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Extending children's literacy through the study of folk tales

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Extending children's literacy through the study of folk tales

Abstract

A unit on African folk tales in the basal reader series was extended through a library search for additional stories for Grades 4 and 5. These works served as examples of strictly structured stories, reflecting humans' enjoyment of storytelling and universal conflicts. A whole array of expressive activities (speaking, writing, illustrating, and dramatizing) was offered through learning centers, sustaining and specific to the unit. These activities extended the literature experiences, thus offering the children opportunities to compose like a reader. The children's responses began to indicate a heightened sense of story structure. This unit offered flexible grouping for the learners. Children could work as individuals or in pairs or small groups. The Sharing Time, a whole class activity, became an opportunity to share expressive activities from the unit. Not only was this period enlivened but the children received ideas for expressing the constructs they had created in their literature experiences.

Extending Children's Literacy
Through the Study of Folk Tales

A Graduate Project
Submitted to the
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
In Partial Fulfillment
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Master of Elementary Reading
and Language Arts
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by
Sandra L. Lewis

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has been approved as meeting a project requirement for the Degree
of Master of Elementary Reading and Language Arts.

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Abstract

A unit on African folk tales in the basal reader series was extended through a library search for additional stories for Grades 4 and 5. These works served as examples of strictly structured stories, reflecting humans' enjoyment of storytelling and universal conflicts.

A whole array of expressive activities (speaking, writing, illustrating, and dramatizing) was offered through learning centers, sustaining and specific to the unit. These activities extended the literature experiences, thus offering the children opportunities to compose like a reader. The children's responses began to indicate a heightened sense of story structure.

This unit offered flexible grouping for the learners. Children could work as individuals or in pairs or small groups. The Sharing Time, a whole class activity, became an opportunity to share expressive activities from the unit. Not only was this period enlivened but the children received ideas for expressing the constructs they had created in their literature experiences.

Children engage in the reading process to create meaning for many reasons. Reading can be a pleasant and informative experience, fulfilling interests, providing excitement, and stimulating curiosity. From reading experiences, children can extend their thinking-language abilities and can better understand themselves and identify with others and the world around them (Smith, 1993; Cambourne, 1988).

Literature-Based Programs

Literature-based instructional programs can assist children's involvement in the reading process by providing whole, meaningful texts to which children can bring their prior knowledge and interests (Goodman, 1986). A literature-based program entails offering quality works from the different genres to create a print-rich environment with many related expressive activities. Such a learning environment extends children's reading experiences and opportunities to interact with others concerning the ideas generated in the reading process (Huck, Hepler, & Hickman, 1993). A connection is then made between the comprehension and composition processes (Graves, 1983).

Many schools are moving toward literature-based reading programs in which quality pieces of literature, rather than an anthology, which is part of a basal reading series, is the basis of the program (Huck et al., 1993). Such quality pieces can

develop themes relevant to children's lives. Children can respond to real-life conflicts with believable characters (Newman, 1985).

Whole Units of Language

Whole units of quality literature provide structures in which children can create their own meaning (Cambourne, 1988). It is therefore important to offer children whole selections and not break them up into small, abstract pieces (Goodman, 1986). By involving children purposefully in whole units, their language abilities will be enhanced (Harms & Lettow, 1992).

Schools need to provide whole units of quality literature which will meet the needs of their students (Huck et al., 1993). As students read literature works, they can build their own sense of story, improve their thinking-language abilities, and foster a love for reading. Therefore, children can learn to read and write naturally as they interact with meaningful texts (Staab, 1990).

Genres of Literature

Children should be surrounded by all genres, or types of literature. Lukens (1990) lists these different types--poetry, fiction, information books, and biographies. The genres have structures with many common characteristics but also different ones that provide vehicles for creating different perspectives of an experience. As children have experiences with these types of literature, they will begin to understand they are shaped by organizational features that guide writers and readers. They

begin to recognize that these characteristics enable them as readers to more fully predict and recall what they have read (Tierney, Carter, & Desai, 1991).

