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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses ways that teachers have found to integrate curriculum and make it more meaningful to students. A review of the literature reveals that teachers are exploring ways to provide developmentally appropriate curriculum and opportunities for children to learn in a more natural setting. Three approaches are examined: whole language, literature-based curriculum, and the project approach. The whole language approach draws on scientific theory based on research in linguistics, education, and psycholinguistics as curriculum is planned and implemented. This approach emphasizes that literacy develops in response to personal and social needs and that children learn language skills in a social context rather than in isolation. Literature-based curriculum is a thematic approach using materials that are meaningful and relevant to the student. The advantages of using literature as the basis of an integrated curriculum are explored, along with methods of student evaluation. Finally, project approach, a method of integrating subjects and involving students in doing in-depth investigation of topics that interest them, is described in detail. Several specific examples are used to illustrate the project approach. allows The three approaches all are seen as enabling teachers to look at how children learn and illustrate that an integrated approach can be an effective and efficient way to teach that is meaningful, relevant, and interesting for teachers and students. (Contains 14 references.) (ND)

INTEGRATED APPROACHES TO LEARNING

DR. MERILEE ROSBERG

ABSTRACT

Classroom teachers are examining their own philosophy of teaching and how children learn. Questions about how to teach and what to teach are being asked. More teachers are exploring ways to provide developmentally appropriate curriculum and opportunities for children to learn in a more natural setting.

This presentation discusses ways that teachers have found to integrate curriculum and make it more relevant and meaningful. These approaches are not new, but they are being reexamined. Some of the practices that are being utilized are "Whole Language," "Literature-based Curriculum," and the "Project Approach." The author describes these approaches and gives examples regarding their effectiveness. The "Project Approach" is examined in detail.

INTEGRATED APPROACHES TO LEARNING
DR. MERILEE ROSBERG

In the past five to ten years there has been a great deal of critical discussion about integrating subjects across the curriculum. This is not a new method of teaching, but it is again being widely debated as practitioners look at different approaches to teaching and learning. Classroom teachers are beginning to look at their own philosophy of teaching and how children learn. Questions about how to teach and what to teach are being asked. Curriculum materials are being examined and rewritten and publishers are promoting new texts. There are several approaches that should be considered by educators.

WHOLE LANGUAGE

One approach that is being used and debated in several western countries is "whole language." "Whole language is a philosophy about language and learning. It's a way of thinking about children as language learners and about classrooms as communities of learners" (Moss, 1990, p. 40). Teachers and students are engaged in this process. Students are learning about language and teachers are exploring ways to support literacy. Whole language teachers draw on scientific theory based on research from linguists, educators and psycholinguists as they plan and implement curriculum (Goodman, 1986).

Children need to be given opportunities to use language and to make sense of written language. They learn from whole to part. When children first begin to talk they may use only one word, but this word represents a whole idea. The utterance "Up!"

means "Pick me up!" Young children speak when they are ready to talk; that is when it is important and meaningful to them. They don't learn language skills in isolation but in a social context.

One of the implications for teachers then is that they need to provide an environment where children are free to explore and to take risks. Children need opportunities to talk to adults and other children in non-threatening situations. They must hear various types of speech in formal and informal situations. Children need time and opportunities to put into practice what they have learned.

Whether teaching oral, written, or reading skills, the teacher's focus should be on the needs of the children. Literacy develops in response to personal and social needs. Language skills and strategies are built during functional and relevant language use. Studies have shown that children learn language best in a natural setting where they have opportunities to explore and experiment with language (Bain, Fitzgerald and Taylor, 1992; Fisher, 1991; and Goodman, 1986).

LITERATURE-BASED TEACHING

One excellent way to develop language skills is to use literature in the classroom. A literature-based programme provides materials that are meaningful and relevant to the students (Galda, Cullinan and Strickland, 1993). Children are able to make predictions because the stories are more natural. Literature facilitates reading because the stories make sense.

Themes can be developed using literature as the framework. In order to be effective, however, they must be meaningingful and

provide depth and breadth in learning. Information should be presented from multiple perspectives (Lipson, et al., 1993). Literature rather than a single textbook, allows students to read from a variety of genres and authors. Various points of view can be examined.

Themes have certain advantages. They tend to promote metacognitive awareness because there are more opportunities for reflection and cognitive linkages (Lipson, et al., 1993). Time is less fratmented and available in larger blocks, so the students can spend more time looking a topics in depth.

Intradisciplinary themes employ literature as the core or focus. They integrate across the language arts with linkages where appropriate to other areas (Norton, 1992). A thematic unit may entail the study of one author, one genre, or one topic.

