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Extending the literature base of a middle school reading program through thematic units

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Abstract

This study will examine the rationale for a literature-based approach to teaching reading in the middle school language arts classroom to replace the basal reader approach. The purpose for implementing a literature-based program is to provide students with quality literature as a model of language, time to engage in the reading process, and the opportunities to discuss ideas generated in the process of reading. Objectives and instructional implications for such a program will be explored from a theoretical basis.

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This study will examine the rationale for a literature-based approach to teaching reading in the middle school language arts classroom to replace the basal reader approach. The purpose for implementing a literature-based program is to provide students with quality literature as a model of language, time to engage in the reading process, and the opportunities to discuss ideas generated in the process of reading. Objectives and instructional implications for such a program will be explored from a theoretical basis.

Basal Reader Approach

Most reading instruction in elementary schools is offered through a basal reading series. The anthologies, or readers, in the series include non-fiction articles, poetry selections, traditional stories, and short excerpts from fiction. Some of these selections are quality works, but often the selections are contrived stories designed to include particular vocabulary and phonetic elements that facilitate the teaching of a particular reading skill. Accompanying basal workbooks and skill sheets are also available and consume much of the reading instructional time, thus limiting students' opportunities to engage in the reading process through whole units of literature. The basal reader emphasizes language fragments and isolated skills, and learning to read becomes learning to recognize words. The most common running words in the text are introduced and reinforced

in the primary grades, while less common words are introduced gradually over the years up to eighth grade (Goodman, 1986).

The directions and suggestions for comprehension questions in the accompanying teacher manual frequently discourage risk-taking and in-depth thinking during discussions. These often require literal thinking, with little consideration given to the whole and the strengths that contribute to the whole (Goodman, 1986).

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. According to Smith (1983), children learn to read by reading whole units of language for meaning.

Large numbers of children have survived the technology of the basal reader and have learned to read and write with at least moderate effectiveness (Goodman, 1986). However, in the process of doing so, these students have learned to think of reading and writing as unpleasant tasks to be avoided rather than a meaningful experience inviting their responses. The concern of educators must then become centered on how to keep these children interested in reading, not merely meeting the requirements of the teacher or the assignment.

Reading Instructional Needs in the Middle School

By the age of eleven or twelve, children's reading abilities and their tastes are greatly diversified. Some very able readers of this age can tackle most books with a reasonable amount of success while some with less ability find their life experiences outside of books. The latter are often wise in ways that are not "bookish" (Meek, 1982).

Most reading programs founded on a basal reader as the primary text do not allow students with diverse life experiences to use those experiences to strengthen reading interests. Many times the answers required to fill in the blanks or to respond to the teacher's questions from the manual do not make sense to children. However, given the opportunity to relate what has been read to a personal life experience, not only makes sense, but gets students involved in their own learning (Meek, 1982).

Characteristics of Middle Students

The emerging intellectual development of youth in the middle school allows them to begin applying logical operations to all classes of problems. They are beginning to apply logical thought to hypothetical problems and problems involving the future (Wadsworth, 1984).

In addition to intellectual changes, emotional and social changes occur as well (Elkind, 1981). These years are a time

when fears of failure, rejection, scorn--even of death--lie just beneath the surface of the emotions. For the majority of emerging adolescents, the only possible outlet for these impulses and fears is in the vicarious experience offered through the media or through reading. They can identify with Margaret as she faces confusion and uncertainty about growing up and God in Judy Blume's Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret. While books can be a powerful resource for anyone, they are particularly so for an adolescent (Gross, 1986).

Records indicate that young people read almost completely for experience. During the middle school years, youngsters dream of adventures that will test their courage and confirm their value to themselves and others. They want to experience adventure and excitement, to know the feeling of self-sufficiency without adult domination (Carlsen, 1980). Presenting Hatchet, by Gary Paulsen, to students in the middle years gives them the opportunity to experience being alone for fifty-four days in the Canadian wilderness. By developing a personal response to the story, the reader can make subconscious plans to survive under harsh conditions.

