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Whole language and predictable materials for first grade readers

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Whole language and predictable materials for first grade readers

Abstract

In this paper, the writer will review the professional literature on whole language and then will describe the implementation of this concept of language instruction through predictable text and related expressive activity in grade one.

WHOLE LANGUAGE AND PREDICTABLE MATERIALS
FOR FIRST GRADE READERS

A Graduate Project
Submitted to the
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
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This Research Paper by: Marilyn Green

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Traditional reading instruction in the United States centers around a basal reading series. Dissatisfied educators armed with current research advocate a whole language approach that is more effective than the basal approach. Goodman (1986) states:

A body of knowledge based on theory, research, and practice has been growing rapidly about how reading and other language processes work, how they develop, and how teaching and school programs can best support effective functional literacy development. Basals have not moved to become more consistent with this knowledge; rather, they have been moving in opposite directions. In response to back to basics pressures and narrow test-teach-test methodologies they have become more trivialized, more atomistic, more arbitrarily sequential with less room for teacher judgment, less opportunity for pupil choice, less concern for making sense of real written language (p. 358).

In this paper, the writer will review the professional literature on whole language and then will describe the implementation of this concept of language instruction through predictable text and related expressive activity in grade one.

A TEACHING DILEMMA

Quality instruction is important in developing reading as a lifelong activity. Although basal readers are widely accepted in instructional programs, their emphasis on skills rather than the acquisition of literacy thwarts children's development. Goodman (1986) says:

Most ironically, the current basals require more time for reading instruction while they provide less time for students actually reading. By defining reading as mastery of arbitrary skill sequences as measured by performance on multiple-choice tests they misrepresent actual reading development (p. 358).

Smith simply states, "Children learn to read by reading, and the sensible teacher makes reading easy and interesting, not difficult and boring" (Smith, 1983, p. 5). In the writer's search for answers to this reading instruction dilemma, articles on the value of whole language were major sources of guidance and a basis for the instructional program.

WHOLE LANGUAGE AND THE BASAL READER

Whole language programs are based on learning that belongs to the learner in a meaningful way. Goodman (1986) says "Keep language whole and involve children in using it functionally and purposefully to meet their own needs" (p. 7).

In whole language instruction, readers see a purpose for reading while developing literacy. Goodman (1977) believes:

Keeping the focus of both the learner and the teacher on meaning will provide both the necessary context for learning and basic means of evaluation and self-evaluation. Readers who understand that success in reading can be easily judged by whether what is read makes sense will tend to drop non-productive strategies even if teachers advocate them (p. 313).

Instruction in a meaningful whole allows the child to engage in the reading process that involves prediction, comprehension, and learning (Smith, 1983).

The emphasis on getting meaning from reading is difficult with the basal reader. Smith states, "Unfortunately, a good deal of reading instruction seems to be based on the premise that sense should be the last, not the first, concern of readers" (Smith, 1983, p. 45).

Whole language experiences allow students to continue their search for literacy in a natural way. According to Harms and Lettow (1986):

Until they enter school, young children learn by using whole units of language. As pre-schoolers they associate with collaborative readers who offer literature experiences and related expressive activities by reading aloud and

supplying books for viewing. They choose stories, request read-aloud sessions on a regular basis, pretend to read using intonation patterns that sound like reading rather than speaking, recite verse and repetition from stories, discuss books, retell the sequence of ideas and experiment with ideas from literature through play, drawing and story telling (p. 325).

As the activities in the Harms and Lettow quote indicate, children's natural learning is not only real but uses whole units. The basal is highly criticized for breaking learning into bits and pieces. Again, from Harms and Lettow (1986):

These children who have confidently owned their reading experience may find to their disappointment that reading in school means learning the alphabet and isolated letter/sound relationships, drilling on these elements, and swiftly completing worksheets that require underlining and matching (p. 325).

Basal readers, with practice exercises that reflect skills sequences, fragment the process. Their presentation of language phenomena is unscientific, and they steal teachers' and learners' time away from productive reading and writing (Goodman, 1986). The instruction offered in basal readers assumes that every child learns to read in the same way and that reading is the acquisition of an arbitrary sequence of skills (Bromley, 1988).

PREDICTABLE TEXT IN THE WHOLE LANGUAGE PROGRAM

One aspect of developing literacy within a whole language instructional program for beginning readers is experience with predictable reading materials. Some predictable stories have refrains or repetition of words or phrases that children can anticipate. The repetitive phrases or questions encourage children to make predictions, or guesses, about words, phrases, sentences, and events of what could come next in the story. Goodman supports the use of these materials. "The best books at this stage are predictable books. Their familiar content and structure, and the often repetitious, cyclical sequencing make them predictable" (Goodman, 1986, p. 47).