Joan VonDros (1990) discusses the use of literature in an integrated curriculum. She states that using literature, drama, writing and art has become her curriculum. There are many avenues to teach the same objective and using literature units enables the teacher to plan activities and experiences to meet the needs and interests of the students. It also allows students to explore topics in depth whether they are studying about jungles or life in the sea. Informational books and stories can be used to make connections between history, math and science.

Huck (1990) talks about the power of literature to give us vicarious experiences, to make us more knowledgeable, to develop the imagination, and to transform us. Literature educates both

the heart and the mind. Research proves that children who read and are read to become better readers and also achieve better scores on reading tests.

Reading books by a particular author enables children to learn more about writing style. An excellent way to motivate students is to invite an author to visit. Children should spend time preparing for the visit to make it more meaningful. Books by the author should be read and discussed before the author's visit. Many illustrators of children's books are also willing to come and visit with children. Before the visit, examine illustrations and have children draw their own pictures after hearing a story. Have children think of questions that they want to ask the visitor. If it is not possible to schedule a visit, children may write letters to their favorite author or illustrator.

Through literature children learn more about the writing process. When the teacher and children discuss a piece of literature such as A Dark Dark Tale by Ruth Brown, they gain a better understanding of how authors use words to express ideas Bain & Taylor, 1992). Qustions regarding how the author uses words to make us feel happy, sad, or scared can help children as they begin to write their own stories. Literature expands vocabulary and extends children's ability to use language.

VonDros (1990) found that using literature had a profound effect on students' writing. Students began to make connections between what they were discussing in reading groups and writing

workshops. They compared styles of writing in books and examined their own style of writing. Their own writing began to improve as they expanded on ideas they discussed.

USING LITERATURE TO INTEGRATE THE CURRICULUM

Literature can make history come alive. Literature study groups can be set up with historical fiction and non-fiction books. Reading time and social studies time can be connected to enable students to study topics in more depth. If there is a social studies text, it can be used as an informational book, but stories and other books can be used to expand upon the topic.

This same idea can be applied to the science curriculum. The textbook can be used as another resource along with other informational books and children's literature. Williams (1988) has written some wonderful life cycle books such as "The Life Cycle of a Frog." In a study of amphibians, this book can be used to elicit interest and enthusiasm on this topic. Then the teacher can bring in tadpoles for observation. Students can observe and record observations of growth and development in their journals. They can even write and illustrate their own life cycle book. Literature becomes the base for planning curriculum.

Literature units can also be student initiated. This approach can be done on a limited basis to start. Once or twice during the year, teachers can provide students with a wide range of reading materials. Children then choose what they want to read. They are divided into small groups based on book choice.

Division could be by author, topic, genre, or specific book selections. If one group is reading books by the same author, they can meet to discuss the author's style, similarities and differences, plot, characters, etc. Another group might be reading fairy tales and could discuss format and different types of tales. They might also choose to write their own fairy tale and then share it with their group. Still another group of four or five children might choose to read the same book in order to discuss it in depth. This approach encourages children to take responsibility for their own reading.

Porter (1990) has students keep a journal to record their reactions, thoughts, ideas and questions when reading a book. She also requires them to publish one piece during each unit. The students choose one piece from their rough drafts and then meet with their peers and the teacher to get feedback. When the revisions are finished, the student and teacher edit the piece and a final copy is made. At the conclusion of the unit, students share their personal publications. Book sharing can be in the form of a story, poem, role play or video tape. The units enable children "to come together to create meaning as common experiences are shared" (Porter, 1990, 108).

Thematic teaching is not a panacea, but an opportunity. Teachers need to carefully select themes and materials that will help children to build a knowledge base. The learnings to be integrated must be worthwhile and the connections being made should be meaningful. The teacher will need to made

discriminating decisions as well as respond to the needs and ability levels of the students. It involves a great deal of teacher organization, but the value of this type of teaching can be very worthwhile and more enjoyable for the students and the teacher than following a single text.

STUDENT EVALUATION

Many teachers are concerned about how to evaluate children when teaching through literature. The teacher still keeps track of student progress through observations, conferences, student journals, and work done by students at the end of the unit. A checklist of skills can be developed by the teacher based on curriculum requirements. Specific skills such as writing complete sentences and using correct punctuation can be readily checked. Ability to make connections and predictions, to test hypotheses, and to relate to characters can be determined through individual and group conferences as well as through reading of the student's journal.

Porter (1990) solicits student comments about their progress. One student who didn't read much before stated that now he enjoys reading and wants to finish a book to find out what happens. Another says that the class no longer depends on the teacher to lead the disucssion because all of the students have thoughts on how the book fits together and questions about the characters and plot. Porter believes that positive attitudes can be developed through the use of good literature and allowing students to have a voice in what they read.