Smith (1988) maintains that reading can never be separated from the purposes, prior knowledge and feelings of a person engaged in the activity and the nature of the text being read. The adolescent years and the period just preceding adolescence

are marked by constant seeking of personal and social definition. It seems as if youngsters in this phase of life are continually holding themselves up for inspection. They are looking inward to measure their growth, their feelings, and their thinking. At the same time they are looking outward for solutions to personal problems, for outlets for fears and impulses, for feelings of mastery, and for opportunities to try on different identities (Elkind, 1984). As they read, their detachment helps them to see events and how those events influence their lives. They learn the challenge of making choices and glow with the warmth of accomplishment as they recognize the changes in themselves (Lukens, 1986).

Literature-Based Program for Middle School

Programs that present quality literature from the various genres (realistic fiction, historical fiction, modern fantasy fiction, folk literature, and poetry) offer experiences to help adolescents recognize their needs and feelings as normal. Literature experiences can help students of this age become better equipped to face their problems and to build a level of self-assuredness that supports courage to face the problems of the future.

Values of the Genres of Literature

Realistic fiction. Well-written realistic fiction that is believable and could conceivably happen has soundly developed

characters and timely conflicts. These characters provide many possible models, both good and bad, for coping with problems of the human condition. As students in the middle years experience realism in fiction, they begin to organize their own thinking about life and the lives of others (Huck, Hepler, & Hickman, 1987). In developing empathy with characters, adolescents discover their problems and needs are not unique. As a result of their reading, they may be more able to express emotions such as fear, anger, and grief (Norton, 1987).

Historical fiction. Students in the middle years enjoy experiencing life in various historical periods and cultures (Carlsen, 1980). With a setting of World War II or before, historical fiction allows young people to enter into the many conflicts of those who lived in the past (Huck et al., 1987). Through experiences with historical fiction, students can begin to realize that their present and future are linked to the past. They can extend their knowledge of people and their values and beliefs and the events of a particular period that influenced their lives (Norton, 1987). When given opportunities for experiences with historical fiction, students can develop a more accurate perception of chronology of human experience as they move through the past into the present. Historical fiction encourages students to feel as well as think as they compare the past with the present (Huck et al., 1987).

Modern fantasy fiction. Modern fantasy is diverse, including contemporary fairy tales, stories of magic and strange events, personified animal stories, fantasy past, and science fiction (Huck et al., 1987). This type of fiction appeals to students of this age because they enjoy moving beyond this point in time and space through their imagination (Carlsen, 1980). Experiences with fantasy fiction can help develop the imagination by requiring students to willingly suspend their disbelief of other worlds. It invites readers to explore the realms of possibility in a contemporary sense in addition to experiencing universal values, desires, struggles, and emotions (Norton, 1987). Modern fantasy provides students in the middle years the opportunity to escape into a fantasy world of others who face everyday problems like their own and make discoveries about fear of the unknown (Lukens, 1986).

Folk literature. This genre consists of folk tales, legends, fables, parables, proverbs, and myths derived from the imagination to explain the human condition. Folk tales go beyond the function of entertainment by kindling the imagination of young people. Although justice is rendered in these stories and wishes come true, it is usually not without the fulfillment of a task or trial (Huck et al., 1987). According to Bettelheim (1977), folk tales help adolescents to cope with their dreams and inner turmoil. The folk tale becomes a mirror reflecting

some aspect of their inner world. From this genre, the origins of basic themes and conflicts, such as Cinderella and Little Red Riding Hood can be studied. For example, students learn that, not only is Cinderella the adolescent dream, but also that the motif makes intelligent decisions for she knows that wishing solves nothing without concomitant action (Yolen, 1981).

Poetry. Poetry confronts young listeners and readers in such an intense, sudden way that their attention is captured. It offers experiences with the unexpected through the element of surprise and makes something of the ordinary (Harms & Lettow, 1989). Well chosen poetry expands the perceptions of middle school students while increasing their knowledge and understanding of the world around them (Norton, 1987). Experiences with poetry help young people develop an appreciation for language as well as giving them insights about themselves and others (Norton, 1987).

