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Developing a literature-based theme study to extend the whole language concept

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Abstract

Language is a process through which humans create meaning. Language as a process begins with a function and then develops as the user experiments with the language form necessary to meet the needs of that function. Students use language and learn its functions at the same time (F. Smith, 1983). As a result, children learn language naturally as they interact with others in their environment (Goodman, 1986).

DEVELOPING A LITERATURE-BASED THEME STUDY TO EXTEND THE WHOLE LANGUAGE CONCEPT

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Language is a process through which humans create meaning. Language as a process begins with a function and then develops as the user experiments with the language form necessary to meet the needs of that function. Students use language and learn its functions at the same time (F. Smith, 1983). As a result, children learn language naturally as they interact with others in their environment (Goodman, 1986).

Young children use holophrastic phrases to represent whole generalized meanings. Children learn from whole to part as they interact with and observe adults using whole units of language in functional and purposeful ways (Goodman, 1986). Parents create an environment that allows children to discover meaning through natural and meaningful language activity (Newman, 1985).

This description of the nature of language and emerging literacy among children is referred to as the whole language concept. In this paper, the writer will explore the process of extending the whole language concept into a middle school reading program. The aspect of this concept that will be focused on is the development of a literature-based theme study. First, a review of the professional literature in the topics of whole language in the reading program and a literature-based reading program will be presented. Second, a literature-based theme study of friendship will be developed for a middle school reading program.

Whole Language in the Reading Program

In nurturing children's emerging language abilities, school programs should involve children in functional and purposeful experiences that meet their needs within the framework of whole units. Goodman says that "language learning is easy when it's whole, real and relevant; when it makes sense and is functional; when it's encountered in the context of its use; when the learner chooses to use it" (Goodman, 1986, p. 26).

Instruction that breaks language learning into fragments makes language experiences more abstract and thus interrupts and postpones the connection of meaning with language use. To students language becomes difficult, artificial, and unattractive. Students should be invited to observe how graphophonics, syntax, and semantics work without isolating skills for instruction (Goodman, 1986).

Teachers whose goals are to extend the whole language concept into the instructional program are implementing theories of language learning therefore they are encouraging students to bring prior knowledge of language structure into the classroom and their natural need to make sense of the world to their learning experience. The school program that supports and extends what children have already learned about language has an impact if teacher practices are brought into line with children's ways of learning (Wadsworth, 1984).

Also school programs seeking to foster the whole language concept encourage risktaking, for language is learned through testing hypotheses. To support this activity, children must feel free to take the risk of using elements of language incorrectly in order to find out whether the rules they have for identifying and using that word are correct. Teachers need to understand and support the process of taking risks. Children's lack of confidence in risking errors and in getting involved in the real act of reading will thwart their success in learning to read (Smith, 1983).

Literature-Based Reading Programs

Quality literature can extend the whole language concept by providing the basis for a meaningful language environment. A literature-based reading program can enable learners to create meaning, interact with others, and strengthen language abilities (Goodman, 1986).

A literature-based reading program surrounds children with a variety of books representing many topics, genres, authors, and illustrators. Wide reading is related to accessibility; the more books available and the more time for reading the more reading children can do. Children should engage in meaningful reading experiences rather than worksheet pages and workbooks. The classroom can be arranged to support many expressive

activities (speaking, writing, dramatizing, singing, and illustrating) that spring from reading experiences (Huck, 1987).

Fine literature gives readers rich experiences with memorable characters, events, and experiences. It sharpens humans' sensitivity to themselves and relationships with others and the world. When children read and listen to quality literature works, they can gain a sense of story and its elements (Huck, 1987).

A literature-based program provides learners with extended periods of time for exploration through the comprehension (viewing, listening, and reading) and composition (dramatizing, speaking, and writing) processes. As a result, children create meaning and discover language. Programs that offer fragmented schedules encourage students to focus on the product rather than the process. Interruptions make absorption in a book or project impossible (Calkins, 1986).

A teacher in a literature-based program plays an important role. The teacher's knowledge of literature is crucial in selecting the literature base and accompanying activity that will provide a rich learning environment. A teacher arranges the learning environment and creates the climate for creativity by providing materials, challenging thinking, and honoring work (Huck, 1987). Also the teacher is a model of a language user by not only showing appreciation for fine literature, but by

reading and responding to it. Frank Smith calls this role "joining the club" (Smith, 1983). The teacher supports a risk-taking environment that provides a place for exploration and discovery. The teacher's role is to make learning easy (Smith, 1983) and to think carefully about the kinds of teacher input which are helpful (Calkins, 1986).

