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Enhancing the language arts program in grade six through picture book experiences

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Enhancing the language arts program in grade six through picture book experiences

Abstract

Educators need to facilitate the reading and writing connection to expand their students' capacity to express themselves in written form. The connections made between the comprehension-composition processes enhance children's emerging literacy (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1983; Calkins, 1991; Graves, 1990; Hansen, 1987; Murray, 1986; Rosenblatt, 1978). Calkins believes that reading and writing are inseparable. Moss (1977) relates that opportunities to read quality literature can influence children's writing abilities.

Enhancing the Language Arts Program
in Grade Six Through Picture Book Experiences

A Graduate Project
Submitted to the
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by
Carrie R. Mayer
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This Project by: Carrie R. Mayer

Entitled: Enhancing the Language Arts Program in Grade Six
Through Picture Book Experiences

has been approved as meeting a project requirement for the Degree
of Master of Arts in Education.

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Introduction

Rationale of the Project

Educators need to facilitate the reading and writing connection to expand their students' capacity to express themselves in written form. The connections made between the comprehension-composition processes enhance children's emerging literacy (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1983; Calkins, 1991; Graves, 1990; Hansen, 1987; Murray, 1986; Rosenblatt, 1978). Calkins believes that reading and writing are inseparable. Moss (1977) relates that opportunities to read quality literature can influence children's writing abilities.

One method of implementing a reading and writing connection at the middle school level is to provide experiences with picture books that can serve as models of language. These models can assist children in writing meaningful stories.

Once thought of as literature for young children, today picture books are available that offer sophisticated conflicts and different levels of meaning. Picture books, or illustrated short stories, provide a whole unit of meaning. Within these small structures, the elements of story creation can be examined. During a class period, discussions of the stories in picture books can lead to understandings that influence students' writing. Students can become aware of the stories within themselves and of the genres and elements that will assist them

in creating meaning through writing. Also, experiences with picture books provide an authentic setting to learn the conventions of writing, such as sentence patterns, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling (Chang, 1986; Bearse, 1992).

Purpose of the Project


The purpose of this project is to provide sixth grade students with authentic language experiences through picture books that will connect the comprehension-composition processes, thus nurturing thinking-language abilities. This project will be implemented in the language arts program as a picture book unit of study.

Importance of the Project

Presenting experiences with picture books in the sixth grade classroom offers models of real literature that can enhance the understandings of story structure and can invite students to write stories that are meaningful to them and are understood by their audience. Too often, the stories written by many sixth graders are meaningless, redundant, and lack the qualities of a good story. Studying the many genres of picture books along with discussions about the elements found in these quality pieces of literature will assist students in their own writing.

Procedures of the Project

First, the writer became familiar with as many picture storybooks as possible. She attended the University of Northern



Iowa's workshop entitled Picture Books Across the Curriculum with the instructors Dr. Jeanne Harms and Lucille Lettow. This four-day workshop discussed such topics as the picture book genres, emerging authors and illustrators of picture books, picture book design, styles and media in the illustrations of picture books, ways to introduce picture books, and picture book experiences in different curricular areas. She also read the chapter on picture books in Huck, Hepler, and Hickman (1993) and the discussion of literary elements in Lukens (1990).

Then, the writer searched in the school and public libraries for other professional books and articles addressing picture book experiences. The writer found these professional sources of particular value: Beyond Words: Picture Books for Older Readers and Writers, by Susan Benedict and Lenore Carlisle (1992); Invitations, by Regie Routman (1991); Using Picture Storybooks to Teach Literary Devices, by Susan Hall (1990); and In the Middle: Writing, Reading, and Learning with Adolescents, by Nancie Atwell (1987). After becoming familiar with available picture books, the writer developed learning centers that offered independent literature experiences and related expressive activities.

Pertinent Terms of the Project

Picture book is a literary work in which the illustrations amplify the short story.

Genres are types of literature (e.g., modern fantasy, realism, and historical fiction).

Elements of fiction are aspects of a story, such as the plot, characterization, setting, and theme.

Learning centers are areas that provide learning experiences.

