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Extending the literature base of a Basal reading program

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Abstract

This paper will present a rationale for extending the literature base of a reading program that is mandated to be centered on a basal reader series and will discuss ways to implement literature experiences through an example unit.

Extending the Literature Base of a Basal Reading Program

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Most schools in the United States are centering their entire reading curriculum around a basal reader series (Goodman, 1986). Basals are seen by some as being an effective means for teaching word recognition and phonic skills. They offer a program that reinforces these skills through the use of drills, worksheets, and workbooks (Farris, 1989; Laughlin & Swisher, 1990).

Because of this focus on skills, many children have lost their ownership of the reading process and the enjoyment of reading. To nurture children's emerging literacy, some teachers who are required to keep the basal reading series are taking steps to extend the literature base through quality works representative of the different genres.

Purpose

This paper will present a rationale for extending the literature base of a reading program that is mandated to be centered on a basal reader series and will discuss ways to implement literature experiences through an example unit.

Review of Professional Literature

To develop a basis for decision-making in the process of extending the literature base of an established basal reader program, the professional literature concerning the whole language concept and its implications for instructional development will be reviewed.

Nature of Language and Emerging Literacy

In recent years, implementing the whole language concept into school language arts programs has become a major trend in instructional development. This instructional concept focuses on the nature of language and how children learn language.

Children have tremendous potential and capabilities for language learning. They acquire language easily when they are young without concern for the complexity of language structures. Children use language as a social system for creating meaning through actual use. Language arts programs that are implementing the whole language concept reflect this understanding of emerging literacy (Cambourne, 1988; Edelsky, 1991).

Creating meaning through the language processes is the purpose of language. Therefore, children involved in the language functions that relate closely to their purposes experience language learning as natural and meaningful (Goodman, 1986). Language learning is best achieved through direct experience. It is the learner's purposes that should drive learning and fuel the language arts curriculum (Edelsky, 1991).

The Whole Language Concept Incorporated Into the Instructional Program

Basing reading programs on the whole language concept has gradually been strengthened over the last twenty years by

research in language and learning, thus offering a theoretical basis for such programs (Edelsky, 1991).

Whole language is a concept, not a curriculum. It combines "recent knowledge about literacy development with a more progressive, child-centered approach to education." (Goodman, 1986, p. 25). The whole language concept applied to the teaching of reading views reading as a process, rather than a product. The child is an active learner who reads for meaning (Gamberg, Kwak, Hutchings, & Altheim, 1988). This concept can be extended throughout the instructional program in many ways (Edelsky, 1991; Bergeron, 1990).

Ownership. While traditional basal reader series offer instruction in skills, they fall short in nurturing reading for pleasure and information (Varnon, 1990). One of the benefits of a learning environment that reflects the whole language concept is that children are encouraged to select and explore books of their own choosing. This ownership of the reading process takes into account a reader's background experiences, their interests, their stage of cognitive development, and their purpose for reading. By selecting books of their own choosing, children are allowed to create meaning within their own framework of social and intellectual development (Harms & Lettow, 1986).

Literature base. The whole language movement has brought to the forefront the value of children's literature in the

development of children as readers. Charlotte Huck defines literature as "the imaginative shaping of life and thought into the forms and structures of language" (Huck, 1989, p. 4).

Literature provides natural, whole units of language in which students are able to organize thoughts and feelings. Interactions with many types of literature allow children to expand their language and enhance their cognitive development. The different genres in literature offer models of language and provide varying structures for meaning (Goodman, 1986; Huck, 1989).

The experience of literature is two-dimensional because it involves interaction between the book and its audience (Huck, 1989). Literature provides personal satisfaction while it widens a child's world and allows for the development of insights (Hickman & Cullinan, 1989). Literature allows meaning to dominate and focuses on the development of readers rather than the development of skills (Holdaway, 1979). It also prepares children to read by helping them build a sense of story that allows them to predict and adjust experiences (Hickman & Cullinan, 1989).

