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Extending the literature base of a language arts classroom using the theme of survival

Mary A. Rosburg
University of Northern Iowa

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Abstract

The general public in the United States recently has expressed much concern about low literacy levels. Many Americans have not developed language abilities that afford successful functioning as adults. Current data support this concern : Approximately one out of ten adults cannot read well enough to fill out tax forms, read a menu, or heed warning labels on medicine bottles. Surveys suggest that at least 50 percent of the unemployed lack basic reading and writing skills to secure a job (Cornett, Blankenship, 1990).

EXTENDING THE LITERATURE BASE OF A LANGUAGE ARTS CLASSROOM USING THE THEME OF SURVIVAL

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Mary A. Rosburg

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Jeanne McLain Harms

4/28/92
Date Approved

Director of Research Paper

Jeanne McLain Harms

4/28/92
Date Approved

Graduate Faculty Advisor

Ned Ratekin

4/28/92
Date Approved

Graduate Faculty Reader

Peggy Ishler

4/28/92
Date Approved

Head, Department of Curriculum and Instruction

The general public in the United States recently has expressed much concern about low literacy levels. Many Americans have not developed language abilities that afford successful functioning as adults. Current data support this concern: Approximately one out of ten adults cannot read well enough to fill out tax forms, read a menu, or heed warning labels on medicine bottles. Surveys suggest that at least 50 percent of the unemployed lack basic reading and writing skills to secure a job (Cornett, Blankenship, 1990).

The public does not seem to recognize that schools have tried focusing on skills, yet many students have not found success in this type of program. This approach to language instruction which emphasizes reading and writing as a group of skills to be acquired has not prepared students to find fulfillment in the contemporary culture.

In the reply to the concern for literacy, schools have begun reconsidering language arts instructional programs in view of the studies on the nature of language and emerging literacy rather than continuing to emphasize traditional methods that are not effective. This current trend in instruction is known as "whole language." The whole language concept draws upon theoretical formulations that are rooted in research from linguistics, language development, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, anthropology, and education. Therefore, the whole language

concept focuses on the development of thinking-language abilities as the result of learners' involvement in the language processes.

Implementing this concept into a language arts instructional program entails many aspects, one of which is extending the literature base through themes, concepts, and units. An extensive literature base provides students with many opportunities to create meaning while engaged in the language processes. Within the framework of a whole unit of language, as a literature work, readers can engage in the language tasks that support thinking. Students who are involved in a print-rich environment have many opportunities to read daily in order to experience the functions of language. Their selection of quality works in the different genres gives them a sense of ownership for their language activity; therefore, they are more energized to become involved in learning (Harms & Lettow, 1986). This approach is in contrast to teachers assigning students the next story to read in the basal reader which may offer literature selections of mediocre quality and of questionable meaning to the student.

Purpose of the Paper

This paper explores the process of extending the whole language concept through a literature-based thematic unit. In developing a unit for students in grade six, who are at the threshold of adolescence, the theme of survival has been selected. This theme appeals to this age group's interest in

adventure and resolve of conflict. Through opportunities to read and to discuss survival stories in which the central character initiates the action that leads to the resolve of the conflict, young adolescents can develop personal-social abilities as well as thinking-language abilities. They can begin to understand that their actions can affect their destiny.

A review of professional literature will be presented to support extending the whole language concept through a thematic unit.

Support for Extending the Whole Language Concept Through a Thematic Unit

From reviewing professional literature on the whole language concept, it can be concluded that in developing language instructional programs the nature of language and how it is learned needs to be considered. Some of these guiding principles appear simple. For example, in order to learn to read, students must do a great deal of reading over a long period of time. People learn to read by reading (Smith, 1983). Therefore, schools in nurturing literacy need to focus on students engaged in the process rather than on skills teaching which fragments the whole.

In extending the whole language concept into the instructional program, the relationship between the learners and their instructional context, or surroundings, is considered

important to their success in school (Halliday, 1975). Language development is related to social interaction and stimulation (Vygotsky, 1978). While students are using language, they are learning language through involvement in the comprehension and composition processes (Halliday, 1975). Involvement in the processes is recursive, not linear. The reader moves back and forth from one aspect to another in the process of creating meaning (Goodman, 1986).

Incorporating quality literature experiences into an instructional program extends the whole language concept by providing structures in which students can engage in the thinking-language processes. Quality literature experiences not only provide models of language but offer natural invitations to respond. Students can relate their prior knowledge to the reading experience and can share the ideas and feelings generated in the process with others (Huck, Hepler, & Hickman, 1987; Smith, 1983).