Huck (1987) also advocates experiences with predictable works:

Many pre-primers and primers have stilted, unnatural language and pointless plots that cut across the child's spontaneous attempts to read; on the other hand, stories that children love and have heard over and over again have natural language and satisfying plots that encourage reading. Many of these books utilize repeated language and story patterns which help the child learn to read naturally as she or he joins in on the refrains or predicts the action of the story (p. 183).

Other predictable stories based on basic concepts important to emerging readers facilitate comprehension. Many stories are built around familiar sequences, such as months, days of the year, holidays or numbers. These capitalize on children's familiarity with sequence in their everyday lives. Bridge (1979) states:

Beginning readers bring a lot of world knowledge to the task of learning to read. When the material they are asked to read is relevant to this background of knowledge, they, too, can use the semantic-associational cueing system to support their limited word recognition skills (p. 503).

A strength of predictable materials in an instructional program is that they foster a positive self-concept and feelings of being a reader among young children. Pattern stories give assistance to children as they begin reading. After children have heard the story read several times they begin to memorize a portion of it. The memorization is easy because of the predictable repeated structure. Memory for the pattern allows children to recite the story accurately while turning the pages-- an imitation of reading or reading-like behavior. Soon children can read the story alone, therefore providing a means for independent reading. As readers continue to reproduce the text, they interact with it to self-monitor their reading strategies.

Readers will experiment and approximate in an attempt to make sense and thus continue the development of reading behaviors (Holdaway, 1982).

Because predictable stories can be learned in a short time, readers soon have a variety of titles to enjoy again and again. These pattern stories provide enjoyment to young children, for as Martin (1971) states, "They put a flow of language in children's ears and eyes and mouth, and fill their lives with the radiance of reading success" (p. 12).

The collaboration between text and illustrations in a predictable story supports readers as they read to create meaning. In the story of The Little Red Hen, children use the pictures to predict each story event from planting the wheat to making the bread (Tompkins, Webeler, 1983).

A natural outgrowth of predictable text is the development of sight word vocabulary. As children are repeatedly exposed to the text, they predict the correct word in context and gradually these words are added to their sight word vocabulary (Bridge, 1979).

The conclusions of the study conducted by Leu, DeGross, and Simons (1986) of first graders' response suggests that when reading predictable text, attention for both good and poor readers is given to comprehension processing but for different reasons. Good readers attend to the meaning of a story because of their

automatic, context-free word-recognition skills; poor readers attend to the meaning of a story because of their automatic use of repetitive sentence context.

From this study, it was concluded that predictable texts seem to have particular merit in the instructional program for first grade children who are learning to read slowly. Predictable texts may give poor readers important early opportunities to create meaning. They can support these children in making inferences, drawing conclusions, predicting outcomes, those tasks traditionally associated with comprehension instruction. Reading predictable texts provide opportunities for slow learners that they seldom have if their attention is occupied by word recognition demands, as is characteristic of many basal reader programs.

A WHOLE LANGUAGE PROGRAM WITH PREDICTABLE TEXT IN GRADE ONE

Experiences with whole language and predictable text became part of the writer's reading instructional program in grade one. These experiences extended children's opportunities to create meaning for themselves within a basal reader series that was dictated by school policy as the basis of reading instruction.

Poetry

Poems with repetition and refrain were presented daily. From sheets given each child, children read as a group, recited after

the teacher, or enacted the rhythm of the work. Examples were "Latch Catch" (Eve Merriam in Blackberry Ink), "Snow" (Karla Kuskin in Dogs & Dragons, Trees & Dreams), and "What Is Blue?" (Mary O'Neill in Hailstones and Halibut Bones). Poetry experiences as a warm-up activity for reading was suggested in Holdaway's Shared Book Experience: Teaching Reading Using Favorite Books.

Predictable Stories

The first graders assigned to small heterogeneous-ability groups were involved in reading predictable stories. The pattern used to teach these stories comes from the writing of Bridge, Winograd and Haley (1983) and Tompkins and Webeler (1983). When children were presented stories, the teacher directed them to the cover of the book and assisted them in making predictions about the content of the story. Then the teacher read the first few pages to introduce the predictable pattern, and the children compared their predictions with the text and made further predictions. The teacher continued to read the text with the children chiming in when they recognized the patterns. At the end of this reading, the children could offer their responses to the story.

The following day the teacher again read the story with the children chiming in. After this listening experience, the children received their own copies of the story and read the story orally as a group and repeated it again. The group moved

to a chart story of the book, without illustrations, to allow the children to receive only verbal clues as they read.