Elements of Literature

Quality literature pieces have well developed elements. Literary elements include characters, point of view, plots, settings, themes, sound elements, and figurative language (Huck et al., 1993). As children become aware of these components, their comprehension and composition abilities are strengthened. Therefore, they become better readers and writers (Calkins, 1983). Even young children can examine story lines and plot outcomes, and make character judgments (Graves, 1983).

When children are familiar with literary elements, they can draw on this knowledge to create meaning in their own writings as they decide settings, plots, and characters (Cambourne, 1988). They, as writers, can anticipate problems, events, and resolutions of stories (Cramer, 1992).

Opportunities to Respond to Literature

Children take a much more active role in the reading process if they are encouraged to create their own constructs as they read (Smith, 1993). These constructs can be extended as children share them in discussions with others.

Children's literature experiences can be enhanced by providing related expressive activities, which is called a

comprehension-composition connection (Huck et al., 1993). These activities can be presented through the teacher-directed sessions or learning centers. Expressive activities can include speaking, writing, and the graphic and performing arts. Learning centers that provide self-directed experiences for individuals, pairs, or small groups can either be sustaining or specific to a unit or theme. Sustaining centers not only support a rich learning environment but also assist in maintaining a secure, predictable one (Harms & Lettow, 1992).

Routman (1991) suggests using a literature response log in which children can reflect on their reading experiences, thus extending the meaning of the texts. Children's responses can be freewriting, open-ended questions, or illustrations. Response logs can be the basis for dialogues between students and their peers and the teacher.

Folk Tales in a Literature-Based Program

Folk tales were told orally for generations before they were recorded in writing. Reflecting this oral tradition, these stories have tightly structured plots which once were devices to keep the audience's attention. Folklore, a treasure house of ancient stories, has four basic functions: (1) To provide a landscape of allusion, in which children view a new environment, filled with symbols of humanity. (2) To enable children to

understand their own and other cultures from the inside out, and recognize how needs from within the culture affect storytelling. (3) To provide an adaptable tool of therapy in which children are able to relate many of the motifs in folk tales to their own lives. (4) To provide a framework or model for a child's belief system through the metaphoric speech of folklore (Yolen, 1981).

These fanciful stories take place in an undefined past and often begin with "Once upon a time." The themes portray a clear conflict between good and evil with good winning over evil through human ingenuity, simple virtues, and some sacrifice or trial. The motifs, symbols of human characteristics, portray the duality of humankind (Yolen, 1981; Huck et al., 1993).

As a part of children's cultural heritage, Routman (1991) suggests these benefits of presenting folk tales in a school program:

1. Folk tales deal with important themes, such as good triumphs over evil, perseverance and hard work pay off, and unselfishness is rewarded. These themes portray the consequences of behavior.
2. Folk tales provide an acceptable way for children to deal with violence.
3. Children feel connected with parents and grandparents by reading the same tales that past generations read.
4. Folk tales have a wonderful, rich vocabulary.

5. Children of varying abilities are exposed to different levels of meaning.

6. Folk tales can be interpreted many different ways depending on point of view and culture.

Language Connections in a Unit on African Folk Tales

A unit on African tales in the basal reader series was enriched through additional tales and a whole array of expressive activities. It was presented to a multi-age class of twenty-eight 4th and 5th graders. The goals of the unit were to study the African heritage of storytelling and to provide opportunities to connect the comprehension and composition processes.

A search was made for African folk tales in the school library and at the local education area agency. Many ideas came from authors, Harms & Lettow (1992), Huck et al. (1993), and Routman (1991). From this search, teacher-directed sessions and learning centers were developed. Sustaining centers, ones maintained throughout the year with their content reflecting specific unit study, were a listening/reading center supplied with African tales; a retelling center to support the telling of these tales through speaking, writing, illustrating and dramatizing; an author center; and a bookmaking center. Several centers specific to the unit were developed. Children worked in these centers individually or in pairs or small groups.

In presenting the unit, the teacher explained the nature of folk tales. Then, the African tale, *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears*, retold by Verna Aardema (Ill. Leo & Diane Dillon. New York: Dial), was read in the basal reader. A discussion followed to identify the elements of folk stories in this work.