Another role of the teacher is that of "kid-watcher" (Goodman, 1986). Teachers need to become researchers, observing how students go about the process of learning and discovering ways that they can help (Calkins, 1986). Observing kids and how they go about learning gives teachers the data they need to understand what language users need to learn. Kid watchers evaluate then revise their instructional plans (Goodman, 1986).

To extend children's literature experiences in a classroom, a teacher can read aloud on a regular basis to the students, can designate periods of sustained silent reading for the students and the teacher, can provide opportunities for connecting the comprehension and composition processes, can encourage students to dialogue with inner audiences, and can extend reading across the curriculum. Each of these approaches to literature experiences will be examined in the following pages.

Reading Aloud

"Teaching children how to read is not enough; we must also teach them to want to read" (Trelease, 1989, p. 203). A teacher

reading aloud can convert negative attitudes toward reading to positive ones by providing a role model of the value of reading. During a read aloud time, the listener's imagination is encouraged, attention span is exercised, listening comprehension is improved, personal-social development is nurtured, and connection with reading and writing is established (Huck, 1987; Trelease, 1989).

A daily read aloud time not only provides enjoyment but develops a sense of story and its elements (Huck, 1987). A child's ability to learn to read depends on familiarity with written language which can be nurtured by listening to literature being read aloud. When choosing read aloud material, the teacher should consider quality writing, student interest and background, and selections should stimulate the imagination and develop appreciation for fine literature (Huck, 1987). This period should give students opportunities to hear favorites, new pieces, a variety of genre, and various topics of interest that reinforce class themes and units.

Sustained Silent Reading

Students' language abilities and reading interests are facilitated by extended periods of time to read books of their choosing. During extended periods of reading time, students can browse and read and think about books of their own choice. Students need the luxury of time with a book in order to think

of themselves as readers. Some teachers initiate a sustained silent reading (SSR) time, when everyone in the class or the entire school reads including all the school staff thus providing models (Huck, 1987). These uninterrupted reading times can encourage children to become lifelong readers who love to read.

Reading-Writing Connection

Instructional programs that reflect the whole language concept support the connection of the comprehension-composition processes in the reading program. Students naturally learn about reading and writing while listening; they learn about writing from reading; and they gain insights about reading from writing. Listening, reading, speaking, and writing involve the same level of cognitive development and the same processes within the brain (Newman, 1985).

Through the reading and writing processes, children strive to make sense of the world (Smith, 1971). Children bring background knowledge to print while reading and writing. Readers respond to print as they compose meaning from the text while writers get response as they compose meaning into the text. Readers and writers use language structure to predict and to satisfy expectations of meaning. Furthermore, readers read and writers write with purpose and audience in mind (Butler, 1987). Children use reading to write. Writers read to discover their

thoughts, to search for unanswered questions, to enjoy the sound of language they construct, to find gaps in their work, to evaluate, to edit, and to share their work (Calkins, 1983).

Frank Smith (1983) says "To learn to write, children must read in a special kind of way" (p. 558). Just as children learn to speak by listening and learning from what they overhear, they learn to write from what they read. Children learn to read like a writer when they engage with the author in what he/she is writing. As a result, the language processes interact and support each other and writing will develop along with fluency in other aspects of language (Smith, 1983).

Dialogue With Inner Audiences

Language symbolizes concepts which the mind must apply to stored experience. While engaging in the reading process, the reader creates a dialogue with him/herself. A reader may dialogue with the experiential self, connecting past experience and other literature works with the work being read. The reader may dialogue with an author by considering the motive for writing the piece, the source of the work, and the writer's approach to the composition process (Graves, 1983; Hansen, 1987; Moffet, 1983). As students are given opportunities to relate familiar concepts to new ideas, they can develop in-depth meanings and more thoughtful reading strategies (Murray, 1982).

As students proceed through a work, they should be given opportunities to dialogue with peers and supportive adults about observations and connections that are made with that work. Collaborative ideas and suggestions of other works and authors can assist in extending comprehension abilities and thoughtful reading. Teachers can help students in developing an interest in dialoguing with the inner selves by encouraging them to ask questions for which they believe there are no questions and then giving them an opportunity to determine answers and new questions (Murray, 1982). Experiences with engaging in inner dialogues can assist students in filling in the gaps of their understandings and in generating their own questions (Calkins, 1984).