Implementing the whole language concept into the middle school language arts program accommodates the needs of students on this level, for they desire activity and movement rather than sitting passively. Teachers in this type of instructional program can take the ideas that students generate and then assist them in setting further goals and connecting their prior knowledge with new experiences. The thematic approach facilitates these

connections in thinking-language abilities. Youngsters' abilities are extended through reading works with common themes, discussing ideas generated with others, and using these ideas in composition experiences (Huck, Hepler, & Hickman, 1987). As a result, reading and writing are not viewed as ends in themselves, but as processes by which students can create their own meaning and can extend their language abilities (Graves, 1983).

This approach to a language arts program empowers both the learner and the teacher. Ownership of an idea or an experience by those engaged in the language processes is an important element of motivation. When students' input into class activity is valued, students develop a commitment to school life because they have invested their ideas, energies, and time (Harms & Lettow, 1986). The teacher's role is to collaborate with students in owning their language experiences by creating a learning environment that is print-rich and by providing many opportunities to use ideas gained from reading (Smith, 1983).

In order to offer effective support to students while they are engaged in the functions of language, teachers need to extend their own knowledge of literature collaborating with the library media specialist. Services from this area can greatly assist teachers in providing print-rich learning environments. A library media specialist can supply knowledge of literature

related to themes and also provide references for selecting literature (Butler & Turbill, 1987).

Other ways teachers can support students' emerging literacy is through reading aloud and by modeling the reading and language processes (Butler & Turbill, 1987). By reading aloud to students, teachers can establish a sense of identification with their students (Graves, 1983). Teachers can provide models of language as well as nurture an appreciation of quality literature (Trelease, 1990).

In the next section of the paper, the thematic unit of survival is presented.

A Literature-Based Thematic Unit: Survival

In this section, these aspects related to extending the literature base of an instructional program are discussed: the goals of the program, the literature interests related to the developmental characteristics of young adolescents, the criteria for selecting quality realistic fiction and historical fiction, the reference tools used for the selection of works, the literature base, an annotated list of survival stories, and the assessment of students' responses.

Goals of the Unit

In planning this thematic unit, the goals of the school language arts program were considered. The instructional

experiences developed in the unit have potential for fulfilling these goals:

1. The students will be able to create their own meaning through whole units of quality literature.

2. The students will have an opportunity to extend their comprehension abilities and knowledge of human existence through reading and discussing many volumes associated with a theme.

3. Time will be provided for the students to make comprehension-composition connections. They will have opportunities to engage in a whole array of related expressive activity associated with their reading experiences.

4. The students with the support of peers and the teacher can extend their understanding of fine writing through reading and discussing the quality works associated with the theme and then incorporating aspects of these models into their composition activity.

5. Through reading and discussing the works related to this specific theme, the students will have the opportunity to develop personal-social abilities.

6. The students' progress in this unit will be assessed through qualitative techniques.

Developmental Characteristics of Emerging Adolescents

The developmental characteristics of preadolescent youth influence their responses to literature experiences and need to

be considered in planning an instructional program. In selecting works for the theme of survival, these characteristics were considered: Emerging adolescents are searching for their own identity and autonomy and are engaging in activities to test their abilities. They relate to survival stories as they seek independence from adult authority.

Students in this age group identify strongly with their peer group; therefore, characters with conflicts similar to theirs are appealing. Their ability to understand another point of view allows them to get inside characters, empathizing with them and demanding justice for them. Also their sense of time allows them to more fully understand story settings distant from their own and the conflicts played out in them. Therefore, aspects of historical fiction are more completely understood.

Criteria for Selecting Quality

In this unit, works from the genres of realistic fiction and historical fiction were chosen. Realistic fiction presents contemporary conflicts that the audience can interact with, plots that are possible but not necessarily plausible, and themes that present hope (Lukens, 1986).

Historical fiction presents stories with settings in the past (World War II and beyond in the past). The conflicts related to these settings can also be timeless. The details of the plot must adhere to strict standards of authenticity. As in

realistic fiction, characters and their actions must evolve with features that the audience can find believable. The themes usually represent human universals, allowing emerging adolescents to identify with the work (Huck, Hepler, & Hickman, 1987).