Extending the literature base of a reading program provides a broader base of reading materials. By reading a wide variety of quality literature each day, children are able to develop the fluency necessary to become good readers (Huck, 1989).

Learning environment. The learning environment is an important factor in extending the whole language concept in the school program. The environment can provide content for children and gives them the opportunity to choose and act within the learning environment (Harms & Lettow, 1992).

The organization of an environment that reflects the concept of whole language is based on two beliefs. First, language is learned through use (Halliday, 1973). Second, a comfortable, reliable setting supports the well-being of children (Maslow, 1970).

Structure can be provided through the use of sustaining centers. Sustaining centers are those that remain in the classroom the entire year. The content of these centers change as units are introduced, but the format remains the same (Harms & Lettow, 1992).

The teacher has an important role in creating a classroom environment that allows children to take ownership of their reading experience and to use and to share ideas gained from reading (Smith, 1983). A teacher can use many strategies to free children in the classroom environment to explore and to discover language through reading. Some of these strategies include encouraging children to choose the type of literature they want to read, allowing students the opportunity to select the purpose for reading, and deciding how to share ideas gained

from the reading experience. These ideas can be shared through retelling, discussion, and expressive activity (Harms & Lettow, 1992).

Scheduling. In order for the literature-based learning environment to be successful, adequate time must be provided for the students to engage in the language processes (Butler & Turbill, 1984). A teacher can eliminate seatwork and support emerging abilities by offering the time to read and then to become involved in related expressive activity (Cambourne, 1988).

Incorporating a daily literature period into the schedule in which the teacher reads aloud to children is one of the best ways to interest children in books. By reading aloud, positive feelings towards reading are generated as well as vocabulary is increased, models of the natural flow and rhythm of language are presented, and a sense of story is developed (Huck et al., 1987).

A time should also be set aside each day for students to read. Children must have ample time to read books of their own choosing. This time can be adjusted depending on the age and abilities of the class. Students who are not yet able to read independently may listen to stories on tape (Harms & Lettow, 1992).

In promoting literacy, it is important to provide opportunities for students to share ideas generated from the

reading experience through discussion and expressive activity. When students are given the opportunity to respond to books through discussion, writing, art, drama, and music, their experiences with books can become more memorable and more in-depth. This activity time allows students to make choices, use their language abilities, and to learn from peers. Children can reflect on their own work and can respond to the work of their classmates. Also from these experiences, the teacher can gain valuable insight into children's cognitive skills (Cambourne, 1988; Huck, 1989).

A Literature-Based Unit: Growing and Changing

Based on the review of professional literature, a literature-based unit on "Growing and Changing" was developed for grade three. The themes inherent in this unit were growing up, changing, and memories.

The literature base was extended through experiences from the different genres and many opportunities to engage in related expressive activity. Many of these literature experiences and related expressive activities were provided through learning centers that greatly facilitated a rich learning environment. Two types of centers were part of the unit--sustaining centers and centers specific to the unit of study.

Introduction of Unit

As an introduction to the unit of growing and changing, a bulletin board was constructed with school pictures of the students during kindergarten and ones recently taken in third grade. From this viewing experience, children compared and contrasted the characteristics of both age groups and concluded that with growth comes change.

Sustaining Centers

Reading/listening center. This center contained examples of realistic literature in picture book form that show children growing up yesterday and today and demonstrate how people young and old change. The picture books selected for this center were based on the themes of growing and changing, memories, grandparents, and the elderly and young people.

Growing and Changing

What's Matter, Sylvie, Can't You Ride?, by Karen Born Anderson (Dial, 1981).

Airmail to the Moon, by Tom Birdseye (Holiday House, 1988).

Jessica, by Kevin Henkes (Greenwillow, 1989).

Geraldine's Blanket, by Holly Keller (Greenwillow, 1986).