Opportunities to Respond to Literature Experiences

Quality literature must be coupled with time to read. Then students need opportunities to share their constructs through writing and discussion with others. When presented with whole works of quality literature, students learn to react to the total structure of the story, not to some message or moral that can be snatched from it. Responses in literature should not be hurried or manipulated by adults. It does students little good to be

told that A is better than B, especially if they prefer B at the time. They have to realize values for themselves and should follow their own rhythms in doing so (Frye, 1964).

Dialogues with inner audiences. Children in the middle years have developed a sense of communicating with themselves. Because they have more complex intellectual structures and more experiences with language and literature, they can simultaneously consider different audiences through their thinking processes. As they strive to interpret what they read, they are able to internally converse with their experiences (Calkins, 1983).

Just as writing is an exploration of one's own ideas and experiences and proceeds according to its own logic, so, too, reading involves making sense of life's experiences (Murray, 1989). The teacher's role in assisting children to discover their inner audiences is to encourage them to ask questions for which they believe there are no answers and then to allow them to determine the answers (Murray, 1982).

These inner audiences are multifaceted; the reader can dialogue with more than one inner audience while reading a work. Engaging in the reading process, a person can relate personal experiences to the text, can be reminded of other works with similar or dissimilar elements, can interact with the author, can consider the genre as a vehicle for the story's message, and can reflect on a problem. By writing in a reading log or

journal, students can connect their background experiences as they write with the meanings they have constructed while reading a literature work. These meanings can also be extended in discussions with peers and the teacher by making connections with other works. Students may find themselves wanting to know more about a particular author or illustrator. This dialogue can be fostered with the assistance of the teacher or librarian and may lead to correspondence with the author (Harms & Lettow, unpublished).

When students read extensively in a genre, they may want to develop a point of reference to use in evaluating other works as they read. The teacher can assist students in this task by discussing the literary elements of a particular work and then helping the students compare and contrast those elements with other pieces as they read (Harms & Lettow, unpublished).

Youth in the middle years experience problems and often feel trapped by dilemmas in their world much the same as adults. Literature can offer an affective as well as cognitive perspective to problems encountered by the human condition. As students read and engage in conversations with their inner audiences, they become aware of possible courses of action and, as a result, may be better able to address problems which arise in their lives (Harms & Lettow, unpublished).

Comprehension-composition connections. Literature is the essential source of knowledge in a writing program. When children have a chance to become writers, they begin to notice how other authors work. Literature then becomes the model for children as they read about ideas and experiences that matter to them (Huck et al., 1987). Eckhoff (1983), comparing children who read from the simplified text of most basal readers with those who read from more complex whole works of literature, found that children's writing closely resembled the type of sentence structure found in the style of their reading materials. From their reading, Huck et al. (1987) say that children can get ideas for plots, themes, and characters for their own stories.

Theory Into Practice

Units focusing on a specific theme can generate enthusiasm for reading and discussion among youth in the middle grades. A unit based on a specific theme can provide structure for students' study, but it also needs to be open-ended providing choices for meaningful reading experiences, responsive writing, and expressive activities, so students can own their own learning experiences.

Themes that are closely related to the needs of emerging adolescence can be presented through the different literature genres. Students can be given choices of expressive activities thus encouraging them to respond from their background of

experiences. Each student can keep a reading journal which becomes an on-going dialogue between the child's inner audience and the text. This type of journaling encourages megacognitive awareness, or "thinking about thinking."

For this instructional development project the writer chose to engage in the process of developing a unit centered around the theme of becoming one's own person. The theme is titled "Changes, Choices, Challenges."

Multiple copies of the literature works and colorful folders offering literature experiences and related expressive activities facilitate a rich learning environment. The specific literature experiences and accompanying expressive activities for the unit are presented below:

1. Literature Experience

   Read one or more of the following books.