References for Book Selection

In selecting works for this theme study, several types of references were used: the index Best Books for Children; Preschool Through the Middle Grades, edited by J. T. Gillespie and C. B. Gilbert (1985); the text Children's Literature in the Elementary School, by C. Huck, S. Hepler, and J. Hickman (1961 and 1987); and review sources Book Review Digest, School Library Journal, and The Horn Book Magazine. Also the headings of survival, courage, and determination were used in searching for volumes in the card catalog.

An annotated list of materials selected for the unit is presented in the Appendix.

Literature Base

The unit is based on two works which are Call It Courage, by Armstrong Sperry, and Hatchet, by Gary Paulsen. Each student is to select one to read and then discuss in a small group of peers of four to five students, selected by the teacher. These two works were chosen because they are models of quality literature. One goal for discussion of these two books is to

recognize the elements of a survival story. These elements are frequently found in youth survival stories:

1. The main character is a child or youth, or a small group of youngsters without adults.

2. The situations call for personal resourcefulness on the part of the character(s), quick thinking and strength.

3. The survivors return to civilization or their former lives knowing they have been changed as a result of their experience.

4. The main characters frequently are dissatisfied with their lives at the beginning of the story but learn to cope and appreciate what they do have in life (Huck, Hepler, & Hickman, 1987).

In order to support the activity of the small groups but yet allowing choice, these suggestions for discussion and expressive activity are given and are based on literary strengths.

Realistic Fiction Work: Call It Courage

Literary Strengths

Characterization

Presentation of the boy character "Mafatu" at the beginning of the book through his throughts and the speech of other members of the tribe

Result of character's experiences

Plot

Meaning of Mafatu's various tests:

Decision to leave

Swamping of boat

Stealing the spear

Killing the shark

Killing the wild pig

Diving for his knife

Final escape

Rising climax

Similarity of beginning and ending paragraphs of the book

Symbols

Uri, the dog = love and faithfulness

Kivi, the crippled albatross = hope

Personal Response

Hidden fears of one's own

Feelings of rejection from a group

Experiences involving tests of physical courage

Values Clarification

Responses taking the greatest courage:

Admit a wrong or mistake

Take a stand against a popular belief

Stand up for one's own rights

Aspirations and reasons for becoming involved in work:

A mountain climber

A policeman

An astronaut

A surgeon

A politician

An emergency medical technician

Expressive Activity

Art

Make a model of Mafatu's boat

Create a diorama of the Marae, or the sacred place; or choose one of Mafatu's seven tests of courage and show what was involved in that test

Create a mural of the story

Drama

Dramatize the different groups talking about Mafatu at the beginning of the work

Select one of Mafatu's seven tests of courage and dramatize what happened in that incident

Dramatize Mafatu's homecoming and show how his family and friends reacted to him

Realistic Fiction Work: Hatchet

Literary Strengths

Characterization

Based on the first chapter, viewpoints of Brian and his mother regarding their relationship with each other, and Brian's viewpoint of his parents

Brian's view of himself at the end of the adventure

Brian's feelings about his parents' divorce at the end of the book compared to those at the beginning of it

Plot

Challenges which Brian faces in order to survive:

Finding food to eat

Dealing with attacks of a porcupine, a bear, and mosquitoes

Surviving a tornado which destroys his shelter

Finding courage to swim underwater to locate the survival kit in the submerged airplane

Imagery

Burning eyes, seeping tears = depth of Brian's feelings about the divorce

Stench of body gas, eyes rolled back into his head, a jolt like a hammerblow = severity of pilot's heart attack

Swarming hordes of mosquitoes that flocked to his body, clogging his nostrils, pouring into his mouth; Brian slapping and crushing them by dozens = viciousness of

mosquito attacks

Greasy, oily taste, his throat throwing it back up,

his whole body convulsing = eating turtle eggs

Personal Response

Hidden fears of your own

Decisions made alone

Experiences you have had with a tornado

Compare and contrast the book with the videotape A Cry in the Wild, which is based on Hatchet

Encounters you have had with wild animals

Values Clarification

Responses taking the greatest courage:

Admit a wrong or mistake

Take a stand against a popular belief

Stand up for your rights

Aspirations and reasons for becoming involved in work:

A mountain climber

A policeman

An astronaut

A surgeon

A politician

An emergency medical technician

Expressive Activities

Art

Make a model/diorama of the island on which Brian lived

Make a mobile of the plane and items which were important to Brian's survival

Drama

Write and conduct a radio drama of the plane crash

Dramatize the finding of Brian on the beach

These centers developed in the classroom support the study of the two major works and further reading and expressive activity.

