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ABSTRACT

Nursery rhymes and written phonics used in a meaningful context are valuable teaching methods which can be applied in a whole language classroom or in conjunction with a basal reading program. Because nursery rhymes are rooted in oral tradition they lend themselves to oral presentation. They provide forms for the oral beginnings of the best of linguistic skills. Children can easily memorize the rhymes and act them out for the class. The rhymes can then be written down and used as reading material for the students. A simple cut-and-paste activity can help children learn phonics. Each phoneme is named and defined as it is introduced. The children then look through magazines to find examples of the phoneme they just learned and explain what they see in the picture and how they hear the sound in the topic, and they can attach a name to their picture. The contributions are then collected and the entire class reviews the pictures and the corresponding phonemes. The materials used in these activities are at hand and are inexpensive. (RS)

Building Decoding and Comprehension Skills into Whole Language

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Building Decoding and Comprehension Skills into Whole Language

The two activities explained here are valuable word recognition and comprehension strategies whether they are used in whole language classrooms or in conjunction with established basal reading systems.

Both strategies were developed from a combination of knowledge of child development, trial and error, knowledge of what did and did not work in previous situations and frequent reference to published research. As a result, these teaching strategies are defensible both theoretically and practically.

The ideas presented here are not entirely new. The nursery rhymes preceded reading and writing as we know them and there have been several methodologies for teaching letter phonics since reading was first taught in America. Although we tend to discount what are considered old ways, they serve a purpose because we can look back and salvage what is useful even as we disregard what was not effective. What has been salvaged from old ways has been augmented and brought into line with the findings of cognitive psychology.

Nursery Rhymes in Kindergarten-Speech and Reading:

Nursery rhymes provide the content for a wide range of activities that enable beginning readers to gain control of print media. Norton (1983) states that, because words play such an important role in poetry, children gain an appreciation for the language through its study. They identify with the characters and situations in poems and, through this, gain insights into themselves. From the first day of school

our kindergarten children begin to learn the nursery rhymes. The objectives satisfied through introducing reading skills and story form in this way are:

- to make the children familiar with the heritage of good literature that contributes to Western culture in general and English literature in particular

- to enable the children to understand the concept of story

- to provide the children with the opportunity to acquire the graphophonemic skills necessary to becoming literate participants in an interesting, non-threatening situation

- to give the children the concept of separate words as these occur in written discourse

- to demonstrate the following conventions of writing: left to right; word forms and spacing; letters and sound patterns in words; and the concept that written words express meanings

The nursery rhymes are short, rhythmical and make sense as a story. That is to say, they have characters, a setting, action and discernable results. Children at this stage need story lines they can comprehend and tell as a unit to give them the concept of story. Refer to the rhymes as satires and the children attach recognizable characteristics to the characters.

In line with Scheffler's (1957) philosophy of economy, the nursery rhymes are economical of teacher time and effort, student time and effort, and subject matter. The nursery rhymes are direct and cognizable, products of years of selective use so they convey only the best of language and meaning. There is no excess language to confuse the young speaker.

Verbs are crisp and descriptive phrases are direct and clear. They represent the best and most elegant of English speech patterns, as clear and expressive today as they were in prehistory.

Because the nursery rhymes are rooted in oral tradition they lend themselves to oral presentation. They provide forms for the oral beginnings of the best of linguistic skills.

The procedures are simple and direct. First, teach the children to say the rhyme. It is impossible for children to learn to hold word forms in their minds if they can not hear and speak them clearly.

Say, "I'm going to tell a story and the name is Jack Be Nimble. Does anyone know what it means to be nimble?" Explain the words in the story so the children will understand what it is all about. Encourage them to use these words in their own sentences. If you display word lists for future reference, add the new words from the rhyme. According to Huck et al (1987), knowledge of the common nursery rhymes adds 400 words to a primary child's vocabulary.