Review of Professional Literature

Providing picture book experiences can improve students' language abilities in many ways. Quality picture books provide a rich language experience that is usually not found in the basal readers with their controlled vocabulary. Picture books can be the catalyst for students to find the stories within themselves (Beckman & Diamond, 1984). The texts of picture books offer structures with ideas and literary elements that can be explored without lengthy reading experiences as full length works (Neal & Moore, 1992; Beckman & Diamond, 1984). Finally, from the whole language standpoint, Chang (1986) concludes that children learn best when they are actively involved in the learning process and when reading and writing is done in an authentic setting.

Several studies have been conducted pertaining to the value of picture books as models of language. Most of the research indicates that real models of literature enhance the students' reading and writing abilities.

Moss (1977) studied the effect of picture books on the writing of six- and seven-year-olds. The researcher read many

picture books aloud to the students. After each story was read, the researcher and the children discussed the strengths of the work and how its elements could be used in writing narratives. Moss found that after much exposure to these picture books, the students became familiar with story elements.

Bearse (1992) concludes from her study of third graders that children incorporate elements gained from listening and reading experiences into their writing. In this study, Bearse discussed the important literary elements found in illustrated single volumes of folk tales with her third graders. From these experiences, Bearse found that when students composed their own stories, they consciously and nonconsciously intertwined the literature experiences into their own writings.

Cairney (1990) in his study examined the influence of literature experiences on sixth graders' writings. He found that students incorporated elements from their literature experiences into their own stories. Cairney refers to this process of connecting literature experiences with writing experiences, or comprehension-composition connection, as intertextuality. In conducting his study, he conferenced with sixth graders on a one-to-one basis to ascertain if they thought of former literature experiences while they wrote their own stories. From these interviews, he concluded that literature experiences were reflected in the students' writing experiences. He also found

that intertextuality is not just confined to the better readers and writers but has an impact on all children.

Project: Picture Book Experiences
to Enhance Writing Abilities

This project was developed as a unit for the language arts program in the writer's sixth grade class. The major goals of the unit were to provide quality short stories through picture books to nudge students to realize that they have stories to tell and to provide models of writing. The short stories in the picture books provided reading experiences that would not take much time so discussion of the works could follow quickly. Works for the study that had sophisticated conflicts and layers of meaning were selected. The few doubters among the sixth graders at the beginning of the study who believed picture books were for young children soon found the selected volumes had appealing elements. Examples of the picture books that were of special interest to the students were The Rough-Face Girl, by Rafe Martin; Monster Mama, by Liz Rosenberg; Owl Moon, by Jane Yolen; The Story of Jumping Mouse, by John Steptoe; Imogene's Antlers, by David Small; and Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day, by Judith Viorst. These volumes offered examples of many genres.

The teacher then proceeded with the unit by asking her sixth graders for some of their favorite books that they read

when they were younger. When a popular one was announced, the writer asked the students what it was that they liked about that particular book. For example, one book that many had heard before was Where the Wild Things Are, by Maurice Sendak. The writer happened to have the book and read it aloud so that everyone would be familiar with it. In the discussion that followed the students pointed out that they liked the fantasy part of it. It seemed so real to them when they were little. They also enjoyed the illustrations. The teacher then pointed out the circular plot of the story and that the story started out as realism, moved into fantasy, and then returned to realism. The students indicated that they had not noticed these shifts but that they were interesting. The teacher, also, pointed out that the illustrator increased the size of the illustrations to indicate the mounting action of his story. The students found that an intriguing use of illustrations, and a few even attempted to use this technique in their own picture books that they later wrote themselves.

The teacher discovered among her students a high interest in fantasy so she introduced a few more fantasies the next day. A few students even brought in one or two of their own favorites from home to share. It then appeared to the teacher that everyone was feeling comfortable with reading, discussing, and sharing picture books.

However, the teacher knew from past experience that not every student would feel comfortable writing a modern fantasy of his/her own so she then read aloud the folk tale The Story of the Jumping Mouse, by John Steptoe. This story had more depth to it and especially caught the attention of those few who still felt a little apprehensive about reading picture books as a sixth grader. Earlier in the year the class had read a few selections of folk literature in their basal reader so they had some knowledge of this literature genre. After reading the literary work aloud to the class, discussion then followed on the nature aspect this author was trying to explain. Many of the students then indicated that the school librarian had read The Legend of the Bluebonnet, by Tomie dePaola, to them. This work also explained something in nature. The teacher could then see some more "lightbulbs" popping within her students' heads. The excitement was really starting to build.