Reading Center

Other books on the theme of survival are also recommended for students to read. Once students have done additional reading, they may choose to share it with others. Representative works for inclusion in this center are annotated in the Appendix.

Ways to Share a Book Center

This center is a reference of ways to share a book (Harms & Lettow, 1992).

1. Write an advertisement for a favorite book. You may wish to illustrate it. This promotional statement can be read aloud to the other students in the class or over the intercom system to the whole school.

2. Make a bookmark which includes a drawing of a character or a quote from the book along with the title of the book and author.

3. Make a crossword puzzle using some of the ideas from the survival stories.

4. Keep a diary from the point of view of a character.

5. Make a diorama of a part of the story with the setting and its characters.

6. Retell a story through a filmstrip. Draw pictures of the important parts of the story on strips of paper slightly narrower than the depth of a shoe box. The projector for the filmstrip can be made out of a shoe box.

7. Create a board game about survival.

8. Make a map of a story. Include the setting of the story, and place the events of the story on it.

9. Conduct a readers' theater by asking classmates to help read the dialogue from a part of a book. The reading could be presented to other classmates or taped for a listening experience.

10. Investigate biographies of the life of a person who has shown much courage. Present your information either in a report or through a poster and an oral report.

11. Write a story about a time in which you had to display courage.

Author Center

This center provides information about authors through folders and displays. For this thematic unit, these authors of contemporary survival stories, Gary Paulsen and Jean Craighead George are featured. Many of their works are displayed through book jackets.

Bookmaking Center

In this center, students can find ideas and materials for bookmaking. After students have read and discussed works within a thematic unit, their responses may lead to a manuscript that is encased in a book.

Assessment of Students' Responses

Evaluation of this unit is centered around three components: Reading and writing rubrics that can be translated into letter grades and a portfolio that includes student work samples compiled in conjunction with student-teacher conferences (Routman, 1991).

The reading rubric includes responses to self-selected reading and in-class reading from the student's reading folder and participation in discussion and related activities. Each item will be rated as consistent or inconsistent along with written comments.

1. Reads and understands independent reading at home.
2. Completes daily reading log and list of books read in reading folder.
3. Completes assigned reading on time.
4. Completes literature response journal on time and to the best of ability.
5. Contributes thoughtful comments to literature group discussion.
6. Refers to journal in discussion and uses text of books read to support statements.
7. Listens attentively and responds to peer comments in discussion.
8. Completes literature-related activities and assignments to best of ability.
9. Takes good care of books.

The writing rubric as the reading rubric includes several areas of response including samples of a student's writing and participation in peer workshop. The items on the checklist are marked as the reading rubric.

1. Able to write a coherent draft.
2. Willingly takes suggestions from peers and teacher.
3. Able to give constructive feedback to a peer's draft.
4. Attempts to incorporate colorful language.
5. Takes responsibility for revising.

6. Proofreads for spelling or incomplete sentences.

7. Adheres to writing deadlines.

8. Keeps writing folder organized and up-to-date.

9. Takes meaningful notes.

10. Incorporates and seeks out multiple references in content areas.

At the bottom of each of these reports, a space is allowed for a final grade. The grade is based on this scale:

A=consistent for all areas (9 out of 10)

B=consistent for most areas (8 out of 10)

C=consistent for many areas (7 out of 10)

D=consistent for some areas (6 out of 10)

F=inconsistent for many areas (5 or less out of 10)

When grades are reported to parents without a conference, a written narrative will be given to explain the grade and the student's progress as well as the goals established by the teacher and the student. When grades are given with a parent-teacher conference, the student's portfolio can be shared as a means of explaining progress that has been made by the student.

Summary

This thematic unit provides a student-centered learning environment that is positive and nonthreatening, one in which students can find their abilities. The activities offered are

appropriate for many different levels of reading ability as well as varying interests. Students are given opportunities to choose activities through which they can create meaning. Student ownership for decisions concerning what to read and which activity to undertake provides motivation for reading, thus extending language abilities as well as personal-social development. The teacher serves as a guide and a model in this classroom.

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Appendix

Annotated Bibliography

Claussen, M. (Producer) (1991). A cry in the wild. Oblath, C. (Editor). Paulsen, G., & Cyran, C. (Screenplay) [videotape]. Concorde.