When the children know the rhyme and are able to repeat it unaided, print it onto a chart to be "read". Try to print the chart as the children watch. You might show them how to write it on a piece of newsprint and later transfer it to oak tag so the children can say the words with the writer as they are printed. This can also be written on the chalkboard as the children tell the teacher what to write next.

Read the rhyme and ask the children to "read" it together. Do this by taking turns, the teacher's turn and the children's turn, then say it together.

After the children can say the rhyme easily from memory, show them how to act it out, taking turns. Sit in a circle on the floor, legs crossed, and give each child a turn to act as the others speak.

To further strengthen the children's facility with the oral rhyme, make a paper "costume" for each of the characters named in the rhyme. The children slip these on to designate who they are as they act out the story. This helps the children in the audience to attach names to the characters in the story.

Because the correspondence between letters and names is the first function of written letters a child learns thoroughly, seeing the names on the actors contributes to the children's ability to label. It helps them to learn well another set of spelling patterns within the context of a familiar role. Furthermore, the characters in the nursery rhymes are highly charged with meaning and their names are integral to the story so the naming function occurs in a setting the children fully understand.

Arrange the charts on the holder in the order they are learned, so they can be read and reread as often as time permits. If a rhyme is longer or contains larger words or obscure ideas, it may take more than one day to learn. As time goes on, children begin to associate words with sounds and remember words from rhyme to rhyme. This is the beginning of word recognition within an understood context.

The rhyme charts can form the first reading material the children use to learn words and sound patterns. As the children sit in a circle around the chart holder and read

and discuss the rhymes as the teacher points to the words. No one is required to learn all of the words but, gradually, the children learn the words at their individual paces. The children then take the pointer and read the rhyme to the other children. In this way they are starting to read from print based on what they know from their speech and dramatic activities. The little readers learn how print works in encoding familiar information.

The seatwork follow-up activities consist of drawing and writing. At this stage the children's writing consists of drawing pictures which often follow the discussions of the nursery rhymes. If the children have other ideas, these are accepted but the rhymes open up a fresh set of ideas for most of the children and, more often than not, they choose to explore these in their writing.

Beginning Written Phonics in Meaningful Contexts:

Start in a morning time slot by showing the children the beginning consonant to be taught that day. Follow the order demonstrated in the reading series you use or just assemble your own. For those who follow a phonics workbook the related pages can be used for homework. The children find the workbook very easy after completing this oral exercise. In whole language classrooms with no basal reader requirements, an order based on the ease of producing speech sounds, i.e. from the front to the back of the mouth, can be followed. The consonants, including the four digraphs, ch, th, sh and wh, should be included.

Tell the children the name of the letter and make sure they know its place in the alphabet. On the chalkboard, show

them the way it is printed in both lower and upper case letters. You might recite the alphabet or sing the alphabet song at this juncture.

This is an opportune time to include handwriting. Discuss the form of the letter under study for that particular day. Explain the production of the form of the letter. Tell the children whether it is an ascender of descender, and say it "goes above the line" or "goes below the line" before introducing the two technical terms if the information pertains to that particular letter. As the children learn the concepts, they begin to identify the letters in their writing as ascenders and descenders. While the children progress through the letter sounds, they become familiar with the terms. They notice the characteristics of the other letters and become familiar with the nuances of letter form very quickly.

For example, show the children that when they make the upper case letter A, they start at the top and draw a diagonal line to the lower left side and return to the top and draw a diagonal line to the lower right. Make the cross line from left to right at the middle. The children then practice writing the letter A in the air until they are able to do so easily.

Tracing the shapes in the air helps the children form a mental image of the letter form and provides kinesthetic reinforcement. They learn the order of motions used to print the letters. Extend this practice by having the children write on each other's backs with their fingers. The next step enables the children to learn the sound-symbol relationship in relation to their individual schemas. First, ask them if they know the sound the letter makes. Some will

know, some will be doubtful, and some will not know the letter sound correspondence at all. At this juncture, pronounce the phoneme carefully, making sure each class member can pronounce it correctly also. When each child can say the sound successfully, the whole class chants the sound so they become thoroughly familiar with its phonal attributes, how it is formed, and how it sounds when pronounced in their own mouths, heads and ears.

