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## BLENDING WHOLE LANGUAGE AND BASAL READER INSTRUCTION

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In recent years there has been a movement in reading education away from basal readers as the primary tool for teaching beginning literacy skills. Whole language approaches; those which attempt to integrate reading, writing, listening, and speaking activities using the child's own language and various forms of children's literature, have seen a resurgence both in educational research and classroom practice. However, some educators feel that the enthusiasm for holistic methods may have already peaked and the movement could fade away as it has several times before in educational history. Reasons for the decline may be that many school administrators and teachers feel strongly about keeping basal readers in their classrooms, and feel they lack the kind of training necessary for venturing into the world of holistic teaching.

There seems to be little doubt regarding the viability of whole language programs in the elementary classroom, but the question remains, "how do we get teachers to begin integrating holistic methods in their classrooms?" A possible solution to the dilemma facing both administrators and teachers is an "integrated approach."

Integrated approaches to reading instruction combine aspects of whole language and direct instruction methods to introduce children to literacy in the classroom. In essence, these approaches are based on the assumption

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that emerging literacy can be nurtured initially in a holistic and natural manner (see Gunderson & Shapiro, 1988) as a prelude to the introduction to commercial reading materials. It is further assumed that the basal reader may be used in innovative ways (Burns and others, 1988; Cooter and Reutzel, 1987; Reutzel, 1986) to promote a variety of literacy experiences. While the notion of integrated approaches has been discussed for many years, there has been little research that observes and documents their existence in classrooms.

The Chetopa, Kansas, program described in this article successfully integrates many holistic and direct instruction ideas presented in bits and pieces for the past few years in various professional journals. We will discuss our observations in these classrooms, both the relative benefits and concerns associated with programs of this kind.

Chetopa is a rural school district in Southeastern Kansas. Data will reflect the development of literacy skills for first grade students in Chetopa over the first three years of implementation. Many of the materials and unit plans were developed in the first two years, as the teachers moved away from the basal reader as the exclusive reading program.

The keystone of this program is immersing children in print. From the first day of school, students find themselves actively involved with motivational creative writing activities, reading quality predictable children's literature, listening to exciting stories, learning to read and write new words from their natural experiences, and learning or reviewing alphabet letters and their sounds. These activities and many more are woven together during the first 26 days of school by focusing on a daily letter theme.

The stage is set for ensuring success with basal and other commercially published materials. Each day as they enter the room, they find themselves immersed in a whole-day theme related to a single letter of the alphabet. Whole group instruction and small heterogeneous groups are used during the entire first grade. Letters of the alphabet are seen as the catalyst for a variety of beginning literacy experiences. For example,

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on "J" day instruction begins with a class introduction to the letter theme by viewing a collage made up of pictures representing words beginning with "J". The discussion is followed by the teacher's reading a predictable book which used the word "jump" as the key word for "J".

Figure 1 J Book

(Adapted from Sounds of Language, by Bill Martin, Jr.)

Jump a rope.	Jump like a frog.
Jump in a puddle.	Jump for the basketball.
Jump over a rock.	Jump for the baseball.
Jump on a trampoline.	Jump for ice cream
Jump on a bed? Oh, no!	Jump like a spider.
Jump like a kangaroo.	Jump for joy!

These teacher-developed predictable books are then reread with the class. Multiple copies of the books are available for children to take home to be shared with family members. Each book is constructed in the shape of a familiar object related to the letter sound. The letter-theme books are written in easy-to-predict patterns--expanding sentences, rhyming lines, or adaptations of familiar songs. Although most of the books used in the program were either original or adapted from existing trade books, a list of predictable books can be found in many publishers' brochures.

Following the predictable book experiences, the students engage in a variety of writing activities. These include structured language experience stories pertaining to the letter theme, handwriting practice with the "J" letter in upper and lower case forms, and creative writing experiences, like writing a "story" about how to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Vocabulary words found in the basal preprimers which begin with the daily letter are introduced in context and written on index cards, which are added to each child's word bank and reviewed daily in class and at home with family members.

The teachers find that first graders gain a great

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deal through the writing component. Because invented spellings are encouraged, children quickly learn about beginning, medial, and final sounds in words. Thus, phonic knowledge begins naturally and intuitively.

Throughout the remainder of the day students meet a variety of literacy events consistent with the daily letter-theme. These include sustained silent reading periods with books having to do with the theme, listening center activities, art projects, cooking experiences and computer assisted instruction.

This basic format continues until all letters have been highlighted. At the end of the first six weeks, each child has read 26 books, learned the words included in the first three preprimers, acquired basic handwriting skills including the formation of all letters (upper and lower case), developed a basic understanding of beginning, medial, and ending sounds in words, mastered most basic concepts about print, and something about authoring.

One of the strengths of this integrated program is its blending of student-driven and teacher-directed experiences. Throughout the day students are allowed to make choices about books they will read, stories they can write about, and topics they can discuss and investigate. Likewise, teachers are provided time for leading the class to discover crucial concepts, vocabulary, and literacy skills for success in texts and trade books.