These centers, sustaining and specific to the unit, were presented.

Sustaining Centers

Reading/listening center. This center offered many volumes of African folk tales. Accompanying cassette tapes of most of the stories were developed by the teacher (see Bibliography).

Retelling center. This center provided many examples of how to retell a story. These ideas, presented on a chart, were taken from Harms' & Lettow's book (1992):

Advertisement	Charts	Pantomime
Book Jacket	Diary	Postcard
Bookmark	Diorama	Poster
Book Review	Filmstrip	Rebus

Bookmaking center. In this center, the children were given directions and materials for constructing books.

Author/illustrator center - Gerald McDermott. Gerald McDermott has retold and illustrated African folk tales--Anansi the Spider (Holt), The Magic Tree (Holt), and Zomo the Rabbit

(Harcourt). In the center, a biographical sketch was posted, and his works were displayed.

Centers Specific to the Unit

Good sibling/bad sibling center.

Literature experience:

Stephoe, J. (1987). Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters. New York: Lothrop.

Onyefulu, O. (1994). Chinye: A West African Folk Tale. Ill. E. Safarewicz. New York: Viking.

Expressive Activity:

Compare and contrast the motifs in these stories.

Trickster center.

Literature experience:

Kimmel, E. A. (1994). Anansi and the Talking Melon, Ill. J. Stevens. New York: Holiday.

Kimmel, E. A. (1992). Anansi Goes Fishing, Ill. J. Stevens. New York: Holiday.

Kimmel, E. A. (1988). Anansi and the Moss-Covered Rock, Ill. J. Stevens. New York: Holiday.

McDermott, G. (1992). Zomo the Rabbit. San Diego: Harcourt.

Expressive Activity:

Choose a story from the Listening/Reading Center and a way of retelling it from the Retelling Center. Then share your retelling with the class.

Mask center.

Literature experience:

Aardema, V. (1977). Who's in Rabbit's House? A Masai Tale.

New York: Dial.

Expressive activity:

Design a mask to use in retelling the story.

Storycloth center.

Literature experience:

Grifalconi, A. (1990). Osa's Pride. Boston: Little, Brown.

Expressive activity:

Design a storycloth of a tale from the Listening/Reading Center.

Nesting dolls or boxes center.

Literature experience:

Aardema, V. (1975). Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears.

Ill. L. & D. Dillon. New York: Scholastic.

Aardema, V. (1991). Traveling to Tondo. Ill. W.

Hillenbrand. New York: Knopf.

Expressive activity:

Construct nesting dolls from the strips of oak tag to retell these stories.

Collage center.

Literature experience:

Day, N. (1995). The Lion's Whiskers, Ill. A. Grifalconi.
New York: Scholastic.

Expressive activity:

Experiment with different kinds of materials to make a collage. You may want to retell a favorite part of a folk tale through collage.

Scratchboard center.

Literature experience:

Sierra, J. (1992). The Elephant's Wrestling Match, Ill. B. Pinkey. New York: Lodestar.

Knutson, B. (1990). How the Guinea Fowl Got Her Spots.
Minneapolis: Carolrhoda.

Expressive activity:

On paper, color with light and bright colors, and then cover the coloring with a dark color. Next, use the scratchboard tools and create an illustration. You may want to illustrate a favorite part of a folk tale.

Mural center.

Literature experience:

Choose folk tales from the Listening/Reading Center.

Expressive activity:

Create a mural with your classmates, illustrating motifs and scenes from African folk tales.

Summary

The children chose many folk tales to read. Many of their selections were extended through expressive activity. The Sharing Period was greatly enriched as they shared these activities. This peer involvement greatly energized the children and gave them ideas for extending stories.

As the children engaged in the expressive activities, their responses indicated a growing awareness of the structures of stories. The children were writing like readers.

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Children's Books in Listening/Reading Center

Aardema, V. (1985). Bimwili & the Zimwi, Ill. S. Meddaugh. New York: Dial.

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