The next day this writer read Big Al, by Andrew Clements, aloud to her class to introduce a fiction book that had a problem and solution. After reading it aloud, the discussion followed with naming the main characters, the setting, the problem Big Al had, and how he attempted to solve his problem. It was discussed that the problem was not solved immediately but built up and climaxed with an event. The students then briefly shared other books that they remembered having the same plot.

The teacher wanted to make sure every student felt comfortable writing a story on his/her own so the next day she read aloud a few books that had more explicit story patterns, such as alphabet books. She shared her favorites with the students--Alison's Zinnia, by Anita Lobel, and Potluck, by Anne Shelby. Discussion of the structure of the books then followed that they were not just concept books. Alison's Zinnia had circular structure; the last letter brought the alphabet series back to the first letter. The students found that to be interesting. The class, also, recognized that Potluck did have an introduction and a conclusion accompanying the plot. It was discussed that if they chose to write this type of book that it needed to center on a topic. The teacher then shared aloud Alexander's Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day, by Judith Viorst, to introduce another genre--realism--and one that had a story line with a beginning, middle and end.

At the end of the second week, the teacher suggested to the students that they might consider the types of stories and their elements that they had been introduced to during this event as they engaged in the writing process the following week. Most of the students responded enthusiastically to this suggestion while just a few were hesitant. They were encouraged to start thinking about what type of story they would like to write over the weekend.

Then on the first day of the next week, the students were presented the four learning centers that further connected their reading and writing experiences. They were entitled "Fantasy," "Legends," "Fiction with Problems," and "One Idea Leads to Another." The first three centers focused on related themes and genres in the basal reader series. They provided several types of fiction experiences that could serve as models of writing. The fourth center contained a whole array of interesting springboards to writing experiences. Each sixth grader then chose individually a learning center in which to work. From individual choices, small groups were formed for each learning center.

The contents of the centers and the accompanying task sheets are presented as follows:

Fantasy Project

Literature Experience

Read some of the books listed and be aware of the realism and fantasy elements in the story.

The Polar Express, by Chris Van Allsburg

Widow's Broom, by Chris Van Allsburg

The Wreck of the Zephyr, by Chris Van Allsburg

Barn Dance, by Bill Martin Jr. and John Archambault

There's a Nightmare in My Closet, by Mercer Mayer

River Dream, by Allen Say

Jumanji, by Chris Van Allsburg

The Secret in the Matchbox, by Val Willis

Expressive Activity

Compare three fantasy picture books and complete the realism/fantasy task sheet. When your group has finished this task sheet share your information with your teacher.

Realism/Fantasy Task Sheet

Name _____

Beginning

Middle

Ending

Where does it start?

Where does it

Does it move

become fantasy?

back into

realism? How?

With other members of your group then make a list of "critical moments." These points in the story are where the author moves from realism to fantasy or from fantasy to realism. For example, the central character went into another part of the house, such as the basement or attic to enter the fantasy part of the story. Share this with your teacher or the rest of the group. After completing the above activities, then begin writing your own fantasy story which you may wish to illustrate. Some suggestions are:

1. Write a sequel to a picture book, such as Jumanji.
2. Write a fantasy using a matchbox that contains a secret

item of your choice and then make this item come to life.

3. Make up your own fantasy.

Fiction with Problems

Literature Experience

Read some of the books listed and think about the problems and solutions that are discussed in the books.

The Rainbow Fish, by Marcus Pfister

Strega Nona, by Tomie dePaola

The Most Wonderful Egg in the World, by Helme Heine

Swimmy, by Leo Lionni

Sam Johnson and the Blue Ribbon Quilt, by Lisa Campbell

Ernst

Chrysanthemum, by Kevin Henkes

Winnie the Witch, by Korky Paul and Valerie Thomas

Imogene's Antlers, by David Small

Big Al, by Andrew Clements

Zinnia and Dot, by Lisa Campbell Ernst

Agatha's Featherbed, by Carmen Agra Deedy

Old Henry, by Joan W. Blos

Expressive Activities

Choose three of the fictional stories to examine and fill out the storymapping task sheet. Discuss these elements with the others in your group and share them with your teacher.