On the third day, the students read pages of the predictable text to each other, read sentences from the chart story, and matched sentence strips to the lines of the chart. On the fourth day, the children read sentences from the chart individually as a review. Also pairs of students were given sentence strips to arrange in the sequence of the story. After this task was completed, they read the story aloud to each other. Each book was presented along with the rereading of the works previously presented.

With so much attention given to the predictable elements in each story, it is important to select quality works, ones worth returning to. Examples are The Big Sneeze, by Ruth Brown; The Very Busy Spider, by Eric Carle; and The Napping House, by Audrey Wood.

Students can extend the predictable text by writing their own story in big book form. The class created Black Bat, Black Bat, What Do You See? as a take-off from Bill Martin's Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See? Students worked as a class in writing big books with individuals supplying accompanying illustrations. The individual pages were stapled together with the title page. These student works were among the favorite books in the Reading Center.

Related Expressive Activity

Center activity provides support for the whole language program. Children chose expressive activity suggested in the centers to extend their language experiences.

Listening/Reading Center

Multiple copies of books with tapes for student listening/reading were available in this center. New books and tapes were added weekly and were generally an extension of the thematic unit being studied.

Poetry Center

Many books of poetry for young people were offered. Poems by Karla Kuskin, David McCord, Eve Merriam, Mary O'Neill, Eloise Greenfield and Myra Cohn Livingston were favorites of the students. They enjoyed reciting their favorite poems for classmates and other classes.

Retelling Center

A flannelboard and pieces made of pelfon to represent important story elements were provided. The children liked to share stories with their friends. Folk tales, with simple, well structured plots such as Goldilocks and the Three Bears, The Three Billy Goats Gruff, and The Bremen Town Musicians make rewarding retelling experiences.

Author Center

This center focused on a series of well known children's authors such as Arnold Lobel, Maurice Sendak, and Beatrice Schenk

de Regniers. Photographs and works of the authors were supplied after they had been introduced by the teacher.

Writing Center

Children chose from a variety of paper (sizes and colors) to write their own predictable stories or to retell predictable stories. The picture file also gave ideas for stories.

Art Center

Students were encouraged to create mobiles, puppets and other art projects to extend the predictable story. A variety of papers, paints, markers and yarns were available.

Summary

The research on whole language and predictable text has given teachers valuable insight into beginning reading instruction. Through reading predictable texts, early readers acquire sight word vocabularies, use context clues, and develop comprehension abilities without the skills instruction of the basal reader. Positive concepts of self as a reader are nurtured as students read and reread predictable stories. Expressive activity centers further extend the ideas in predictable texts and stimulate creative composition while providing a connection between reading and writing. Whole language and predictable text foster success for readers in grade one.

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Martin, B., & Brogan, P. (1971). Teacher's guide to the instant readers. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Smith, F. (1983). Essays into literacy. Portsmouth: Heinemann.

Tompkins, G. D., & Webeler, M. R. (1983). What will happen next: Using predictable books with young children. The Reading Teacher, 36(2), 498-502.

APPENDIX

Predictable Literature for Early Readers

Poetry Volumes

- Greenfield, E. (1978). Honey, I love, illus. Diane and Leo Dillion. N.Y.: Crowell.
- Kuskin, K. (1980). Dogs and dragons, trees and dreams. N.Y.: Harper and Row.
- Livingston, M. C. (1976). 4-way stop. N.Y.: Atheneum.
- McCord, D. (1969). Every time I climb a tree, illus. Marc Simont. Boston: Little, Brown.
- McCord, D. (1970). A star in the pail, illus. Marc Simont. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Merriam, E. (1985). Blackberry ink, illus. Hans Wilhelm. N.Y.: Morrow.
- Merriam, E. (1988). You be good and I'll be night. N.Y.: Morrow.
- O'Neill, M. (1961). Hailstones and halibut bones, illus. Leonard Weisgard. Philadelphia: Doubleday.

Picture Books

- Brown, R. (1985). The big sneeze. New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard.
- Burmingham, J. (1971). Mr. Gumpy's outing. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Carle, E. (1969). The very hungry caterpillar. Cleveland: Collins World.

- Hutchins, P. (1972). Good-night, owl! New York: Macmillan.
- Hutchins, P. (1968). Rosie's walk. New York: Macmillan.
- Galdone, P. (1973). The three billy goats gruff. New York:
Houghton Mifflin.
- Keats, E. J. (1972). Over in the meadow. New York: Four Winds.
- Langstaff, J. (1984). Oh a-hunting we will go. New York:
Atheneum.
- Martin, B. (1971). Brown bear, brown bear, what do you see?
New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Tolstoi, A. (1968). The great big enormous turnip. New York:
Franklin Watts.
- Wood, A. (1984). The napping house. New York: Harcourt, Brace,
& Jovanovich.