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Toward a whole language approach in a middle school classroom

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Toward a whole language approach in a middle school classroom

Abstract

"I like reading. I just don't like reading class." How many middle school reading teachers have heard these thoughts expressed by students? If teachers become less enthusiastic each year as they plod through the basal, page by page, skill sheet by skill sheet, is it any wonder that students have trouble generating an interest in reading? Many students have a misconception of reading; they perceive reading as the basal text and the workbook that accompanies it. They have not discovered that reading is the process of constructing meaning from the printed page in order to gain knowledge and enjoyment.

TOWARD A WHOLE LANGUAGE APPROACH
IN A MIDDLE SCHOOL CLASSROOM

A Graduate Project
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Shirley A. Kirby
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Jeanne McLain Harms

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Date Approved

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Date Approved

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April 24, 1989
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Toward a Whole Language Approach in a Middle School Classroom

"I like reading. I just don't like reading class." How many middle school reading teachers have heard these thoughts expressed by students? If teachers become less enthusiastic each year as they plod through the basal, page by page, skill sheet by skill sheet, is it any wonder that students have trouble generating an interest in reading?

Many students have a misconception of reading; they perceive reading as the basal text and the workbook that accompanies it. They have not discovered that reading is the process of constructing meaning from the printed page in order to gain knowledge and enjoyment.

For this study, the writer developed for her middle school classroom a reading program that focused on the use of whole units of meaning rather than fragmented as presented in the skills lessons of the basal reader. The literature base of the basal reader was extended through thematic units supported by the different genres and related expressive activities. Following a review of professional literature on the trend toward whole language instruction, the value of a literature base for a reading program, the contributions of different genres in a reading program, and the comprehension-composition

connection, the implementation of these ideas into an instructional program will be presented.

A Rationale for Change

Trend Toward Whole Language Instruction

A strong trend in school reading programs is a change from the traditional skill-based reading instruction involving a basal reader and workbook toward a whole language reading program. Whole language refers to "reading and writing instruction which utilizes complete texts in communicative situations, as contrasted with focused skills practice or the use of 'phonics' or isolated language drill" (Clarke, 1987, p. 386). It emphasizes the students' involvement in the process of reading to create meaning rather than movement through a commercial reader series. A whole language approach recognizes the supportive nature of the other language arts (listening, speaking, and writing) in facilitating reading ability (Rich, 1985). Children learn to read by reading whole units of language for meaning (Smith, 1983). Goodman (1986) relates that the focus of reading should be on communicating meaning between the writer and the reader rather than breaking reading into a hierarchy of skills. If reading for meaning is the focus of the instructional program, students have a better chance of becoming successful readers than those who have simply mastered isolated skills (Palinscar & Brown, 1986). Less emphasis on the

workbook and more emphasis on the reading process and comprehension of whole units of language will increase literacy in the classroom and do more to meet the goal of developing lifetime readers (Shoop, 1986).

The reality for many reading teachers is that the basal text is the framework of a reading program, and it may be the reading curriculum itself. The teacher's manual determines the reading assignment, directs the discussion of the stories, and plans the scope and sequence of the isolated reading skills to be taught. The teacher becomes little more than the basal's aide. While some publishers may attempt to provide children's literature in their reading series, many times these attempts result in simplified excerpts or the selection of mediocre stories with uninteresting plots, little characterization, and stilted language that does little to motivate children to become readers (Durkin, 1978).

Basal readers often provide opportunities for work on language fragments--letters, sounds, and words, and emphasize isolated skills set up in an arbitrary hierarchy that demands time for worksheets, workbooks, and assessment tests. The comprehension questions of basal readers frequently discourage risk-taking and in-depth thinking during discussions by requiring specific answers to the questions and preventing the

readers from making sense out of the texts on their own (Goodman, 1986).

Value of a Literature Base

A literature base provides whole units of language that have meaning for personal-social language and serves as models of language (Goodman, 1986). Literature not only provides enjoyment, but reinforces narrative as a way of thinking, develops insight into human behavior, and presents the universality of experience (Huck, 1987). Quality literature, which is characterized by carefully developed characters, well-designed plots, interesting ideas, and varied language patterns and styles, also provides memorable experiences which encourage students to respond, remember, and manipulate ideas from their reading (Harms, 1982). Literature offers new perspectives of the world and new worlds to explore and facilitates students' questioning, risk-taking, and exploring (Smith, 1983).

