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Extending children's literacy through a thematic unit

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Extending children's literacy through a thematic unit

Abstract

This paper will present the rationale for extending the literature base of a reading and language arts instructional program. Implications for instruction, based on a review of professional literature, will be discussed and then applied to the development of a fifth-grade unit based on the theme of memories. Literature-based units provide children with many opportunities to engage in the functions of language, thus strengthening their thinking-language abilities.

Extending Children's Literacy Through a Thematic Unit

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Many of the conditions that nurture children's oral language abilities also foster their written language abilities. Just as children need to be surrounded with speech to learn to talk, they need to be immersed in a print-rich environment to learn to read and write.

The classroom environment that offers many literature experiences with the different genres facilitates emerging literacy. These literature experiences provide models of language that nurture children's written language abilities (Cambourne, 1988).

Statement of Purpose

This paper will present the rationale for extending the literature base of a reading and language arts instructional program. Implications for instruction, based on a review of professional literature, will be discussed and then applied to the development of a fifth-grade unit based on the theme of memories. Literature-based units provide children with many opportunities to engage in the functions of language, thus strengthening their thinking-language abilities.

Theoretical Base for a Literature-Based Unit

Recent professional literature has shown that many language arts instructional programs in the elementary school are not based on what is known about the nature of language and children's emerging literacy. This concept of an instructional

program is known as "whole language." These aspects of language need to be considered in improving instruction.

Whole Units

When language is encountered in real situations, it involves wholes, not fragments. Through whole units, children can naturally experience the systems of language working together. Focusing on isolated fragments and skills makes language experiences abstract and meaningless to children (Goodman, 1986).

Just as children develop their ability to speak through hearing and using meaningful speech, they develop their written language abilities through engaging in the reading and writing processes (Smith, 1983). Whole units of quality literature provide meaningful texts through which children learn to read and to write. Through experiences with literature works, the reader can make sense of text by making predictions and reducing alternatives based on prior knowledge, relational clues, and context (Smith, 1983).

Certain conditions facilitate written language development. Learners need immersion in written texts and demonstrations of written language. They need time and opportunities for engagement in the reading and writing processes to develop the ability to make approximations and to form and test hypotheses and then to receive feedback from others. From these experiences, they can develop confidence in, and high

expectations for, their abilities, thus becoming successful readers and writers (Cambourne, 1988).

A literature-based unit provides a framework in which these conditions can be made available. When experiences with fragmented bits of language found frequently in basal reader series are replaced with whole units of quality literature, students will engage in reading and writing because they have a real purpose (Hancock & Hill, 1988).

Quality Literature as a Model of Language

Quality literature offers a reason to return to it. Literature provides a model of conventions, styles, and techniques used in written language (Smith, 1983). As children read a variety of books, they become familiar with different textual forms that can be used in their own writing. When given a rich learning environment filled with literature and the opportunity to reflect and respond to books, children will naturally begin to read from a writer's perspective and write from a reader's perspective (Atwell, 1987). Literature generates enthusiasm for writing. Books are demonstrations of what can be achieved by writing (Hancock & Hill, 1988).

A writer may "borrow" and build upon another author's theme, genre, topic, or technique. Calkins (1990) suggests reading books to children in such a way that it affects how they write. For example, stories with interesting leads might be

discussed in a mini-lesson on writing techniques. What makes a good lead? How can this be applied to student writing?

Graves (1983) suggests that students document when they think of writing while reading, enhancing their metatextual awareness. Through small group discussions, they can share how their own writing has been influenced by pieces of literature, including stories written by classmates. He advocates treating student writing in the same way that professional writing is treated. It should be treated as literature.

Through many opportunities to read quality literature, children not only extend their thinking-language abilities but their personal-social development as well. Children can gain new perspectives and insights into situations they may otherwise have never thought of before. They can live vicariously through characters by predicting, imagining, and speculating on how that character might solve a problem. These new understandings make children more social and empathetic as they come across various aspects of the human experience in literature. As children learn to read and write through literature, they also can gain new insights about themselves and the world they live in (Huck, 1982).

