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Extending the whole language concept through a thematic unit

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the process of integrating the language arts program through a literature base representative of the different genres. From the supporting professional references that will be cited, a unit utilizing these implications for instruction will be offered. The unit that illustrates the process of instructional development is Fun and Games and is appropriate for the upper elementary grade levels.

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American public schools for decades have been embracing the basal reader as the basis for reading instruction. Basal reader series encompassing kindergarten through grade eight have offered controlled vocabularies, reading readiness programs, lists of sight words, phonics workbooks, and skill sequences. Children, in many cases, have seen reading and writing in its most difficult and confusing form: fragmented and isolated from any purpose.

At a time when Americans are required to use ever-increasingly sophisticated levels of functional literacy to be a part of the American dream, many of the methods and practices that are employed in today's classrooms are not fostering a love of learning and reading that will pave the way to the empowerment literacy can afford (Atwell, 1987). This concern for literacy has fueled the implementation of the whole language concept into school instructional programs.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to explore the process of integrating the language arts program through a literature base representative of the different genres. From the supporting professional references that will be cited, a unit utilizing these implications for instruction will be offered. The unit that illustrates the process of instructional development is

Fun and Games and is appropriate for the upper elementary grade levels.

Theoretical Base for Integrating Literature into the Language Arts Program

The theoretical base for integrating the language arts and for presenting quality literature to support this instructional development will be presented.

Whole Language

The whole language concept focuses on the nature of language and how children's literacy emerges (Goodman, 1986). Creating meaning through involvement in the language processes nurtures literacy. The communication of meaning is the natural purpose of language in the real world (Goodman, 1986). Somehow this purpose for language use has been confounded in the classroom by reliance on textbooks and exercises that fragment language (Edelsky, Altwerger, & Flores, 1991). When language instruction is fragmented, it becomes meaningless and abstract, thus difficult for children. It is through involvement with the functions of language that children's thinking abilities are nurtured (Smith, 1983; Goodman, 1986). The irony of an instructional program that is loaded with reading exercises is that little time is left in the school day for the real thing--reading and writing (Edelsky et al., 1991).

Providing opportunities for students to use language for legitimate purposes places the teacher in the role of facilitator rather than the director of instruction. Guidance, support, encouragement, and celebration are tasks that replace the teacher's control in a whole language classroom (Goodman, 1986).

In fostering literacy, reading should be seen as writing and writing as reading (Calkins, 1983; Tierney & Pearson, 1983). When children bring writing experience with them to the task of reading, they begin to recognize the author's craft. They begin to read like writers. While children are writing to create meaning, they are constantly engaging in reading (Smith, 1983).

Quality Literature

In Cambourne's discussion of the whole language concept (1988), he presents a model of learning in which risk-taking facilitates learning. Before this approximation can occur, learners need to be immersed in quality literature. Extending the literature base through the different genres provides in-depth experience with and offers models of language for creating meaning (Huck, 1982; Harms & Lettow, 1992).

Quality literature not only offers enjoyment, but engages the child's mind and is the catalyst for constructing meaning. It provides children with order and form in which to see life's experiences. It can help children to focus on what is most

important and enduring about life and can help children sort life experiences into meaningful categories such as family loyalties, sacrifice, courage, elitism, wisdom, maturity, partisanism, and compassion (Huck, Hepler, & Hickman, 1987; Lukens, 1986). Its strengths offer invitations to return to savor, to ponder, to discuss, and to respond through composition activity. Such involvement nourishes thinking-language abilities (Harms & Lettow, 1986).

The teacher needs to select literature works that will provide enjoyment and will also offer models of writing (Harms & Lettow, 1986). Huck et al. (1987) remind teachers to select literature that is a true reflection of the experiences and emotions of children. Lukens (1986) presents other considerations for choosing quality literature for children--vocabulary, text length, and complexity of the writing.

Learning Environment

An important reason for integrating the language arts through a literature base is to help children realize that books are an essential part of their lives (Huck et al., 1987). The classroom environment should be print-rich and overflowing with different genres and books of varying degrees of complexity and difficulty. Routman (1988) suggests that this variety should include picture books for both younger and older students, folklore, fantasy, poetry, realistic fiction, historical

fiction, biography, and nonfiction informational books. Different genres lend themselves to different messages. Butler and Turbill concur that to read effectively one must be exposed to many different kinds of written materials (1984).

The learning environment should supply students with opportunities for varied language experiences. Print has many functions, and these functions can be a part of classroom instruction. If children can see the importance of print as a way to get information, to become more proficient at a task or hobby, and to enjoyably occupy time, then reading experiences are meaningful to children (Goodman, 1986). Teachers need to put away exercises that fragment language and get children involved in purposeful activities with whole units of language.