Extending the basal readers with literature and encouraging students to choose their own books can increase reading comprehension, improve reading attitudes, and promote the development of reading as a hobby (Koeller, 1981). The tremendous increase in the number of books written for youth makes it possible and desirable to develop a middle school reading program that centers on students' responses to books. A literature-based reading curriculum makes literature available

to all students and provides the opportunity for them to discover that literature is reading and reading can be interesting and fun (Atwell, 1987).

Contributions of the Different Genres

Exposure to a variety of literary types (fiction, folklore, poetry, and nonfiction) demonstrates the different but effective ways language can be conveyed. It allows the reader to see the literary elements (e.g., characterization, point of view, plot, setting, mood, theme, imagery, figurative language and style) developed in many ways with varying degrees of importance. Also, reading different genres may extend a reader's understanding of an idea or experience. Awareness of the value of each of the genres ensures its inclusion into a reading program to facilitate meaning (Harms, 1982; Huck, 1987; Lukens, 1986; Norton, 1987).

Fantasy fiction. This type of fiction invites readers to explore the imaginative realms of possibility in a contemporary sense in addition to experiencing universal values, desires, struggles, and emotions (Norton, 1987). These stories of wonder and imagination help adolescents develop new perspectives about their own worlds and help them solve contemporary problems (Huck, 1987). Fantasy develops the imagination by requiring students to willingly suspend their disbelief of other worlds. At the same time, fantasy provides the opportunity to escape

into a fantasy world and yet find support in the themes of human life and problems (Lukens, 1986).

Contemporary realistic fiction. This popular form of fiction, with a post-World War II setting, allows students to identify with characters of their own age who have similar interests and problems. In developing empathy with characters, adolescents discover that their problems and desires are not unique, and they may be able to express repressed emotions such as fear, anger, and grief, as a result of their reading (Norton, 1987). Besides providing models for coping with problems, contemporary realistic fiction can provide adolescents with experiences in a setting much different than their own. The incorporation of realistic fiction in the classroom prepares students to face honestly the realities of life such as the death of a friend or family member through a vicarious experience (Huck, 1987).

Historical fiction. This form of fiction, with a setting of World War II or before, allows the adolescent to develop a sense of history. Through experiences with historical fiction, students can begin to realize that their present and future are linked to the past and can increase their knowledge about the people, values, beliefs, and events of a particular period (Norton, 1987). This form of literature encourages students to think as well as feel, as historical fiction invites comparisons

between the past and present. These comparisons will help students to see and judge events of the past so they can take advantage of others' experiences and can avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. In addition, students will realize that human beings in the past depended upon each other and needed respect, belonging, love, freedom, and security, just as people do today (Huck, 1987).

Traditional literature. This genre includes folktales, fables, myths, and legends. These traditional tales contribute to the students' literary heritage and provide a basis for understanding all literature (Huck, 1987). These tales help children broaden their understanding of the world through an awareness of early humanity and commonality among cultures; an appreciation for the cultures, arts, and languages of different countries; and the acquisition of knowledge about various countries and cultures. Reading traditional stories gives students the opportunity to clarify their concept of good and bad and realize that, despite difficulties, honorable characters who are struggling can receive the help and guidance needed to be victorious (Norton, 1987).

Poetry. Experiences with poetry contribute in many ways to a literature-based reading program. Through poetry experiences, students experiment with words and realize the possibilities of language to create moods, feelings, experiences, and visions.

It expands vocabularies and increases the knowledge and understanding of the world around them (Norton, 1987). Poetry also helps adolescents develop insights into themselves and others by demanding a total response from the individual through his/her intellect, senses, emotions, and imaginations (Huck, 1987). Poetry expresses moods familiar to adolescents and makes comments on life in a way that is meaningful to them; therefore, they can come to understand and to accept their feelings and can develop new ways of sensing the world (Huck, 1987; Norton, 1987).

Nonfiction. Informational books for adolescents cover a variety of topics (Bromley, 1988). This genre includes biographies and autobiographies. There are concept books, alphabet books, and number books for younger children. Like fiction, informational books provide enjoyment, extend knowledge, and develop thinking abilities. Informational books serve as resources across the curriculum, suggest new areas of study, and provide support for students' reading development and appreciation for good writing (Huck, 1987).