Print-Rich Environment

Children should be surrounded by print in their learning environment. In order to learn about language, children need to

have access to it. A print-rich environment should include quality literature from many sources, such as newspapers, magazines, signs, posters, labels, and any other forms of functional print. Children need to be exposed to quality literature from the different genres, for a fully literate person reads widely from a variety of literature (Huck, 1979).

Aspects of each genre are particularly valuable to the reader:

Folktales. These traditional tales offer common themes that still hold true today such as good vs. evil and provide the reader with a logical organization of plot (Norton, 1983).

Modern fantasy. Fanciful stories allow the reader to accept another world by temporarily suspending disbelief. It can stimulate the reader to extend his/her thinking away from this time and place to create other worlds (Huck, 1979).

Realistic fiction. Realism offers contemporary conflicts that are possible but not necessarily plausible. The author develops the qualities of the central characters so that the reader can come to know the character as believable (Lukens, 1986).

Historical fiction. The authentic recreating of setting (time and place) is important in historical fiction. The past comes alive for the reader who can gain new insights into historical events and can relate to the heritage of the past.

The reader can discover common features of humanity throughout time (Norton, 1983).

Poetry. This genre appeals to the emotions by offering new, intense insights into experiences. Through experiences with poetry, the reader can see and hear in a vivid sense the interrelationships of the language systems (Harms & Lettow, (1983).

Interactions with Text

Time for interaction with text must be provided in the classroom. Children need opportunities to experience the joys of reading and writing in order to develop lifetime reading habits. This engagement with print is fostered by sustained periods of reading and writing. Cambourne (1988) advocates sustained reading and writing as the most effective ways to internalize and control language.

Reading aloud to students is another effective way to generate excitement for books. Listening to text enhances children's knowledge of language. Vocabulary is developed as children hear new words within the context of a story as well as being exposed to new meanings of familiar words (Trelease, 1985). These sessions can also expose children to different genres, develop a sense of story, make connections with other stories and their own lives, and build a frame of reference for quality stories and poems (Friedberg & Strong, 1989).

Providing Natural Avenues for Response to Literature

As children are immersed in print, they should have opportunities to respond to literature in meaningful ways. Rosenblatt (1983) defined "response" as an exploration of meaning, or a transaction between reader and text. Opportunities for response will help children become more thoughtful readers as they bring background experiences, associations with other texts and authors, and feelings to text. Opportunities for response are endless. Learning centers that offer a variety of suggestions are valuable in stimulating thought (Harms & Lettow, 1992).

Atwell (1987) suggests having students keep reading journals in which they write letters to classmates and/or the teacher to share thoughts about the books they are reading or have read. They can describe a character, react to the style of writing, give a critical review, compare two books, or share any other thoughts that occur naturally as a consequence of reading.

Children can also choose to retell a story through art, drama, puppets, or music. They can make a display, a bulletin board, or an advertisement about a book. The study of characters can be a focus for children's responses: They can write diary entries from the point of view of a character or letters to or from a character. Children can compare and contrast a story with other works of the same genre or with the

same theme. Characters, plots, organization, settings, themes, or writing styles can be the focus of these comparisons (Harms & Lettow, 1992).

Ownership of the Learning Experience

When children are surrounded by print and offered opportunities for response, they need to be given ownership for their learning experiences. In a learner-centered classroom, ownership empowers children with control and choice to create meaning (Harms & Lettow, 1986). Goodman (1986) suggests involving students in the development of the print-filled environment. They can be responsible for organizing displays, posters, and bulletin boards.

Learning centers, by offering many alternatives for response to literature, can provide a rich environment. Children can choose books and activities as well as taking some ownership of time management (Harms & Lettow, 1986).