Next, make sure the children can separate this particular phoneme from the others when it occurs in words. To do this, have them say words that begin or end with sound being learned. They may suggest words that have the sound in the middle so accept that, too, making sure that the rest of the class knows where the sound occurs.

The students then look in old magazines for pictures in which they hear the sound in the name of the picture or a topic to which the picture pertains. At this juncture the children become very creative as to how they label their pictures and, as time goes on, more and more children learn to invent their own meanings for a picture so they don't have to look so long to find one that fills the requirement. This is the point at which labels become more than one word.

When the children have cut out the pictures they explain what <u>they</u> see in the picture and how <u>they</u> hear the sound in the topic or name they attach to their pictures. When each child has chosen a satisfactory picture, he or she gives it to the teacher for the day's collection and goes on to other pursuits. At this point, the teacher collects the pictures in an envelope until they can be put onto the chart.

Later in the day, resume the sound-symbol identification. Take each child's picture out of the envelope. The child who cut out the picture tells about it. He/she names the picture and explains how the letter fits into the name chosen. Because there are so many, do not take time to discuss the pictures in depth unless they are unusual but take the time to make sure everyone understands why the picture was chosen. Accept and explain the conceptual labels and the names of the objects as you glue the pictures onto the chart for the day while the children watch.

The procedure is as follows. First hold up the picture and ask, "Who cut this out for us?"

As the child whose picture it is raises his or her hand ask, "What did you cut out for us?"

The child tells the group what he/she sees in this particular picture that depicts the phoneme studied that day. Next, the child carefully pronounces the label, the word or the name for the concept, he/she sees in the picture.

While the child tells about the picture, glue it onto the chart. With a magic marker, slowly print the label under the picture. Ask the children to identify, name, and pronounce each letter as it is written. When the children have difficulty giving the sound, repeat the troublesome phoneme until they are able to identify and pronounce it.

When an unusual letter, a silent letter, or an unfamiliar phoneme appears, take time to explain it to the children. Some of these irregularities occur on successive days, and, if this happens, explain the sound as was done before. Understanding difficult phoneme/grapheme correspondences

requires time and repetition. Speaking helps the children become familiar with the idiosyncratic and advanced phonic skills that would not be introduced in the basal readers and workbooks that accompany them at that grade level. Because the children often make use of these sounds in their writing, they seldom go unlearned.

The advantages of this procedure may be listed as follows:

1. No child has his/her ideas called incorrect. What he understands and tells the class is accepted and explained. This enables him to go from what he understands to graphic information. In this way, children understand the place of the phoneme in the written lexicon on their own terms. Nothing is left to meaningless memorization.

2. If the sound is not spelled the way it is in the majority of the words being discussed as with i for long or short e, place these words in a separate corner of the chart. This grouping allows the children to learn that there are differing graphic forms for one phoneme.

3. The sound/symbol relationships and spelling patterns are reinforced and used in new contexts each day. This enables the children to transfer what they know to new and realistic reading and writing situations.

4. When a new phoneme is introduced, the children have the former charts to use as references. Those who have better developed auditory abilities look at the charts immediately and find the new sound in words they have already recorded whereas others are given the opportunity to wait for the lesson to confirm their knowledge. This keeps instruction at the growing edge of learning for the varied abilities found in one class.

5. The children have before them a vocabulary list of words exemplified in pictures that provide a ready reference as they write. The words and pictures on the charts displayed belong to the children and if one forgets he/she has only to ask another class member because each word or phrase displayed is one classmate's pride and joy.