Expressive Activity

1. Choose one of the experiences from the books that remind you of how you have grown.

2. Choose one of the books to read aloud to a kindergarten child. Practice reading to one of your classmates before you go to the kindergarten room.

Memories

The Patchwork Quilt, by Valerie Flournoy (Dial, 1985).

Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge, by Mem Fox (Kane/Miller, 1985).

The Relatives Came, by Cynthia Rylant (Bradbury, 1985).

Owl Moon, by Jane Yolen (Philomel, 1987).

Grandparents

Song and Dance Man, by Karen Ackerman (Knopf, 1988).

Georgia Music, by Helen V. Griffith (Greenwillow, 1986).

Coco Can't Wait, by Taro Gomi (Morrow, 1984).

Grandpa's Slide Show, by Deborah Gould (Lothrop, 1987).

The Elderly and Young People

The Wednesday Surprise, by Eve Bunting (Clarion, 1989).

Now One Foot, Now the Other, by Tomie de Paola (Putnam, 1980).

Shoes from Grandpa, by Mem Fox (Kane/Miller, 1989).

My Great-Aunt Arizona, by Gloria Houston (Harper, 1992).

Another section of the Listening/Reading Center focused on *folklore with motifs that changed form.*

The Enchanted Caribou, by Elizabeth Cleaver (Atheneum, 1985).

The Selkie Girl, by Susan Cooper (Atheneum, 1986).

The Seal Mother, by Mordicai Gerstein (Dial, 1986).

The Frog Princess, by Elizabeth Isele (Crowell, 1984).

The Crane Wife, by Sumiko Yagarva, trans. by Katherine Paterson (Morrow, 1981).

Poetry center. This center contained a collection of multiple copies of poems on changing and growing up. Poems were selected from these volumes.

The Way I Feel . . . Sometimes (Clarion, 1988), by Beatrice Schenk de Regniers.

Honey, I Love: And Other Poems (Harper, 1978), by Eloise Greenfield.

Nathaniel Talking (Black Butterfly, 1988), by Eloise Greenfield.

Remembering: and other poems (McElderry, 1990), by Myra Cohn Livingston.

Every Time I Climb a Tree (Little, Brown, 1979), by David McCord.

Under Your Feet (Four Winds, 1990), by Joanne Ryder.

Today is Saturday (Atheneum, 1969), by Zilpha Keatley Snyder.

Author/Illustrator center. This center can offer children the opportunity to become acquainted with authors and illustrators and to see how an author's writing is influenced by life experiences and how he/she engages in the writing processes. It contains biographical information on the author and selected works. The award-winning author Beverly Cleary was selected because her character, Ramona, has many experiences related to changing and growing up. Children noted how Ramona, her family, and friends changed as they grew.

Literature Experiences

Beezus and Ramona (Morrow, 1955).

Ramona the Brave (Morrow, 1976).

Ramona and Her Father (Morrow, 1977).

Ramona and Her Mother (Morrow, 1979).

Ramona the Pest (Morrow, 1968).

Ramona Quimby, Age 8 (Morrow, 1981).

Expressive Activity

With some of your classmates, create a time line representing the experiences of Ramona, her family, and friends. How do the characters change as they grow? You may want to illustrate your time line.

Expressive Activity

Make tin can stilts such as Ramona and Howie made in Ramona and Her Father. You will need two tin cans that are the

same size, two pieces of heavy twine, a large nail, and a hammer. Punch two holes on opposite sides near the top of each can. Pull the twine handle tightly. To use stilts, step on the cans while holding the twine.

Expressive Activity

In the book Ramona Quimby, Age 8, Ramona has many feelings related to starting school. Think about your first day of school. What memories do you have? Draw, write, or tell about your first day of school.

Interesting objects center. This center for the unit contained a collection of objects that helped the children recall memories and to explore growing up (Harms & Lettow, 1992).

Literature Experience

Listen to/read Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge, by Mem Fox (Kane/Miller, 1985).