If children are to develop lifetime habits in reading and writing, they need to have positive attitudes toward literacy experiences. Providing children with responsibility for their learning assists in satisfying individual needs and interests. When interests are exercised, attitudes improve and so does efficiency in reading and writing. When given responsibility and control, children will more likely believe in themselves as readers and writers. Thus, the goal for the language arts

program should be personal growth rather than a level of achievement that everyone attains (Goodman, 1986).

Johnston (1984) addresses the issues of ownership in assessment. Children should be involved in self-assessment of their emerging literacy through interviews, student-kept records, and goal-setting conferences. Atwell (1987) relates that a reading journal can help children not only react to specific works but reflect on their involvement in the reading process over time.

Role of the Teacher

In a learner-centered environment, the teacher becomes a co-learner and an active participant. Goodman (1989) describes the teacher's role as a model and facilitator. The teacher collaborates in problem-solving with children, supports students without controlling learning, and accepts individual differences. The teacher motivates, monitors development, and provides materials and activities for a stimulating environment.

Students should see the teacher in the roles of a reader and a writer. The teacher's communication of excitement about reading and writing is important in motivating students to be readers and writers (Atwell, 1987). By sharing literary experiences with the class and reading with the children during periods of sustained silent reading, the teacher can be an effective model.

A Literature-Based Language Arts Unit: Memories

A thematic unit provides a focal point for language development (Goodman, 1986). This fifth-grade unit, centered on the theme of memories, offers many literature experiences and a whole array of suggested expressive activity. The learning environment is enriched with learning centers--sustaining and those specific to the theme.

Sustaining Learning Centers

Sustaining learning centers are those that are maintained for the entire year, providing a consistent structure for the learning environment. The content of the centers are changed to support a particular unit or theme (Harms & Lettow, 1992). The sustaining centers and their contents for this unit are described below:

Listening/reading center. Books from various genres are provided in this center along with student author works. Tapes of books from many genres recorded by adults or children can be made available (Harms & Lettow, 1992).

Literature Experience

These books can be available at this center to extend the memories unit.

Picture books:

The Remembering Box, by Eth Clifford

In Coal Country, by Judith Hendershot

Miss Rumphius, by Barbara Cooney

Home Place, by Crescent Dragonwagon

Miss Maggie, by Cynthia Rylant

When I Was Young in the Mountains, by Cynthia Rylant

The Hundred Penny Box, by Sharon Bell Mathis

Roxaboxen, by Alice McLerran

Julius Baby of the World, by Kevin Henkes

Ira Sleeps Over, by Bernard Waber

Koala Lou, by Mem Fox

Chrysanthemum, by Kevin Henkes

Wilfred Gordon McDonald Partridge, by Mem Fox

The Best Town in the World, by Byrd Baylor

The Chalk Doll, by Charlotte Pomerantz

The Relatives Came, by Cynthia Rylant

No Star Nights, by Anna E. Smucker

When I Was Nine, by James Stevenson

Owl Moon, by Jane Yolen

Full length books:

A Girl from Yamhill, by Beverly Cleary

Homesick, by Jean Fritz

Boy, by Ronald Dahl

Childtimes, by Eloise Greenfield

But I'll Be Back Again, by Cynthia Rylant

Little House on the Prairie, On the Banks of Plum Creek,
Farmer Boy, and The Long Winter, by Laura Ingalls Wilder
Self-Portrait, by Margot Zemach

Expressive Activity

Response to reading or listening to these books can include these expressive activities:

1. After listening to or reading The Hundred Penny Box, collect a penny dated for each year of your life. Write a memory from each year. These memories can be compiled into a book.
2. After listening to or reading Wilfred Gordon McDonald Partridge, think of some memories that are warm, some that are as precious as gold, and some that make you laugh or cry. You might want to share one or more through writing or illustrating.

Poetry center. This center can offer volumes by individual poets, collections of poems that relate to a current theme or unit of study, a poetry form reference, students' poetry, and biographical sketches about poets (Harms & Lettow, 1992).