This videotape is based on the novel Hatchet, which was written by Gary Paulsen. The author helped with the screenplay to make the video follow the book closely. It is ninety minutes in length.

Cleaver, V., & Cleaver, W. (1969). Where the lilies bloom. New York: Harper.

Mary Call is a fourteen-year-old girl who lives in the Appalachian Mountains. After the death of her father, Roy Luther, she faces struggles in keeping her three siblings alive through winter without the authorities discovering that they are alone. With a maturity beyond her age, she faces the threat of their possible separation and the problems of staying warm and alive.

George, J. C. (1972). Julie of the wolves. New York: Harper.

Miyax is a thirteen-year-old Eskimo girl who escapes out onto the tundra from the boy she is promised in marriage. Lost and without food, Arctic wolves accept her and make her a part of the pack. When she is found by her tribe, she has come to

realize that her future will never be easy because she has chosen to live in two cultures.

Hautzig, E. (1968). The endless steppe: growing up in Siberia. New York: Harper.

The author recounts what it was like to grow up in a slave labor camp after the Russians shipped her Jewish family to Siberia during World War II. She learns to deal with poverty and privation but finds hope in severe surroundings.

Holman, F. (1974). Slake's limbo. New York: Scribners.

Slake is a thirteen-year-old nearsighted orphan who lives with his aunt in New York City. He escapes the abuse of his peers by taking refuge for 121 days in the subway. He earns money by selling recycled newspapers and sweeping up at a lunch counter. His home is destroyed by a subway crew and eventually his ill health takes him to a hospital, where he receives nourishment and eyeglasses.

Houston, J. (1977). Frozen fire. New York: Atheneum.

The story is based on an actual survival story of a boy in the Canadian Arctic. Matthew Morgan and his Inuit friend, Kayak, set forth on a snowmobile to search for Matthew's prospector father, whose plane has been downed by a snowstorm. They become stranded seventy miles from Frobisher Bay, but Kayak uses skills taught him by his grandfather to enable them to walk out on the ice, where they are seen and rescued.

Lowry, L. (1989). Number the stars. New York: Crowell.

Ten-year-old Annemarie Johansen, a Jewish girl, living in Copenhagen, is rescued from the Nazis by the family of her friend. They make the claim that she is their daughter by showing photographs of a deceased child. Annemarie becomes a part of the smuggling operation which took Jews to safety in Sweden under the guise of fishing industry.

Mayhar, A. (1985). Medicine walk. New York: Atheneum.

After their plane crashed in the Arizona desert and his father dies, twelve-year-old Burr Henderson treks through the desert with little food or water, recalling survival skills taught to him by an Apache foreman on his father's ranch. When the boy stumbles upon an Apache in the desert, the Apache explains that his journey was not a bad experience, but a "Medicine Walk" --the Apache rite of adolescence.

Mazer, H. (1973). Snowbound. New York: Dell.

Two teenagers, Tony and Cindy, snowbound in the windswept plateau called Tug Hill in New York State, are forced to spend eleven days trying to survive the cold, wild dogs, and no food.

Milton, H. H. (1979). Mayday! mayday! New York: Franklin Watts, Inc.

Eleven-year-old Allison Parker finds that she and her friend, Mark Brasfield, are the only passengers capable of searching for help after their plane crashed on a mountainside in Alabama.

Their trip down Oak Mountain is hampered by their own injuries and the threat of a wild dog pack. Knowing that the survival of four helpless passengers depends on them strengthens their resolve to complete their mission and to endure the hardships.

Paulsen, G. (1987). Hatchet. New York: Bradbury Press.

Thirteen-year-old Brian Robeson is alone with a pilot headed for the Canadian wilderness, when the pilot has a heart attack and the plane crashes. Brian has only his mother's gift, a hatchet, to help him survive the challenges of nature. As Brian grows in ability to live in the wilderness, he also grows emotionally in dealing with his parents' divorce.

Paulsen, G. (1988). The voyage of the frog. New York: Bradbury Press.

Fourteen-year-old David Alspeth sails in a twenty-two foot sloop, the Frog, into the Pacific, beyond the sight of land, to scatter his late Uncle Owen's ashes. When a storm arises, David must rely upon sailing skills, which his uncle taught him, to endure. He draws on his inner strength to survive loneliness, fear, physical pain, and hardship.

Sperry, A. (1940). Call it courage. illus. by author. New York: Macmillan.

Mafatu sails to another island to conquer his fear of the sea. He successfully faces many kinds of tests.