Reading Across the Curriculum

Reading as well as the other aspects of language (listening, speaking, and writing) can be integrated into the units of the content areas. A unit or theme can be extended through literature experiences from the different genres and also different works representing the same theme or literary element (Huck, 1987). Extending a theme or unit through literature experiences can provide students opportunities to choose activities that will result in productive studies (Goodman, 1986). Within a theme or unit, students can extend

their understandings and also can find meaningful reasons and ways to express themselves.

Friendship: A Thematic Unit

The writer engaged in the process of developing the literature base and related expressive activities for a thematic unit on friendship for presentation to a sixth grade reading class in a departmentalized middle school. This unit demonstrates components that are related to the development of a literature-based unit. The theme of friendship was chosen because middle school students focus much of their energy in developing their personal identity which involves the observation of and trying on of many selves. At this time of developing self-awareness, friendships are especially important (Elkind, 1984).

The students in this class are characterized as at-risk and are scheduled into the class on the basis of low performance in the basal reader and on an achievement test. Many of these students come from dysfunctional homes and have marginal parental support which is characterized by insufficient amounts of rest and poor nutrition and by limited parental support for achieving at school.

Project Goals

The goals for the project were:

1. A literature-based program will support the extension of the whole language concept into instruction.
2. Quality literature experiences representative of all genres will be presented to encourage personal-social development and to develop an understanding of language.
3. Students will make use of the natural connections between the language processes (comprehension and composition) to strengthen their thinking-language abilities.
4. Student ownership of language experiences will be nurtured through self-selection of materials in a rich learning environment that presents the different literature genres and a whole array of alternatives for expression of ideas and feelings.
5. Students will be given extended periods of time to plan and to carry out their learning experiences.
6. Students will read for pleasure and to extend the study of themes and concepts.
7. Students will use oral and written language in purposeful and functional ways.

8. The assessment of students' progress in gaining language ability will focus on their involvement in the language processes. It will be ongoing and descriptive and in partnership with the teacher.

Unit Preparation

The unit on friendship was developed by searching for books that focused on the theme of friendship and also satisfied the interests of these sixth graders who were emerging adolescents. These literature activities and related works were selected.

Reading Aloud

The book chosen for the reading aloud experience was A Wrinkle in Time, by Madeline L'Engle (New York: Dell, 1973). The theme of this modern fantasy work is good overcomes evil through love. It examines friendships built around problem solving.

Discussion

Three realistic fiction works were selected for in-depth discussion. Beverly Cleary's Dear Mr. Henshaw (New York: Morrow, 1983) portrays a boy who learns while corresponding with an author that writing can assist him in coping with an absent father. The book The Incredible Journey, by Sheila Burnford, (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1961) examines the friendship of three animals--a siamese cat, a bull terrier, and a labrador retriever--as they take a long journey in order to reach home.

The work Bridge to Terabethia, by Katherine Paterson, (New York: Crowell, 1977) is about individuality, an emerging friendship between a boy and a girl and then the loss of this friendship through death.

Each student can choose one of these books to read and then discuss with others without a planned list of questions composed by the teacher. In allowing students to own their reading experiences, the responses are not always what adults would anticipate.

Learning Centers

Centers can be used to extend the theme by offering students meaningful comprehension and related expressive activities and opportunities to select their language activity. Some centers have a sustaining function in that they are maintained throughout the whole school year providing a secure consistent learning environment (Harms & Lettow, unpublished). Other centers are developed to support the specific theme.

Sustaining Centers

These sustaining centers support the theme of friendship.

Listening/reading center. This center presents works of different genres with the theme of friendship and is accompanied by teacher-prepared cassette tapes. It includes two picture books--Miss Maggie, by Cynthia Rylant, illustrated by Thomas DiGrazia, (New York: Dutton, 1983) and The Seeing Stick, by

Jane Yolen, illustrated by Remy Charlip & Demetris Maraslis, (New York: Crowell, 1977) and the full length modern fantasy Abel's Island, by William Steig, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1976). These works which contain poems on friendship are also included in this center:

Adoff, A. (1982). All the Colors of the Race. illus. J. Steptoe. New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard.

DeRegniers, B. S. (1986). A Week in the Life of Best Friends and Other Poems of Friendship. illus. N. Doyle. New York: Atheneum.

Grimes, N. (1978). Something on My Mind. illus. T. Feelings. New York: Dial.