Another accommodation that must be made in the classroom is an allotment of time for students to spend reading books of their own choosing. Teachers and administrators should dismiss feelings of guilt when time is spent on individual pastime reading. The way to become a better reader is to read. It is the best practice possible (Trelease, 1979).

Students also need sustained amounts of time for writing (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1983; Murray, 1989). Time spent writing daily about what is being read, thought about, experienced, and wished for makes connections between reading and writing. It is through this writing that students become aware of what an

author needs to do to tell a story, relate a feeling, or pass on information.

Reading aloud to students is another activity that influences students in their learning of language. Some of the benefits of reading aloud to children, even to upper elementary students, are: increased attention span, improved vocabulary, increased listening comprehension, and interest in books and authors that might not be found by students (Harms & Lettow, 1986; Trelease, 1979). Reading good literature aloud to children demonstrates to them the English language at its best and helps them to appreciate the use of language in books they may not yet be able to read independently.

Assessment of Language Growth

Assessment of students' involvement in the language processes needs to be described by means of informal techniques. A running record of each child's growth as the school year progresses needs to be kept. This description can be developed by collecting samples of children's work in portfolios and through student logs, teacher journals, student-teacher conference summaries, and checklists (Winograd, Paris, & Bridge, 1991).

Valencia (1990) offers some guidelines for assessment:

1. Assessment should, as nearly as possible, resemble the tasks that occur naturally in the classroom.

2. Assessment needs to be a continuous and on-going record of involvement in the process rather than the product. Assessment should depict the changes that are a result of development.

3. Assessment needs to sample many tasks associated with being a literate person.

4. Assessment needs to, not only measure the developmental growth of the student, but also the effectiveness of the methods employed by the teacher. A dialogue between student and teacher about accomplishments, disappointments, and hopes for the future will aid the instructional process and help the student become a self-evaluator.

Implementation:
A Literature-Based Instructional Unit on
Fun and Games

This thematic unit on fun and games, developed for the upper elementary grades, offers a literature base representative of many genres and related expressive activity. The rich learning environment for this study is facilitated by learning centers which offer a whole array of activity from which children can choose, therefore, owning their learning experience. Two kinds of centers--sustaining and specific to the unit of study--are offered.

Sustaining Centers

These centers remain constant; however, the contents reflect the specific unit of study. Their purpose is to provide a structure for the classroom that is predictable.

Listening/reading center. This center provides literature to support the theme. Children can select quality literature to read silently or read aloud to a partner and to listen to from a tape of a book. To provide appropriate materials for all the children in the class, books of varying reading levels are offered.

For this unit on Fun and Games, the center has works with games as an important part of the plot. Examples are:

Jumanji, by Chris Van Allsburg

The Westing Game, by Ellen Raskin

Pinballs, by Betsy Byars

Playing Beatie Bow, by Ruth Park

The Shrinking of Treehorn, by Florence Parry Heide

The Surprise Party, by Pat Hutchins

Uncle Elephant, by Arnold Lobel

Each Peach, Pear, Plum, by Janet and Allan Ahlberg

Guess Who My Favorite Person Is, by Byrd Baylor

Students may respond to any of these books by choosing from several expressive activities, designed to encourage readers to respond.

1. Write a personal narrative about a fun time you once had playing a game.

2. With a group of other students, pantomime a scene from one of the books. See if your classmates can guess the book's name.

3. Suggested activities after reading Jumanji, an open-ended story:

   (a) Write a sequel or the next episode.

   (b) Write and perform a play that shows what happens to Danny and Walter when they attempt to play the game.

4. Suggested activities after reading Pinballs:

   (a) What kind of a game is pinballs? After reading the book Pinballs, consider why you think Betsy Byars named this book after a game.

   (b) Games are usually played for fun. Was Pinballs a fun book? Tell why you gave the answer that you did. Describe the characters' responses to their homelessness.

   (c) Think what it would be like if the three main characters in Pinballs came to stay with you in your home. You may want to write a story about the experience, including yourself among the characters.

   (d) Choose one of the foster kids from Pinballs and

write an episode about what happens to them when they leave the Masons.

Author/illustrator center. By working in this center, students can conduct an in-depth study of authors and illustrators, learning about the source of their ideas and the ways they engage in the writing and illustrating processes. For the unit on fun and games, the author/illustrator, Chris Van Allsburg, was featured. His stories and illustrations exhibit playfulness as he leads his readers through mazes, dreams, mysteries, and twists in plots. There is always something to figure out and consider after the book is completed. Other titles by Van Allsburg are:

The Stranger

The Polar Express

The Garden of Abdul Gasazi

Two Bad Ants

The Mysteries of Harris Burdick

The Wreck of the Zephyr

The Z Was Zapped

Ben's Dream

Just a Dream

The Wretched Stone

The many types of media used in the illustrations of Van Allsburg's works can be studied. These materials should be

available to let students experiment with the media that he used in his illustrations: pen and ink, water color, oil paint, and graphite.