   Midnight Fox, by Betsy Byars

   I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip, by John Donovan

   Randall's Wall, by Carol Fenner

   Rabble Starkey, by Lois Lowry

   Expressive Activity

   Write a first-person narrative about a time when you had to confront changes in your life. Tell how you

came to terms with the changes and how the changes resulted in your growth as a person.

2. Literature Experience

Read one or more of the following books.

The Cay, by Theodore Taylor

Hatchet, by Gary Paulsen

The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle, by Avi

The Sign of the Beaver, by Elizabeth George Speare

Expressive Activity

1) Make a list of the changes the main character had to make in order to survive the ordeal into which he or she had been cast.

2) Make a map of the cay or the area of the plane crash. Include the location of shelters, food sources, and other areas important to the survival of the character.

3) Charlotte Doyle made serious choices while she was aboard the Seahawk. These choices changed her life. Make brief notes concerning at least four of those choices. Discuss these with the teacher.

3. Literature Experience

Read one or more of the following books.

The Moonlight Man, by Paula Fox

The One-Eyed Cat, by Paula Fox

On My Honor, by Marian Bauer

A Fine White Dust, by Cynthia Rylant

Shiloh, by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor

Expressive Activity

The main character in each of these stories made a choice which resulted in dramatic changes for that character. Construct a story wheel of the story. Make the character's choice the hub of the wheel and the varying results of that choice the spokes. Be prepared to discuss your wheel.

4. Literature Experience

Read one or more of the following books.

The Pinballs, by Betsy Byars

Getting Even, by Mavis Jukes

Maniac Magee, by Jerry Spinelli

Expressive Activity

Create an illustration with several frames (similar to a newspaper comic strip) showing the changes made by one of the characters in the story. Write a brief description to explain each frame.

5. Literature Experience

Read one or more of the following books.

Dogsong, by Gary Paulsen

Julie of the Wolves, by Jean George

Expressive Activity

Acceptance of changes in life is sometimes necessary to the resolution of problems. Make a list of the changes Russell or Julie had to endure to survive the harsh conditions of the tundra. Then write a list of the questions you would like to ask Russell or Julie if you could meet them.

6. Literature Experience

Read one or more of the following books.

The Divorce Express, by Paula Danziger

Can You Sue Your Parents for Malpractice? by Paula Danziger

The lives of the main characters in these stories were changed through no choice of their own.

Expressive Activity

Make a sketch of the characters in the story after you have read fifty pages.

Write a brief description of each of the characters. Then make another sketch of the same characters when you have finished the book. Write another brief description detailing how you visualized the changes made by each character.

7. Literature Experience

Read one or more of the following books.

Number the Stars, by Lois Lowry

The Endless Steppe, by Esther Hautzig

Expressive Activity

War forces people to make many changes. Complete one of the following activities:

1) On a map of Denmark, locate the cities mentioned in Number the Stars. Write a report on the German occupation of Denmark during WW II. You will find this information in the encyclopedia.

2) On a map of Europe, locate the city where Esther lived before she was exiled to Siberia. Then read about Siberia in the encyclopedia and write a brief report about its geographical features including the climate. Include in your report some of the changes Esther endured and how her brave choices helped her to meet the challenges and survive.

3) Discuss WW II with a family friend, neighbor, or relative who is at least 60 years old. Ask questions about how their life changed during the war years. Make an entry in your reading journal about the discussion and tell what you learned from that person.

Summary

The purpose of this instructional unit was to apply a literature approach to reading in the middle school. This approach focuses on students' involvement in the comprehension and composition processes to create meaning. Quality literature experiences from the various genres support students' responses to their reading experiences. Through quality pieces, students can experience the joys and trials of life's conflicts and can learn to appreciate the beauty of language. While engaged in reading, students are taken on long journeys which many times can broaden their understanding of themselves, their ideals, and values. These experiences strengthen students' thinking and language abilities.

A result of a reading program with a strong literature base is to develop an appreciation of reading as a pastime and as a source of extending learning.

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