Design your own storymapping form filling in your ideas for a fictional story with a problem. The task sheet can be a guide in developing your ideas.

Storymapping Task Sheet

Name _____

Book Title _____

Author _____

Setting:

Characters:

Problem:

Event 1

Event 2

Event 3

Event 4

Event 5

Event 6

Resolution:

After completing the above activities, then begin writing your own fictional story. Some suggestions are:

1. The fictional story you choose to write could be a sequel to one of the books listed above. Your story would involve the same characters, but they would experience different problems.

2. Also, you could choose to write your own fictional story focusing on characters, problem, and solution.

Legends

Literature Experience

Read some of the legends listed and identify the elements that make them legends.

Where the Buffaloes Begin, by Olaf Baker

The Legend of the Bluebonnet, by Tomie dePaola

The Legend of the Indian Paintbrush, by Tomie dePaola

The Man Who Could Call Down Owls, by Eve Bunting

Quillworker, by Terri Cohlene

Ka-ha-si and the Loon, by Terri Cohlene

Expressive Activities

Choose three of the legends to compare. Write down what elements are needed for a story to be considered a legend with your group members. Then share this with your teacher.

Think of an experience that could be told as a legend and fill out the Legend Planning Sheet.

Legend Planning Sheet

1. What event or object in nature are you going to explain?
2. Who will be your main characters?
3. What will be the setting for your story?
4. What problem will the main character have?
5. How will the main character solve his/her problem?

6. How will you as the storyteller tell the audience that they are to believe that the story is true?
7. Make sure your problem and solution explain the event or object.

After completing the above activities, then begin to write your own legend.

One Idea Leads to Another

Literature Experience

Choose one of the three model books to help lead you to your own book.

Read the three books listed.

Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad

Day, by Judith Viorst

Alexander, Who Used to Be Rich Last Sunday, by Judith

Viorst

Someday, by Charlotte Zolotow

Expressive Activity

Choose one of these books as a model for your own story. In the instance of Alexander, use your own name if you wish.

Write a spin-off of one of these books entitled "That'll be the day when . . . ," or "Don't you hate it when . . . ," or "I can't figure out . . . ," and complete each statement numerous times.

Literature Experience

Read these alphabet books.

Q is for Duck, by Mary Elting and Michael Folsom

Alphabears, by Kathleen Hague

The Extinct Alphabet Book, by Jerry Pallotta

The Underwater Alphabet Book, by Jerry Pallotta

Potluck, by Anne Shelby

Alison's Zinnia, by Anita Lobel

The Z Was Zapped, by Chris Van Allsburg

Old Black Fly, by Jim Aylesworth

Expressive Activity

Choose a topic for your alphabet book. You may wish to begin your book with an introduction.

Write and illustrate your own alphabet book.

Literature Experience

Read Unfortunately, by Remy Charlip.

Expressive Activity

Compose a "fortunately/unfortunately" story. You may want to do illustrations.

(There is no task sheet for this center.)

While the students took the time to read the books of their choice in the learning centers and do the task sheets that centered the students' attention on the elements of the stories, the teacher walked about listening, guiding, and answering questions. The teacher was primarily a facilitator at this point with hopes that the students would work together cooperatively to

accomplish their goals. When the task sheets were finished, each small group conferenced with the teacher, sharing their responses to the literature-based activities. Then each student proposed a story of their own and started their first draft.

After studying the elements of their chosen genre by working on the task sheet, each group met with the teacher to discuss the necessary elements found in the stories of their particular genre or learning center. During these group conferences, the teacher focused the students' attention on the authors' choice of genre, the literary devices that the authors used in their stories, and the contributions of illustrations to tell the stories. Less than one week was spent completing and discussing this topic. It was found then that each student was eager to begin writing his/her own story.

While the students wrote their own stories, the teacher conferenced with the children individually to assist them in developing their ideas. Because many of the students had found an idea that they wanted to develop into a story, most of them had their first rough drafts done in a couple of days. Then, four to five more days were needed to conference with each student. In these student-teacher conferences, the students read their stories aloud and then discussed with the teacher any areas that were difficult to understand or elements that could be further developed. Then, the students engaged in redrafting and

later shared these drafts with the teacher. After conferencing, the students focused on form and revised their stories in light of such elements as spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. The teacher also recommended that the students share their stories with a peer or relative to see if their composition could be interpreted easily.