Also included in the center is biographical information collected in a folder from sources such as newspapers, magazines, dust cover flaps, and the reference source Something About the Author.

Van Allsburg's work suggests many expressive activities from which to choose.

1. Look for Fritz, the dog, in all of Chris Van Allsburg's books. What can you find out about this dog? Write to inform the class about what you know.
2. Design a bookmark celebrating Chris Van Allsburg and his work using one of his art media.
3. Write a story to go along with one of the captioned illustrations in The Mysteries of Harris Burdick.
4. Create an illustration using the medium of your choice, and compose a caption for it so that it could be added to The Mysteries of Harris Burdick.
5. Write in your journal who you think the Stranger really is in the book of the same title. How do you explain the unseasonably nice weather at the farmer's place?

Interesting objects center. This center provides an opportunity for students to bring in small brainteasing games

such as Rubick's Cube, Hi-Q, Jinga, Chainlink, and Crazy Unicorn. Homemade games and brainteasers are welcome also.

Some books to support this center are:

The Code and Cipher Book, by Jane Sarnoff and Reynold Ruffins

Secret Writing Tricks, by Geoffrey Lamb

Upside Downers, by Mitsumasa Anno

Topsy-Turvies, by Mitsumasa Anno

Round Trip, by Ann Jonas

Puzzles, Stunts, Brain Teasers and Tricks from Tell Me Why, by Arkady Leokum

These expressive activities can be included in the center:

1. Fill out a card with this information:

Name of Game_____

Write on the card what you were thinking when you were working on this game. Was there a certain method, or strategy, you used that could help someone else? Write it down. Sign your name. Pin it on the board.

2. Make a crossword puzzle, using a book as the theme. You might want to make the puzzle in a special shape that would go with the book you are reading. If you are reading a science fiction book, you might want to make your crossword puzzle in the shape of an important image in the work, for example, a spaceship.

3. Choose your favorite game, or brain teaser. Describe it in writing and tell why it gets your vote.

Poetry center. This center always contains poems that support the current theme. Riddles and limericks are focused on in this unit. The literature base for this center includes the following riddle and joke books:

Too Hot to Hoot, by Marvin Terban

Nutty Number Riddles, by Rose Wyler and Eva-Lee Baird

Riddle Red Riddle Book, by Ann Bishop

A Very Mice Joke Book, by Karen Jo Gounaud

The Six-Million-Dollar Cucumber, by E. Richard Churchill

What? A Riddle Book, by Jane Sarnoff and Reynold Ruffins

Joke-Away Riddles Plus, by Robert F. Vitarelli

I Know! A Riddle Book, by Jane Sarnoff and Reynold Ruffins

My Head Is Red, by Myra Cohn Livingston

All the Small Poems, by Valerie Worth

Some possible books containing limericks are:

The Book of Pigericks, by Arnold Lobel

Laughable Limericks, by Sara and John E. Brewton

The Little Book of Limericks, by Warren Lyfick

These expressive activities are suggested for this center:

1. Band together with someone else and publish a book of jokes, riddles, and/or puzzles of your own. Choose a theme on which to base your book.

2. Find out what a "palindrome" is and write an explanation of it in your own words. Make up a palindrome of your own and pin it on the board.

3. Write a limerick, following the correct form. Notice that there are five lines:

two rhyming lines

two more rhyming lines with a different rhyme

one last line that rhymes with the first two

Limericks are usually silly or funny.

4. Make up some riddles based on characters from books. For example: "I drive a very small motorcycle by saying Pb-bb-bb. Who am I?" (Ralph, the mouse, in Beverly Cleary's The Mouse and the Motorcycle.)

Bookmaking center. This center is always available for students to practice the author's craft. Student responses to reading can be to write a book. Books and filmstrips on bookmaking can be available in the center. Possible titles are:

Books for You to Make, by Susan Purdy

How a Book Is Made, by Aliki.

This center needs to be well-stocked with materials that children will need to publish books. Atwell (1987) offers a comprehensive list that she calls "writing materials". These would include stiff material to use for book covers, paper, scissors, tape, staplers, paper clips, correction fluid,

markers, calligraphy pens, pencils, ballpoints, rulers, date stamp and pad, lettering stencils, needles and thread, wallpaper sample books, scraps of cloth, dry mounting paper, and an iron and ironing board.