Comprehension-Composition Connection

In addition to providing quality literature experiences through exposure to the different genres, a whole language approach encourages students to respond to their reading experiences through various types of expressive activities. As a result, their language abilities are extended through this

comprehension-composition connection. For example, children reflect elements of their literature experiences in their writing. When the reading curriculum utilizes a simplified basal text that is a limited model, students may not include elaborate and complex sentences in their writing (Eckloff, 1985). Quality literature experiences expose students to various styles which may then be reflected in their own writing. As they are introduced to various genres, students may experiment with the different forms when they write stories. Also, students may get ideas for plots, themes, and characters for their composition activity from stories they have read or heard read aloud (Huck, 1987). The opportunity to respond to their reading, in writing or in some other form, will help students to become active participants in the comprehension-composition connection (Calkins, 1983).

Comprehending and composing are active processes that construct meaning for the reader or composer (Goodman, 1986). As students make connections between the comprehension and composition processes, they will realize the commonality in structure and purpose of both processes (Harms, unpub.).

Comprehension is a complex thinking process that includes knowing and feeling. It is an active process during which the reader constructs his/her own model of what the text means (Pearson, 1985). The receptive language arts of viewing,

listening, and reading are utilized in order to gain an understanding of ideas (Harms, 1982). Comprehending requires the learner to make sense of ideas expressed by another person. Prior knowledge affects the quality of comprehension; the reader's knowledge and attitudes determines the meaning he/she derives from the text (Squire, 1983).

Composition involves constructing meaning and relating these ideas through acting, speaking, and writing. As in comprehension, prior knowledge affects the meaning achieved through involvement in the composition process. The same knowledge and attitudes that influence comprehension can serve as sources of ideas for composition (Squire, 1983). The commonality in structure of the comprehension and composition processes supports a natural transition from comprehension activities to composition experiences (Harms, 1982). The integration of the language processes (viewing, speaking, listening, acting, writing, and reading) can assist in developing thinking-language competence (Goodman, 1986).

Theory Into Practice

Units focusing on specific genres can foster whole language experiences in a middle school reading program. When a basal reader with a limited offering must serve as the basis of the instructional program, this type of unit can extend students'

opportunities to develop their thinking-language abilities. A unit based on a specific genre can provide structure for students' study but also needs to be open-ended, providing choices for meaningful reading experiences and related expressive activities, so students can own their learning experiences.

Beginning with a story of a particular genre, other works can be selected to extend a specific aspect, for example, personified animal stories which are modern fantasy or a particular theme, such as survival in realistic fiction. For this instructional development project, the writer chose to develop a unit on folklore, specifically Greek mythology.

Rationale for the unit. Developing a rationale to support the presentation of thematic units based on selected genres to middle school students can be helpful when explaining the reading program to a parent, other teachers, and administrators.

Mythology conjures up visions of lightning bolts hurled through the sky by an angry god and scenes of pastoral beauty created by a pleased goddess. A unit on Greek mythology is one way to introduce students to stories of classical literature and to provide an enjoyable reading experience. For a group of seventh-grade students with diverse reading interests, myths offer action, mystery, humor, romance, life, and death.

Adolescents searching for self-identity may find help in dealing with their own feelings as they read about gods, goddesses, and heroes confronted with feelings of anger, jealousy, greed, and love. For adolescents who are beginning to think more abstractly in terms of what was and what might be rather than what is (Elkind, 1984), myths provide a literary vehicle for acquiring an understanding of the chronology of past events and sense of their place in time while leading students to understand that all people in all times have asked the same questions about the existence of the earth and life on it (Harms and Lettow, unpub.). At the same time myths generally have a happy, or at least acceptable, ending that will leave these early adolescents with a sense of hope for the future.

Description of the genre. Determining what aspects of the genre will be presented in the unit can lead the teacher to further study of the genre.