6. The finished charts are displayed on lines hung just above the children's heads. They are proud of their efforts and often look at them and say the words and sounds just for the fun of it. The colorful charts are decorative as well as useful and the materials are relatively cost-free.

7. The charts provide the teacher with a ready record of what has been accomplished in phonics and spelling and the children with a handy "dictionary" to use in their daily writing. Best of all, the children enjoy making them.

Analysis

Neither the use of nursery rhymes nor the decision to teach through charts is new. Huck, Hepler and Hickman (1987) list several reasons why the familiar old nursery rhymes appeal to four and five-year old children as they do:

- their language patterns are varied and have an unmistakeable musical quality
- rhythm, rhyme and alliteration that please young ears
- they offer opportunities for active participation
- verses are short and easily memorized and can be chanted
- the narrative quality: they tell a good story
- quick and decisive action: not moralistic, but justice is swift and sure
- characters have interesting personalities, they are decidedly good or wicked - fat or thin

- appeal to children's interests - animals, pies, shoes, mice, clocks - all things children know or like to hear about

- often related simple, everyday experiences

- varied humor from animals and people in ridiculous situations

- pure nonsense and exaggeration

The efficiency with which verbal material can be recalled is directly related to the the extent to which it is meaningful (Psychology Today: An Introduction, 1970) and the nursery rhymes are invested with meaning. This quality combined with the strong rhythm and rhyme scheme make learning the verse easy enough to provide the children with a "built in" framework from which to begin learning the conventions of print.

A simple, cutting and pasting activity turns isolated phonemes into schema-based concepts. According to Woolfolk and McCune-Nicolich (1984), a concept is a set of defining attributes or distinctive features that cluster according to what a child already knows and provide a component of the learner's schemata. Schemata forms include four easily recognizable components of this lesson; (1) the name of the concept, (2) its definition, (3) distinctive attributes, and (4) examples and nonexamples.

The work of Eggan and Kauchak (1988), indicates that the children form useful patterns from what they learn and use these patterns to predict events in future experiences. This explains both the reason for and results of teaching phonics in the manner presented here. Teaching phonics consists of learning sequences of letter patterns that facilitate the prediction of words as printed content is scanned. When the

children in the phonics class discuss and sound their words and ideas phoneme by phoneme they are building up phonemic patterns.

As with concepts generally, this is accomplished through naming and defining each phoneme as it is introduced. Both of these activities are oral and the whole class participates. There is no time wasted while the action concentrates on one child or group. In this way the teacher is able to monitor the participation and understanding of the whole class daily.

After the children are sure of the sound taught they are directed to find their own examples of the concept as they look through the magazines for pictures. As they do this, they are compelled to make decisions incorporating the fourth attribute of concept definition. They must distinguish between non-examples and examples. A decided strength in this procedure is the variety of contexts presented in one session. Each is impromptu yet directly related to the concept under study. The definitions are distinctly the children's own ideas and not those prearranged in workbook or drill fashion.

As the children build up schemata around the sound elements they learn, the chart with the pictures provides a tangible record of their accomplishments. The array of pictures provides a sufficient variety of materials to prevent what Woolfolk and McCune-Nicolich (1984) call undergeneralization, the exclusion of ideas that should be part of the general definition held in the learner's mind.

Although each picture may not be directly related to the sound and, to the casual observer, may not appear to be

sound-symbol related the way the lesson is conducted ensures that all of the children are afforded opportunities to explain their picture choices. In every instance a variety of pictures and speaking opportunities attend each phoneme presented. Proponents of skill development term this procedure reinforcement whereas the cognitivists call it developing schemata.

On a day-to-day practical level, this procedure is enjoyable for the children and easily accomplished. It entails all aspects of the language arts including oral, auditory, and visual activity. The speaking and cutting provide a kinesthetic experience.

The materials used are at hand and inexpensive. They consist of chart paper and old magazines. Furthermore, for the purposes of primary classrooms, the products are published. Children can see and use the results of their efforts.

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