THE PROJECT APPROACH: AN EXAMPLE

Another way of integrating subjects and involving students is described by Katz and Chard (1993) in a text entitled Engaging children's minds: The project approach. Projects allow children to do in-depth investigations of topics that interest them. They usually last about two to four weeks and topics are related to places and events that are familiar and concrete to the children. Either the teacher or children can initiate a project, but the topic should stem from the children's interests.

In one classroom of six and seven year olds in the United States, the teacher chose the broad topic "People." Since this was the first project for the children, the teacher did some structuring. She read a book called People by Spier (1980). The text and accompanying illustrations show the similarities and differences of people from all over the world. After listening to the book, the children discussed types of food, housing, clothing, and physical characteristics of people from various cultures. After spending some time on this, they narrowed their focus and looked at their own classroom. They talked about number of girls and boys, hair coloring, color of eyes, favorite sports and TV programs and other similarities and differences. The teacher helped them to do diagrams such as pie charts, bar graphs, and Venn diagrams to compare and contrast physical characteristics. They also made charts to depict likes and dislikes. They wrote individual and group stories about the children in their class.

Next the children decided to explore their school and to interview other people in their building to find out more about them. They became very interested in the role of the custodians, the people who cleaned and maintained the school. The children wanted to know more about their job. There were two custodians, a male and a female, and they agreed to be interviewed about their job and what they liked or disliked about it. The children made a list of questions that they would ask and agreed on who would ask the questions. They taped the responses so they could use them later on in doing their work.

Several projects arose from this interview. Some children worked together to write a story about the job of the school's custodians. Others drew pictures depicting their work. Another group listed some facts and then made diagrams. They listed chores of the custodians and made a bar graph to depict how much time was spent per week on each chore. They made a comparison chart showing likes and dislikes. They also made a map of the school to show where the custodians worked.

Children involved in these activities were developing reading, writing, speaking and listening skills. Social studies and math activities were integrated with language arts. Children learned to cooperate and work together as they solved problems and made decisions.

After completing this group project, all of the children chose an individual project. The teacher still structured their activities by giving guidelines. All of the children were

required to do at lea st one piece of writing such as a story, a report, a poem or a skit. They also had to do a diagram to visually depict their topic. Then as a conclusion, they shared their work with their peers. This presentation could be in the form of an original song or poem, a story or report, or a skit or something that they have constructed.

One child, who chose to research frogs, wrote a detailed report on the life cycle of a frog. He also drew a chart showing this life cycle. During sharing time he recited a poem and demonstrated the movements of a frog. The teacher was able to evaluate his writing and speaking skills and to check his understanding of several scientific concepts. The other children in the class also benefited by seeing and hearing his presentation.

The project approach not only allows teachers to integrate curriculum but it enables them to attend to the whole child. The child is actively engaged in learning based on interests and needs. The child is developing physically, intellectually, socially and emotionally as he/she engages in activities with peers. Activities are meaningful and relevant to the child, so there is not a problem of motivation. Children learn from each other and expand their understanding of their world. This approach does involve more work and flexibility on the teacher's part, but it can be much more interesting and rewarding.

Katz and Chard (1993) admit that they do not have empirical evidence supporting this approach. Most evidence is from

satisfied teachers who have experimented with these ideas. It is suggested that teachers experiment with this approach and collect data to discover the benefits and/or drawbacks of this approach. So far comments and observations by teachers seem to indicate that it is an appropriate and successful way to work with children.

CONCLUSION

Teaching skills through an integrated curriculum seems to be an effective and efficient way t o work with children. In the area of language arts, reading, writing, speaking, and listening are all interrelated. If these areas are integrated, there will be more time and opportunities for children to practice these skills. "Whole language" allows children to learn about language in a way that is relevant to their needs and interests.

Another method, the Literature-Based Approach, has proved to be an effective way to integrate curriculum. Literature can provide a framework for children to read, discuss stories, and to write their own stories. As teachers read to children and children have opportunities to read independently, vocabulary and comprehension increases and children become better readers.

Using good literature also allows teachers to integrate other curriculum areas such as math, science, and social studies. Teachers can develop units based on a selection of books on a certain topic. Children can learn to be researchers as they gather more information on a topic of interest. They discover that books can be meaningful and relevant as they read about

children who are experiencing some of the same problems that they have.

Teachers can also use a combination of trade books and a "hand-on" approach. The "Project Approach" encourages children to choose a topic to explore in detail. Children read books, interview people, do research, and engage in problem solving. While exploring a topic, children use math, reading, writing, and problem solving. They learn to cooperate and to work effectively with others.

All of the approaches described enable teachers to look at how children learn. Children learn in an integrated manner, not by compartmentalizing subjects into fifty minute periods. Integration makes sense. If done in an apporpirate manner, it is a more effective and efficient way to teach. It is also more meaningful, relevant, and interesting for the teacher and the student.

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