What is a myth? According to William Bascom (1965, p. 4), "myths are prose narratives which, in the society in which they are told, are considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past." Leeming (1976, p. 40) describes myths as "reflections of historical events." In designing a unit on Greek mythology for middle school students, however, the writer believed it was necessary to present the definition of myths in more simple terms such as defined by these authorities:

Isaac Asimov (1961, p. 3) defined a myth as "a particular kind of story containing fanciful or supernatural incidents intended to explain nature or one which deals with the gods and demons invented by early man." Students will understand that myths are "early literature as well as early science" (Hamilton, 1942, p. 13) because these tales are entertaining as well as man's attempt to explain the world around him.

What are the three types of myths? The creation, or origin, myth explains how the world began. Hamilton's brief summary can aid students' understanding and can provide them with prior knowledge for further reading.

The Greeks believed that the world was created out of Chaos. Out of Chaos came Night and Erebus followed by Love, Light, and Day. Next came Earth (Gaea) and Heaven (Ouranos). Mother Earth and Father Heaven gave birth to Monsters, the three one-eyed Cyclops, and, finally, the Titans. One Titan named Cronus wounded his father, and the Giants and the Furies were born. Cronus ruled with his sister-queen, Rhea, until their son Zeus rebelled. Following a war between the Titans and Zeus along with his five brothers and sisters, Zeus and his siblings reigned over all after defeating all of Earth's terrible forces including Typhon and the Giants. With the

Earth cleared of these horrible beings, man was created. This is told in the story of Prometheus (Hamilton, 1942, pp. 77-83).

The second type of myth is the nature, or explanation, myth. These tales attempt to explain natural phenomena and account for the characteristics and existence of animals, geographical features, constellations, the sun, and the moon. The story of the seasons as told in the tale of Demeter and Persephone is a familiar nature myth.

The third type of myth is the hero myth. These stories do not explain anything but "recount the activities of the deities, their love affairs, their family relationships, their friendships and enmities, their victories and defeats" (Bascom, 1965, p. 4). These myths center on a hero who is given certain tasks by the gods or on a mortal whom the gods want to help or hinder. The story of the hero Theseus and the Minotaur, a creature that was half man and half bull, is one such myth. Other heroes include Perseus, Hercules, and Odysseus.

What are some common elements of myths? Setting, attitude, characters, and theme are some common elements that identify myths as a separate literary form (Norton, 1987). The setting of myths is in "an earlier world, when the earth was different from what it is today, or in another world such as the sky or the underworld" (Bascom, 1965, p. 4).

The attitude in myths is sacred rather than secular because "religion is there as man tried to define what human beings need and what they must have in their gods" (Hamilton, 1942, p. 13). David Leeming (1976, p. 7) addressed the religious aspect of myths this way: "Any given mythic story is a combination of superstition and religious truth, of primitive fears and universal understandings." The Greek myth of Baucis and Philemon illustrates the concept of the sacred attitude in myths. When Zeus, the lord of the sky, and Hermes, the messenger of the gods, are treated insolently and inhospitably by the people of Phrygia, save for Baucis and Philemon, the two gods punish the wicked by flooding the countryside. Baucis and Philemon are rewarded for their kindness by being made priests of a new temple and, at their request, are allowed to die together so that neither has to live alone.

The main characters in myths are non-human; they are animals, deities, or heroes who often have human qualities (Bascom, 1965). Hera, the goddess of women and marriage, often exhibits jealousy. King Midas is remembered for his greed for gold. As students read myths and listen to myths read aloud, they will become familiar with the gods, goddesses, and heroes found in these stories.

The themes in myths are similar to those of folktales. The theme that simple virtues are rewarded and the lack of virtues

is punished is often present. The kindness and hospitality of Baucis and Philemon were rewarded by Zeus and Hermes. Arachne's folly was to claim equality with Athena, the goddess of wisdom, in the art of weaving: Her arrogance resulted in disgrace, death, and, then, life as a spider. Bellerophon is another example: His ambition and pride in his successes made him believe he could reside with the gods on Olympus. As a result, Pegasus, the winged horse, threw him, and Bellerophon roamed the earth alone until his death. Other themes in myths include good over evil and fate as a control of man's destiny.

Literature base for the unit. Selecting the stories from the basal that complement the unit provides the basis for the study. Then constructing a bibliography of stories, books, poems, film, and other media will extend student reading and will offer the teacher possibilities for read aloud experiences.