Author/illustrator center. This center helps children recognize the connection between reading and writing. They can see that real people write and illustrate the stories they have been reading. This center can include a study of how authors go about the act of writing: Where do they get their ideas? How

do they revise? Do they confer with others? For the memories unit, students can study the works of the illustrator, Stephen Gammell. Students can relate their childhood memories to many of the books illustrated by Gammell. For example, Airmail to the Moon might remind them of a lost tooth or a moment they felt foolish. The Relatives Came sparks memories of family trips and reunions.

In a folder on the illustrator, children can learn about Stephen Gammell and his illustrating. Gammell is known for his pencil illustrations. His earlier work was done in black and white. Later he used color to extend and amplify text. He uses a large-size fine drawing paper and likes to use the white space on the page for emphasis. He incorporates visual codes into his drawings, enhancing the emotion and action of the story (Commire, 1988).

Examples of Gammell's effective use of light and shadow are found in Airmail to the Moon and The Song and Dance Man. He uses different styles, such as surrealism in The Old Banjo and impressionism in Where the Buffaloes Begin and The Relatives Came.

These books have been illustrated by Stephen Gammell.

The Song and Dance Man, by Karen Ackerman

Where the Buffaloes Begin, by Olaf Baker

Airmail to the Moon, by Tom Birdseye

Old Henry, by Joan Blos

The Old Banjo, by Dennis Haseley

Come A Tide, by George Ella Lyon

Will's Mammoth, by Martin Rafe

The Relatives Came, by Cynthia Rylant

Wing-a-Ding, by Lyn Littlefield Hoopes

Suggested expressive activities to accompany these works

are:

1. Experiment with different kinds of pencils to illustrate one of your stories or poems.
2. Read about graphic codes in the folder for the center. Identify some of the codes--size, position, line, color--used in Gammell's illustrations.
3. Find illustrations, by Gammell, that you feel show movement or emotion.
4. Write about a memory you have that is sparked by a book, illustrated by Stephen Gammell. How do you think he might choose to illustrate your memory?

Storytelling center. This center has a tape recorder and cassette tapes available for students to tape their own stories. For the memories unit, students can contribute tapes of stories that have been passed down through their families. Children can tape record an interview with a grandparent or elderly friend focusing on their memories of people, places, events and

customs. They can tape record interviews with their teachers from earlier years to see what memories those teachers have of them and their classmates.

Interesting objects center. Objects brought to the classroom by students and teachers can be used as ideas for stories or props in a play (Harms & Lettow, 1992). For the memories unit, students can bring objects that remind them of some event or person in their past. The teacher can read Wilfred Gordon McDonald Partridge, by Mem Fox, to introduce the center. Students might discuss why Wilfred chose particular objects to help Miss Nancy find her memory.

Bookmaking center. This center offers instructions for constructing a variety of books that can be used for the publication of student writing. Examples should be provided as well as materials and explanations of various aspects of book design.

Centers Specific to the Theme of Memories

To extend the study of memories, these literature-based learning centers can be presented.

Grandparents and the Elderly. Books with grandparents and elderly characters portray many types of grandparents and different relationships with their grandchildren.

Literature Experience

Listen to or read some of these books with elderly or grandparents as characters.

Picture books:

Grandpa's Slide Show, by Deborah Gould

Through Grandpa's Eyes, by Patricia MacLachlan

The Song and Dance Man, by Karen Ackerman

The Two of Them, by Alike

On Granddaddy's Farm, by Eloise Greenfield

When I am Old with You, by Angela Johnson

Annie and the Old One, by Miska Miles

Nana Upstairs and Nana Downstairs, by Tomie de Paola

The Wednesday Surprise, by Eve Bunting

Grandpa's Face, by Eloise Greenfield

Granddaddy's Place, by Helen Griffith

Full length books:

Dacey's Song, by Cynthia Voight

All Together Now, by Sue Ellen Bridges

Queen of Hearts, by Vera and Bill Cleaver

The House of Wings, by Betsy Byars

Stone Fox, by John Reynolds Gardiner

The Winter Room, by Gary Paulsen

The War with Grandpa, by Robert Kimmel Smith

Expressive Activity

1. Compare and contrast some of the grandparents in these books.
2. Sometimes grandparents are in need of support from their families. At other times they offer support. Find examples of this in the books you have read.
3. Choose a grandparent from one of the books that you would like to have as your grandparent. Explain your reasons for your choice.
4. Discuss some ways that the grandparents in these books helped their grandchildren learn about their past. What have you learned about your past from your grandparents?
5. What do you think you will tell your grandchildren about your childhood?
6. Write a story or poem from the viewpoint of an elderly character.
7. Finish the story that Gram began at the end of Dicey's Song.
8. How might the events in The House of Wings have been different if Sammy's parents had been there?
9. Write a different ending for Stone Fox.

Memories of War. Several children's books with the theme of war do more than relate historical facts but explore the feelings of the characters as they are involved in this event.

Literature Experience

Listen to or read some of these books on the theme of war.

Rose Blanche, by Roberto Innocenti

Cecil's Story, by George Ella Lyon

Hiroshima, by John Hershey

A Place Called Hiroshima, by Betty Jean Lifton

Hiroshima No Pika, by Toshi Maruki

Number the Stars, by Lois Lowry

Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes, by Eleanor Coerr

Expressive Activity

1. Recall your thoughts and emotions during the Gulf War.
2. List ways someone your age could promote peace.
3. Write a diary entry from a character in one of the books.
4. Make paper cranes through origami to promote peace.

Another Place/Another Time. The idea of time travel is

fascinating and promotes imaginative speculation.

(1) Literature Experience

Listen to or read these books on time travel.

Martian Chronicles, by Bradbury

Max and Me and the Time Machine, by Greer and Ruddick

Just a Dream, by Chris Van Allsburg

Professor Noah's Spaceship, by Brian Wildsmith

The Time Machine, by H. G. Wells

Tuck Everlasting, by Natalie Babbitt

Expressive Activity

If you had a time machine what year would you travel to?

Why?

(2) Literature Experience

Read or listen to some of these fantasy past books.

Playing Beatie Bow, by Ruth Park

A Girl Called Boy, by Belinda Hurmence

The Root Cellar, by Janet Junn

Thimbles, by David Wiseman

Cave Beyond Time, by Malcolm J. Bosse

Expressive Activity

Select a time in the past you would like to live in. Tell about your experiences in that period.

(3) Literature Experience

"The Choice", by Wayland Young

Expressive Activity

In "The Choice", why would Williams choose not to remember?

If someone from the past visited the present, what might he or she not want to remember or want to remember?

Quilts. Family traditions and cultural values are reflected in quilts. Children's sense of the past is enhanced by the stories told by quilts (Burket, 1991).

Literature Experience

Listen to or read some of these books on quilts.

The Josefina Story Quilt, by Eleanor Coerr

The Bedspread, by Sylvia Fair

The Patchwork Quilt, by Valerie Flourney

The Quilt Story, by Tony Johnston

The Quilt, by Ann Jonas

The Keeping Quilt, by Patricia Polacco

Tar Beach, by Faith Ringgold

Sam Johnson and the Blue Ribbon Quilt, by Lisa Campbell

Ernst

Expressive Activity

1. Write about a quilt or blanket that has been special to you or someone in your family.
2. Create a quilt block to contribute to the class quilt.
3. From reading The Bedspread and Tar Beach, tell some memories of your home or neighborhood.

Summary

A literature-based thematic unit can extend the whole language concept throughout the instructional program. By offering whole units of meaning representative of the different genres of literature, such a unit provides a rich learning environment in which children can engage in the language

processes, therefore strengthening their thinking-language abilities.

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