Expressive Activity

Look in the basket. Which object is something from long ago, something warm, something that makes you cry, something that makes you laugh, and something that is as precious as gold?

Look at home for something to share. Write about the memory it brings to mind. Put it on the table to share with others.

This center also had a collection of articles to spark interest in the area of growing up. Some of the objects included dress up clothes such as suits, dresses, hats, handbags, briefcases, and jewelry.

Literature Experience

Listen to/read Someday, by Charlotte Zolotow (Harper & Row, 1965).

Expressive Activity

Think about experiences you want to happen in the future as you grow. Compose stories. You may want to do illustrations.

Expressive Activity

Dress up in clothes you could wear when you grow older. Dressing up may help you think of a story or an illustration to draw. You may want to make a poster showing how you will change.

Bookmaking center. This center encourages students to publish their writing. An expressive activity was suggested based on a book related to the theme of memories (Harms & Lettow, 1992).

Literature Experience

Listen to the story The Hundred Penny Box, by Sharon Bell Mathis.

Expressive Activity

Write the date of the year you were born on the image of a penny at the top of the first page of your life booklet. After asking your family about experiences during your first year of life, choose some to write about.

Centers Specific to the Themes

Center: Memories

Literature Experience

Listen to/read What Did You Leave Behind? by Alvin Tresselt (Lothrop, 1978).

Expressive Activity

Recall one of your interesting experiences. What do you remember seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, and smelling? Compose a story about your experience. You may want to illustrate your story.

Literature Experience

Listen to/read The Patchwork Quilt, by Valerie Flournoy (Dial Press, 1985).

Expressive Activity

Bring in a swatch of material from home. Is there a special memory related to your material? You may want to share your memory with your classmates.

Expressive Activity

Use a liquid embroidery pen to draw a special memory onto a piece of material. With the help of a grownup, this piece can be sewn into a pillow for the reading corner.

Center: Grandparents

Literature Experience

Read/listen to My Grandson Lew, by Charlotte Zolotow (Harper, 1974).

Expressive Activity

What are some of the stories that your grandparents have told you? Write or tell about some of these stories.

Literature Experience

Read/listen to The Best Present is Me, by Janet Wolf (Harper, 1984).

Expressive Activity

Make a card for your grandparents. Fold a piece of construction paper in half. Lightly draw a design on the front of the card with a pencil. Trace the design with glue. Sprinkle some dry jello over the glue. Shake off the excess jello onto a paper towel. Repeat with different colors of jello until the design is finished. When your card has dried thoroughly, add a ribbon and write a special message inside.

Literature Experience

Read/listen to Knots on a Counting Rope, by Bill Martin and John Archambault (Holt, 1987).

Expressive Activity

Interview a grandparent or an elderly friend. Ask this person to tell you about his or her life. Think of some questions you would like to ask before you meet with your friend. You may want to use a tape recorder to record the responses. Think of a way to share your interview with your classmates. You may want to write a story, draw a picture, or act out an event from your grandparent or friend's life.

Center: Parade

Literature Experience

Read/listen to Thump Thump Rat-A-Tat-Tat, by Gene Baer and illustrated by Lois Ehlert (Harper & Row, 1989).

Expressive Activity

Use some colored construction paper and pellon material to construct the main elements of the story. Cut geometric shapes from the construction paper and apply pellon material to the back of the shapes. Retell the story on flannelboard to your classmates.

Conclusion

Basal reader programs are the main source for instruction in the reading curricula across the United States. The recent focus on emerging literacy and the whole language concept has captured the attention of many educators who are still mandated to use the basal reader. Those involved in reading instruction are finding ways to enrich the learning environment by extending the literature base and offering opportunities for children to set their own goals and engage in the reading and language processes. This involvement with literature not only nurtures children's reading abilities, but allows them to grow as literate individuals who enjoy reading and choose to do so.

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