For a seventh-grade Greek mythology unit, the writer selected the following myths from the basal texts: "The Good Goddess," by Doris Gates, a nature myth that explains the seasons of the year; "Atalanta's Race," by Padraic Colum, a hero myth that features Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty and love; "The Story of Daphne," by Doris Gates, a nature myth that explains the existence of the laurel tree; "Demeter's Lost Daughter," by Robert Graves, another version of the explanation of seasonal changes; and "Echo and Narcissus," by Roger L. Green, a nature myth that

is also a story of an unusual love triangle: Echo loves only Narcissus who loves only himself. Story collections, single illustrated tales, films, and small media resources that extended the unit are listed in the appendix.

Expressive activities. Composing a list of expressive activities that were open-ended promoted the comprehension-composition connection. These activities provided further opportunities for students to engage in listening, speaking, reading, and writing activities. These literature-based expressive activities were presented in a learning center. The literature works were available in the center.

1. Literature Experience

Read "The Good Goddess," by Doris Gates,
and "Demeter's Lost Daughter," by Robert Graves.

Expressive Activity

Read several versions of this myth.
Construct a chart that shows the similarities
and differences among the different versions.

2. Literature Experience

Read "The Story of Daphne," by Doris Gates.

Expressive Activity

Write a nature myth. Decide what natural
phenomenon you want to explain. You may wish to

publish your myth in book form, complete with cover, end papers, title page, copyright, illustrations, and information about the author.

3. Literature Experience

Read "Arachne," by Olivia Coolidge.

Expressive Activity

a. Design a poster about Athena, the goddess featured in the story. You may wish to include her Greek and Roman names, her title, symbols, and information about her realm, activities, deeds, relationships, and how she was honored as well as illustrations.

b. Choose a god or goddess featured in another Greek myth. Construct a similar poster for that deity.

4. Literature Experience

Read "The Story of Io," by Doris Gates.

This story includes the tale of Pandora and Zeus's revenge on man for accepting Prometheus's gift of fire.

Expressive Activity

Make a mobile of the items that were released by Pandora. Present the mobile to the class with a retelling of the myth.

5. Literature Experience

Read "Orion," by Doris Gates.

Expressive Activity

Research the stories behind some of the other constellations. Prepare a poster with drawings of the constellations and explanations of the myths behind them.

6. Literature Experience

Read "The Story of Baucis and Philemon," by Doris Gates. Hermes, the messenger of the gods, is featured in this story. Today, Hermes is a symbol for FTD Florists.

Expressive Activity

Design a chart that shows modern uses of classical Greek and Roman names and images. Consider months, planets, and trademarks used in advertising and names of products. Words from the Myths, by I. Asimov will be helpful.

7. Literature Experience

Read "The Golden Touch," by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Magic and trickery appear in this myth.

Expressive Activity

Find instances in other myths in which magic

and trickery were used. Construct a chart that identifies the story, the kind of magic or trickery used, and the changes in the story that occurred because of them.

8. Literature Experience

Read "Atalanta's Race," by Padraic Colum.

In this story Hippomenes comes face to face with the goddess Aphrodite.

Expressive Activity

Write a story about your experience when you came face to face with a god or goddess. Publish your story in book form.

Evaluation. Pre-determining an evaluation system will help both the teacher and the students. For the Greek mythology unit, each student will complete an independent study unit that includes required reading, individual reading, journal entries, and the completion of student-selected expressive activities.

Summary

The purpose of this instructional development project was to apply a whole language approach to a reading program for adolescents. A whole language approach emphasizes comprehension experiences based on quality literature from the different genres and supports students in responding to their reading experiences

through many forms of expressive activity. The unit presented in this paper was on Greek mythology.

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Appendix

Greek Mythology for Adolescents

Basal Texts

Durr, W. K.; LePere, J. M.; Bean, R. M.; and Glaser, N. A. (1983).

Emblems. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

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Films and Small Media

- KM 00372 Mythology is Alive and Well
- KM 01248 Myths and Legends in Music

- KM 03305 Greek Mythology
- F 11698 Ears of King Midas
- F 10249 Flight of Icarus
- F 30617 Greek Myths
- F 28380 Mythology of Greece and Rome
- F 11669 Sisyphus
- F 13350 Sun Flight
- F 31446 Voyage of Odysseus
- F 11384 World Tree