Kuskin, K. (1980). Dogs and Dragons, Trees and Dreams. New York: Harper & Row.

Livingston, M. C. (1985). Worlds I Know and Other Poems. illus. T. Arnold. New York: Atheneum.

Author/illustrator center. The author/illustrator center can assist students in becoming familiar with how the lives of authors/illustrators influence their compositions and illustrations and how they become involved in the writing/graphic arts processes. During the friendship unit, Cynthia Rylant is the featured author. The center contains photographs of her, biographical information, comments she has made about writing, and several works.

Rylant, Cynthia. (1987). Children of Christmas. illus. S. D. Schindler. New York: Orchard Books.

_____. (1985). Every Living Thing. illus. S. D. Schindler. New York: Bradbury Press.

_____. (1986). A Fine White Dust. New York: Bradbury Press.

_____. (1983). Miss Maggie. illus. T. DiGrazia. New York: Dutton.

_____. (1985). The Relatives Came. illus. S. Gammell. New York: Bradbury Press.

_____. (1984). Waiting to Waltz. illus. S. Gammell. New York: Bradbury Press.

_____. (1982). When I Was Young in the Mountains. illus. D. Goode. New York: Dutton.

These activities were suggested.

1. Make a bookmark, book jacket, or poster of your favorite book.

2. Write a letter to the author or one of the characters.

3. Write questions from one of the books and play trivia.

Bookmaking center. The bookmaking center includes instructions and bookmaking materials for students to construct books for their compositions. This center also includes ideas for book design such as various formats, illuminated letters, and borders.

Taping center. The taping center includes a cassette recorder and tapes so that students can tape their compositions or their reading of a favorite poem or book. Students may want to tape dialogues and reader's theatre.

Centers Specific to the Friendship Unit

These centers are developed specifically for the unit on friendship.

1. Center: Guess Who My Favorite Person Is?

   Literature Experience

   Listen to/read Guess Who My Favorite Person Is, by Byrd Baylor, illustrated by R. A. Parker, (New York: Scribner, 1977).

   Expressive Activity

   a. Play the game by using the topic cards.

   b. Add topics to the game.

   c. You might want to make a book of your ideas.

2. Center: Special Friends

   Literature Experience

   Read The Man Who Lived Alone, by D. Hall, illustrated by M. Azarian, (Boston: David R. Godine, 1984) and Miss Maggie, by Cynthia Rylant, illustrated by T. DiGrazia, (New York: Dutton, 1983).

   Expressive Activity

   a. The Man Who Lived Alone and Miss Maggie are

unusual friends. Write and/or draw about some of the things that made them special and unique.

b. Do you know someone that is special? You may want to write and illustrate a story about their life.

3. Center: Giftgiving

Literature Experience

Read The Mother's Day Mice, by Eve Bunting, illustrated by J. Brett, (New York: Clarion, 1986); A Chair for My Mother, by Vera Williams, (New York: Greenwillow, 1982); and Music, Music for Everyone, by Vera Williams, (New York: Greenwillow, 1984).

Expressive Activity

a. Think of something someone has recently done for you. You might want to write them a thank-you note.

b. Think of things you could do for a friend or loved one. Make friendship coupons representing gifts of friendship. For example, a coupon might read, "This coupon is good for one bike ride."

4. Center: Special Gifts

Literature Experience

Listen to/read from this list of simple biographies of people with special gifts.

Bell, W. (1981). Saxophone Boy. New York: Tundra.

DePaola, T. (1988). The Art Lesson. New York: Putnam.

Fritz, J. (1980). Where Do You Think You're Going, Christopher Columbus? illus. by M. Tomes. New York: Putnam.

Fritz, J. (1977). The Double Life of Pocahontas, illus. by E. Young. New York: Putnam.

Provensen, A., & M. Provensen. (1984). Leonardo Da Vinci. New York: Viking Kestrel.

Stanley, D., & P. Vennema (1988). Shaka: King of the Zulus, illus. by D. Stanley. New York: Morrow.

Stanley, D. (1986). Peter the Great. New York: Four Winds.

Expressive Activity

Write a story about someone with a special gift.

5. Center: Friendships

Literature Experience

Read/listen to Honey, I Love, by Eloise Greenfield, illus. by L. & D. Dillon. (New York: Crowell, 1972).

Expressive Activity

List things you enjoy doing with your friends and relatives. You might want to write a poem or make a poster representing your poem.