Centers Specific to the Unit

The remaining centers were designed specifically to go along with the theme of Fun and Games.

Card games center. Children in the upper elementary grades are naturally interested in card games and tricks. Through this interest, they can become involved with many books from which they can learn new games to try with their friends and perhaps experiment with the performing arts by putting together a card trick show that can even be video taped.

Possible titles for this center are:

Card and Coin Tricks, by Cathy Cashion

Let's Play Cards, by John Belton and Joella Cramblit

Around the World Board and Card Games, by Ruth Oakley

Solitaire Games, by John Belton

Suggested expressive activities are:

1. Find a new game in one of the books, read about it, and learn how to play it. Tell about this experience in your reading journal.
2. Teach another person how to play a game.
3. Make a list in your reading journal of the different

ways you can sort a deck of playing cards. See how many you can come up with.

4. Make up your own card game. Write the directions in your reading journal. Teach this game to someone else.

5. Do playing cards make you think of a story or experience you could write about? Write it!

6. Learn a trick or a game well enough to perform it or explain it to the whole class.

7. Create a deck of cards of your own design. You might make a potato print or use a stamp of some kind so that the backs of the cards are all the same. Your game should contain images from a book or books that you have read or heard. You might want to pattern your game after "Old Maid" or "Go Fish", or you might want to come up with an entirely new game.

Board games center. Although this center does not have a literature base, students are involved in the reading process as they read directions in preparing to play games and also during the course of the play. The book Jumanji, by Chris Van Allsburg, is a book about a board game and is a good springboard for introducing this center to the class.

Some expressive activities to go along with this center include:

1. Organize a group of friends to play a board game that you brought or that someone else brought. Record in your reading journal what game you played and who you played it with. Why did you choose this game? Will you play it again? Why or why not?

2. Make your own board game using a book you have recently read as your theme. For example: "Henry's Paper Route Game" or "Monster Garden Monopoly". Construct and design a box for storage. Why do you think people would like your game? Would they buy it? Why or why not?

3. Write a description of how to play your favorite board game and let others try to guess what game it is. If they cannot guess, edit your description until the group can figure it out.

Newsstand center. Recent newspapers and a dictionary should be on display as the literature base for this center. Activities that will actively involve children in reading and writing to make connections with the games theme are:

1. Find as many games as you can in the newspaper. Make a scrapbook of the different types of games you find. You might want to play some of them.

2. Cut out news articles related to games or with the word "game" in the article. Pin these on the bulletin board near the center.

3. List different ways to use the word "game" on a chart page. Add yours and tell what it means in your own words. For example: "Are you game?", war games, game of life, game of chance, game leg, game (animals hunted) smells, and Olympic games.

4. Organize a checker or chess tournament. Keep the class informed on the progress of the tournament just as the newspaper does in the sports section for a tournament like Wimbledon or the Masters' PGA tournament.

Olympic games center. This center is especially fun if the Olympics are being conducted at the time, but can still be stimulating at other times, too. Posters of Olympic athletes can be displayed as well as pictures of Olympic facilities around the world, Olympic mascots, and tapes of Olympian theme songs from past games. The center provides students an opportunity to get involved with informational books and to familiarize themselves with that genre. Titles appropriate to this center are:

Olympic Games in Ancient Greece, by Shirley Glubok and Alfred Tamarin

The First Olympic Games, by Barbara Christensen

Olympics, by Dennis B. Fradin

Children may participate in the following activities:

1. Choose an Olympic event (past or present) or an Olympic champion that is interesting to you. Find out as much as you can about it and inform the class of your findings.

2. How did the Olympics get started? Find out as much as you can about it and inform the class of your findings.

3. Plan "Olympic events" that could be performed in the classroom.

Computer center. This center called Screen Play involves computer technology and games. A resource person can be asked to give a presentation or an interview to children who are especially interested.

The following titles can support the expressive activities suggested in this center:

Screen Play, The Story of Video Games, by George Sullivan

A Look Inside Video Games, by James I. Clark

Basic Fun, by Susan Drake Lipscomb

The Computer Nut, by Betsy Byars

Invent Your Own Computer Games, by Fred D'iGnazio

Using the Computer, by Neil Ardley

These accompanying activities can be part of the center:

1. Create an idea for a computer game of your own. Write the rules and directions to play it. You could construct a model of this game so that we can see how it will look.

2. Write about your favorite Nintendo game or video game. What makes it great? Why do you like it so well?

3. Write a story that has images of a video game or computer in it, like the one in The Computer Nut.

4. Write and run your own computer program. Use the books in the center for help.

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