In the conferences, many of the students had indicated that they had used ideas from the picture books shared aloud with them to help them write their stories. Their journals also told of the influence of the picture book experiences on their story writing. Examples are "The picture books showed you different ideas for writing." "The picture books shared with us helped give me ideas to get started with my own story." "I am glad that we were given so many choices of what kind of story we could write. I would have hated to be told that I had to write a fantasy story. I wouldn't have any ideas."

After the stories were completed for the most part, the teacher and the class then focused on the use of illustrations to help tell the story and on ways to illustrate. Some of the styles shared were Lois Ehlert's relia collage method, Leo Lionni's stamping method, and Eric Carle's method of painting his own paper to be used in collage. Book design elements, such as illuminated letters were pointed out, also. Before doing their final copy, the students did a "dummy" book, or a mock-up of a

book, to figure out the placement of the text and the illustrations. Through engaging in this task, the students became aware that much planning goes into making a book. Then, the students did their illustrations and developed the final copy.

The teacher then introduced them to other book design elements--covers, front matter, and endpapers--that could be considered if they wished to bind their stories into books. The teacher shared some well designed books as examples. As the stories were bound as part of the publication component of the composition process, the students' sense of ownership was complete. Examples of students' responses to publishing were: "I learned from publishing my book how good it feels just to know you accomplished something big, and it gives you something to be proud of." "It was a LOT of work, but they were neat when we got done." "I noticed there was a lot more to a picture book than just writing a story." "I learned it took a lot of dedication and effort to do my book, and they are pretty cool to look at when they're all done." Many students indicated in their journals that they did not know how much effort and time went into the construction of a picture book, but they believed that they learned much from the project and that it was a worthwhile effort.

Conclusions

From the student responses in conferences and journals, it could be concluded that they gained insight into the process of writing, the different genres and their elements, and the contributions of illustrations, and that they realized the concept of ownership in their writing from their experiences with picture books. Genuine connections were made between the comprehension and composition process. The results of the project indicated that there is a connection between what the students read and what the students write. The reading experiences nudged children to realize their own stories and to use the story structures as models for their writing. Many times while writing their drafts, the students would go back to the table displaying the picture books to look for ideas or for some specific detail.

Also, in their journals the students mentioned over and over that the picture books were of great help to them in writing their own stories. One student commented "The picture books helped by giving me an idea of what most of them are like and the different kinds that there are. I learned that it isn't as easy as it looks." Another student wrote in her journal that "The picture books helped me cause it gave me an idea on what to write about." One student chose to write an alphabet book about dinosaurs after seeing Pallotta's alphabet books on extinct

animals and on underwater creatures. In his journal, he wrote the following: "A few picture books helped me on my book by giving me the idea of having dinosaurs. I learned a ton by doing a subject that I knew little of. There were some dinosaurs that I never even knew. I think it was a great idea to have our own choice because I don't think I would have had as good a book had I been told I had to write a certain kind of book."

Some students commented at the end of the project that they did not know they could write such a long story because they had never been given the opportunity to write a story of their choice. Another familiar comment was "I can't believe how much work it was to write and illustrate a story."

Some intratextuality in the students' stories that Cairney had referred to in his study was noted in the students' stories, particularly in the fantasies and legends. In the students' picture books, the teacher noticed literary elements such as a climax, problem and solution, the intertwining of hints of what might happen in the story, and other devices that typically are difficult for these sixth grade students to do in their writing. The different genres represented in the texts of the picture book offered many models of language for the students to refer to in creating their own meaning.

Conferences and small group discussions supported students in developing their ideas. The pride in their ownership was

visible on the publishing day when they examined their bound books and shared them with the class. They wanted to take their books home that day to share with their families.

The instructional implication of the project is that quality literature experiences presented in a classroom can affect the writing responses of the students. Unfortunately, basal readers usually do not provide rich literature experiences that can be extended to children's writing experiences. Fine picture storybooks from the different genres greatly enrich the learning environment by enhancing the comprehension-composition connection in the students' writings.

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