6. Center: Family Friends

Literature Experience

Read Like Jake and Me, by Mavis Jukes, illus. by L. Bloom, (New York: Knopf, 1984) and We Be Warm Till

Springtime Comes, by Lillie D. Chaffin, illus. by L. Bloom, (New York: Macmillan, 1980).

Expressive Activity

Think about a special time you have had with a family member. Write and/or illustrate a story about this special time.

7. Center: Best Friends

Literature Experience

Read A Week in the Life of Best Friends, by Beatrice Schenk de Regniers, illustrated by N. Doyle, (New York: Atheneum, 1986).

Expressive Activity

Plan to keep a diary for a week about your life with a best friend.

8. Center: Party Time

Literature Experience

Read/listen to When the Sky is like Lace, by Elinor Lander Horwitz, illustrated by B. Cooney, (New York: Lippincott, 1975).

Expressive Activity

Think about and plan an imaginary or real party you would like to have with your friends.

9. Center: Giving Advice

Literature Experience

Read It Could Always Be Worse, by Margot Zemach, (Toronto: McGraw Hill, 1976).

Expressive Activity

Tell about who you would like to go to for advice.

10. Center: Secret Places

Literature Experience

Listen to/read the picture books Everybody Needs a Rock, by Byrd Baylor, illustrated by P. Parnall, (New York: Charles Scribner & Sons, 1974); Your Own Best Secret Place, by Arnold Adoff, illustrated by R. Himler, (New York: Dutton, 1978); and Under the Early Morning Trees, by Arnold Adoff, illustrated by R. Himler, (New York: Dutton, 1978).

Expressive Activity

Where do you like to go with your friends? Think about a secret place you would like to take your friend. You might want to draw a map or illustrate your secret place.

11. Center: My Friends

Literature Experience

Read Spin a Soft Black Song, by Nikki Giovanni, illustrated by G. Martins, (New York: Hill & Wang, 1971).

Expressive Activity

Tell about making friends. You might want to write about and/or illustrate the moment you met your best friend.

Evaluation

Student evaluation in a reading program reflecting the whole language concept needs to be changed. Assessment of student progress in a literature-based program needs to reflect the goals of that program. The program described in this paper focused on students' involvement in the language processes. As a result, assessment tools are chosen to record their goals and their involvement in the reading process. Assessment tools that can be effective are anecdotal records, records from teacher-student conferences, student-kept records, and student publications.

Anecdotal records about student reading and writing experiences can be used to collect information during observations that focus on a student's material and topic selection, time spent in reading and writing, text reconstruction, and interaction with peers.

During teacher-student conferences, the teacher can become a monitor and receiver of developmental information as students focus on meaning and clarity. Student information can be used to help learners build self-awareness and confidence. Peer

interaction and conferencing can help students take on helping roles and receive feedback on their reading and writing.

Students' self-evaluation can encourage them to set goals for their involvement in the language processes. Their recorded lists can include things they knew they had accomplished, things they wanted to learn, and ideas for future inquiry. Tapes of oral reading and portfolios of self-selected work can reflect what students know and what students need to learn. The publishing of student writing can contribute to writing development as it provides a variety of audiences for feedback, evidence of progress, and opportunities to work with mechanical conventions.

Evaluative tools that more closely reflect students as thoughtful language users enable students to acquire language abilities that will enhance their chances of becoming lifelong readers and writers.

Conclusion

As the students in this project are given experiences with quality literature and expressive activities, they can find relevance, enjoyment, and power in reading. As the instructional goals change from teacher-directed learning to student-directed learning, the classroom experiences can become more positive and in line with children's interests. They can become excited about language and their learning

experiences. Giving children opportunities to make their own choices about reading materials and expressive experiences can help them to develop deeper meaning and more pleasure out of reading. Freedom to direct their own learning through dialogues with inner audiences can give them confidence and a desire to become lifelong learners. Ongoing peer support groups provide readers and writers with feedback that fosters language knowledge.

In developing a literature-based reading program, the teacher becomes a learner-researcher who looks for ways to nurture students' emerging literacy. The teacher in extending the whole language concept in the school program models the functions of language by taking part in the comprehension and composition processes. The teacher by continuing to become familiar with quality children's books can assist in meeting the students' needs and in enriching the school's offerings. To encourage children to own their language experiences thus creating meaning, teachers need to encourage risktaking, to listen carefully to students' responses, and to ask supportive questions.

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