

The Ugly Duckling, by Hans Christian Andersen, was adapted as a play from the basal reader. The group began the study of the story by viewing a film. Then they read versions illustrated by different illustrators and compared and contrasted these visual interpretations. As the children retold the story in groups of three, their narration was written down by the instructor. The students then identified major sections of the story and did a group illustration, each child doing one section. This was displayed for their classmates to aid in their understanding of the story. Some of the children retold the tale as a flannelboard experience to the kindergarten students.

From this background of experiences with the story, this group of second graders were able to develop the play in less time than in previous years. They did the comprehension page in the basal workbook after they had begun work on the play. In prior years this page has been difficult for the students, but the present group completed the page with few errors.

To conclude the study of The Ugly Duckling, each child dictated the story which was then typed for reading to the group. Most of the stories followed the literature versions more than the basal reader version. One girl was able to tell the action of the story but had the sequence confused. When she read to her peers, they pointed out her incorrect sequence and assisted her in the revision. The teacher helped her in cutting up and reordering her story. Then the girl read aloud the revision and was pleased to receive peer approval.

The story of Pop's Muffin Shop, the basal reader version of The Gingerbread Man (Rowland, 1982), was the next story that was studied along with several other versions from different cultures. These included the American version, Journey Cake Ho! (Sawyer, 1953); the Russian version, The Bun (Brown, 1972); the Scottish version, Wee Bannock (Steel, 1962); and the Norwegian version, The Pancake (Arbuthnot, 1961). After reading these versions with different names for the major motif and locating

the countries of their origins on the globe, the children discovered that each story was similar to The Gingerbread Man.

For related expressive activities, they constructed a gingerbread man Christmas tree and decorated it, recited a choral reading of the story to the first graders, ate gingerbread men, and retold the story through flannelboard pieces.

The story of The Gingerbread Man enhanced the students' understanding of cumulative plot which had been introduced to them prior to this unit. Throughout the year, these second graders often shared literary pieces they had found that contained a cumulative plot.

The story of The Firebird was introduced through attending a pantomime performance presented by another reading group. Then the children in the project read the basal reader version of The Firebird (Untermeyer, 1982) and compared it to the dramatic presentation. Other Russian folktales including The Snow Maiden (Foregosi, 1970), Bonylegs (Cole, 1983), and the Firebird (Arbuthnot, 1961) were read and retold through flannelboard experiences. Since the basal selection centered around ballet, the group practiced ballet positions and danced to Stravinsky's music for The Firebird (Polydor, 1975).

It Could Always Be Worse (Zemach, 1976) was preceded by the story in the basal reader, Edgar G. Crabb's Apartment (Levitt, 1982), which has the theme of "being happy with what you have"

and a cumulative plot structure. After reading these stories, the children readily saw the similarity in the elements among the stories. The experience with It Could Always Be Worse was extended through oral storytelling, a flannelboard experience, and the construction of dioramas. Also, children retold the story using an experience of their own, such as a noisy home, a crowded desk, or a noisy school bus.

The story of The Last Dragon, a basal reader adaptation of E. Nesbit's The Last of the Dragons (1982), developed interest in stories of knights and dragons from the Middle Ages. From the comparisons made with St. George and the Dragon (Hodges, 1984), the children decided that the basal reader dragon tale did not closely follow the folktale formula. Additions and deletions were made by the group so it was more like a folktale. Bordered illustrations related the story to book design of the Middle Ages, as illustrator, Trina Shart Hyman, had done in St. George and the Dragon. The group also read Sir Cedric (Gerrard, 1984), Richard Brown and the Dragon (Bright, 1952), and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (Hastings, 1981) to further develop the idea of a knight going on an adventure to conquer evil. The experience was extended by making medieval bookmarks and dioramas involving knights.

The story of Beauty and the Beast was in the form of a play in the basal reader. Prior to reading and performing the basal



selection, the version by Patricia Daniels (1980), another by Mary Osborne (1987), and the audio tape by Wetzel and Lewis (1975) were compared. The students retold the story orally to the class, illustrated the sequence of events, and performed a puppet play for the first grade. After these expressive activities were completed, they performed the basal reader version for a fifth grade class.

Having had so much exposure to folktales, this group responded to the theme of Hansel and Gretel as going out into the world rather than abandonment. They generated much discussion over these themes in each of the versions. Expressive activities for Hansel and Gretel included individual retelling on tape and drawing maps to show the journey of Hansel and Gretel. The latter activity crossed the curriculum because they were doing map skills in social studies: It enhanced their understanding of maps as well as facilitating the retelling of the tale.

The Month Brothers was shared with the entire class, and different versions of the story were related to the study of months and seasons. The children in this low reading group assumed leadership in comparing and contrasting the elements of the versions and retelling them. They explained folktale elements and pointed them out in the versions of this story for the whole class. Many expressive activities emerged from

The Month Brothers. First, the class worked in groups of three to rewrite the story in their own words which helped them review the action, motifs, sequence, and plot structure to extend their understanding of the story. The students were heterogeneously grouped so each group had at least one student who could take the group's dictation. Following this, they chose, either individually or as a small group, an expressive activity--writing their own versions using different months than the original tale, illustrating the months of the year, making flannelboard stories, constructing dioramas, and finding poetry associated with the months and seasons of the year.

#### Conclusions

By the end of this folktale study, these low achievers were aware of the elements of folktales in the stories they had read and often related these characteristics to other stories.

Each of the folktales was extended through many types of expressive activity, allowing the children to explore the meaning of the stories in depth therefore extending their sense of story. As these children listened and read and then engaged in related expressive activity, they became more aware of story structure which allowed them to both comprehend the stories and relate more readily the ideas of the stories in expressive activity. They gained more confidence in their abilities and began taking more chances in writing experiences, not only associated with the

folk literature instruction, but also in other activities in the classroom, for example, in a writer's workshop, small heterogeneous groupings of children in the class representing different abilities which met separately from the reading class.

The instructor initially wondered whether experiences with multiple versions of the same folktale would become tiresome to the students. On the contrary, they seemed to enjoy these extended experiences. They enthusiastically noted similarities and differences and were eager to see how many versions of each folktale they could study.

At the beginning of the year they thought the cartoon versions of folktales were more enjoyable. After comparing them with quality literature, they decided that the cartoon versions deleted or altered too much of the folktale and that the illustrations had no life. This conclusion influenced their choice in other fiction. They chose cartoons as a last choice.

After the success of this project, the second grade class this year is heterogeneously grouped for reading, and the instructor has been following the same basic pattern for instruction. Because of the leadership of the able children, expressive activity was more sophisticated and progressed more rapidly. With the integration of the whole group, no one is pointed out as "the dummy" or "the brain," and the students seem more cohesive.

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