### Bringing in the Basal

At the conclusion of the 26 letter-theme days and for the remainder of the school year, the basal is integrated into the program. Basal stories are viewed as only one literacy experience within a larger theme of study. For instance, if a basal preprimer is written around a circus motif; then writing experiences, supplemental materials (audio/visual aids, etc.), bulletin boards, computer assisted instruction packages, are pulled together in a thematic unit about circuses. Thus, the basal preprimer is secondary and serves only as a thematic departure point for a variety of other literacy experiences. Once the pupils are placed into the basal materials they move through the preprimers rapidly. By the end of the first semester the first graders are

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usually one full book ahead of traditional basal-only classes. More important, they have acquired zeal and enthusiasm for reading and authoring. One teacher remarked "These children believe they can read anything!"

In essence, the Chetopa teachers use the basal reader as one small piece of an otherwise holistic literacy program. For example, the teachers used what amounted to the Reconciled Reading Lesson (Reutzell, 1985) when presenting basal stories. When queried, the teachers indicated they had not hear of this procedure, but used the pattern only because it made sense and students responded to the basal stories more favorably. Similarly, the teachers felt free to eliminate stories in the basal when they seemed to mundane and unappealing. The success of the Chetopa program seems to validate the notion that when teachers are free to select their own programs and materials, student performance levels increase dramatically (Veatch and Cooter, 1986).

Table 1  
Chetopa First Graders' Average Percentile Rank

<u>Yr</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Listening</u>	<u>Word Analysis</u>	<u>Vocabulary</u>	<u>Reading</u>
'83*	25	28	60	51	49
'84	25	52	51	51	59
'85	26	82	73	77	79
'86	31	n/a	77	65	73

\* Before integrated program was initiated

### Learning Outcomes

A careful review of student performance in these first grade classrooms from 1983 to 1986 was conducted. This allowed examination of achievement levels prior to the beginning of the integrated program through full implementation. The information provides a quantitative look at the strength of the integrated approach as compared to a typical basal program. Table 1 gives average percentile for all first graders, using the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (1986). While the figures represent impressive and significant gains with the integrated approach, many qualitative aspects of experimental pro-

grams often escape the statistical component of a study, and the Chetopa program is no exception. Major benefits of the integrated approach are:

--Teaching Versatility

There are at least two groups of teachers who benefit from the integrated approach; those who are "basal bound" and fearful of leaping into a holistic approach all at once, and those who understand holistic teaching methods but feel pressured by their school district to use basal readers as part of their program. For the "basal bound" group, an integrated approach allows one to develop literacy events which enhance what is already being done and gradually move on to more holistic experiences. Eventually the basal moves out of center stage and becomes only one part of an exciting new learning mosaic. Teachers who are more holistically inclined and are feeling pressured to use the adopted basal program will find the integrated approach to be a welcome ally. Simply "plug in" the basal stories to the existing program where they make sense, or use the basal themes to organize literacy events already planned.

--Naturalistic Skill Development

While some may feel that teaching skills is antithetical to whole language, others disagree (Gunderson & Shapiro, 1988). As we mentioned, many literacy skills are taught in an incidental fashion in the Chetopa program. Much of the credit seems to rest with the merging of writing with reading experiences from the first day of school. Random inspection of student work gives ample evidence of the rapid growth occurring through the writing component. This becomes a natural desire to express oneself in print and to read the thoughts of others, leading to natural acquisition of basic concepts about print necessary for success in commercially prepared and published materials.

--Parent Involvement

The Chetopa teachers initiate parent involvement prior to the beginning of school and continue to nurture this participation throughout the year. Parents understand that they are a critical factor in their child's educational success and respond accordingly. During the

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first 26 days parents commit to listening to their child read student copies of the letter-theme books each night, regularly reviewing word bank words with their child, reading aloud, and providing writing materials. Parents of first graders generally welcome such an opportunity.

--Student interest

Children involved with Chetopa's integrated program are "turned-on" learners. They are interested, excited and fearless authors and readers. In parent-teacher conferences the word used most by parents to describe their child's reaction to the program was "enthusiastic."

As someone has said "Every silver lining has its cloud" and this approach does suggest a few concerns.

--Time commitment

Most of the materials used in the Chetopa program are teacher-made. Thus, a substantial amount of time is required to make such items as the predictable books, bulletin boards, listening and writing centers, not to mention research time to locate theme-appropriate trade books for classroom use. For teachers with large room budgets, predictable books, big books and basal text extenders (trade books) may be purchased from some of the educational publishers, but for most teachers developing a solid integrated program like that in Chetopa will mean a two or three year process, if unsupported by the school district.

--Risk taking

Some teachers tend to get into "comfort zones" in their classrooms. What has worked reasonably well in the past tends to become a permanent fixture in a curriculum. Certainly basal readers have worked reasonably well in the past (or perhaps students have learned in spite of them). At any rate, those who feel comfortable using the basal are now presented with a viable option in the integrated approach. The key factor is the teacher and the question--can s/he muster sufficient courage to try?

More research is needed to determine whether the Chetopa integrated program can be replicated elsewhere with the same degree of effectiveness. Some whole language purists may feel this type of program is contrary

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to holistic and naturalistic modes of teaching. However, this may be a needed bridge for many basal bound teachers helping them establish more enriched classroom environments.

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