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A literature-based thematic unit for a multi-age classroom : friendship

Abstract

A literature-based thematic unit, friendship, has been developed for a multi-age classroom (grades three and four). This thematic unit can contribute to a major goal of a multi-age classroom: to provide students with a learning community in which they can find meaningful learning experiences, thus strengthening their personal-social and thinking-language abilities. The strands for the unit not only included friendship among peers, but also they extended the horizons of friendship to young children through mentoring, to peers at a distance through pen pals, and to the elderly through visitations to a retirement home.

In developing a print-rich learning environment for the unit, experiences with the different genres of literature and many options for related expressive activity were developed. Such a learning environment provides students with many opportunities to create meaning (Harms & Lettow, 1998; Langer, 1995; Routman, 1991).

A Literature-Based Thematic Unit for a Multi-Age Classroom:

Friendship

A Graduate Project

Submitted to the

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

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by

Leslie Baxter

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A literature-based thematic unit, friendship, has been developed for a multi-age classroom (grades three and four). This thematic unit can contribute to a major goal of a multi-age classroom: to provide students with a learning community in which they can find meaningful learning experiences, thus strengthening their personal-social and thinking-language abilities. The strands for the unit not only included friendship among peers, but also they extended the horizons of friendship to young children through mentoring, to peers at a distance through pen pals, and to the elderly through visitations to a retirement home. (Harms & Lettow, 1998)

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Rationale for Multi-Age Classroom

A multi-age classroom organization offers potential for focusing on individual children's learning. An instructional program in a multi-age classroom can be organized for continuous progress, not just steps or grades. Materials and activities are not dictated by a grade level (Surbeck, 1994). A multi-age organization can facilitate heterogeneous grouping with children of different ages and abilities working together with no distinction of grade level. Such a learning environment can promote a school community in which positive peer relationships and individual children's self-esteem can be promoted (Anderson & Pavan, 1993). Younger children can learn from older ones and vice versa in a multi-age classroom (Elkind, 1987). Young children can emulate older children's approach to learning while older children can experience the rewards of being role models for the younger children. Thus, children can learn to look out for each other and to respect differences (Katz, 1996).

When students are grouped in a heterogeneous learning environment that respects and values all students, both lower ability and high achieving students will benefit. Such a grouping can nurture children who excel and also those who are at-risk (Pavan, 1992). Teachers are able to be more flexible in planning programs for students with special needs, both accelerated and achievement delayed. Less danger of retention is present. Children's progress can be assessed by individual learning performances, not a graded norm (Pershing, 1993).

A Thematic Unit for a Reading Program in a Multi-Age Classroom: Friendship

The unit's focus is on creating meaning through the language processes, not through a series of skills lessons. Many literature experiences and related expressive activities were developed for this unit on friendship for children in grades three and four and can be presented through teacher-directed and student-initiated experiences to enhance heterogeneous grouping and individual student growth. The student-initiated experiences are presented for the most part in learning centers. With each strand of the friendship unit, two types of learning centers can be presented as options for student activity: sustaining centers are available throughout the school year, maintaining a secure, predictable learning environment. Their content can reflect the present study. Centers developed specifically for a unit can also be offered.

Because third and fourth graders are maturing in many ways, they are able to engage in activities that can extend their sense of community: peer group acceptance is emerging as an important social factor. Empathy for others and time and spatial concepts are becoming more sophisticated. Thus, these strands of the unit can be developed: friendships among classmates, friendships among younger students in the school, friendship among peers in another school, and friendships with the elderly.

Friendship Among Classmates

Teacher-Directed Activity

The teacher can foster fulfilling peer relations that result in emerging friendships through several heterogeneously grouped activities. The unit can be introduced by developing with the children a webbing that is ongoing as the unit progresses. These major features can be considered: What is a friend? How can we be a friend? How can we resolve a conflict with a friend? These questions can form the headings for a list of answers displayed on large sheets of paper. The ideas of the webbing can be extended as the read aloud experience of the full-length book of realism, The Sixth Grade Nickname Game (1998), by Gordon Korman (New York: Hyperion), is presented.

The teacher can support other discussion in conjunction with individual and small peer group reading that can contribute ideas to the webbing. To promote an exchange of ideas from reading experiences and the growth of group social abilities, the teacher can assign four to five children to each peer group that meets regularly. The discussion in these small groups can assist children in extending their interpretations of story. In the Sharing Time (a whole class activity), the teacher can guide children in explaining their selected activities in the learning centers and to receive feedback from other students.

After reading the picture book, Junk Pile! (1997), by Lady Borton and Kimberly Bulcken Roat, II. (New York: Philomel), the teacher can present the character elements -- the protagonist, and the antagonist -- and their conflict in a mini lesson. Then, how the dynamic protagonist's action leads to the resolution of the conflict, which is the theme, can be explained. This diagram can be presented on a chart:

Dynamic Character & Conflict _____ Action _____ Resolve

As children read stories with dynamic characters, they can create a diagram of the elements and place it on the chart.

Student-Initiated Activity

The sustaining centers and ones specific to this strand can offer many options for the study of friendship among peers.

Sustaining Centers

The sustaining centers -- listening/reading, poetry, and bookmaking -- can house much of the literature for this strand.

- Listening/Reading Center

In this center, picture books with accompanying teacher-made tapes and full-length volumes can be presented. A bibliography of picture books, full-length books, and poetry books are found in Appendix A.

- Poetry Center

Poetry books and a compilation of single poems can be presented in this center. The teacher and the students can make posters of selected poems to display. A booklet of poetry forms can serve as a reference for the students' poetry writing.

- Bookmaking Center

Directions and materials for making books as part of the publishing component of the writing process can be available for the students' use.

Centers Specific to the Strand

- Autograph Books

Literature Experience

The couplets from "It's Raining, Said John Twaining," (1973) coll. N.M. Bodecker (New York: Atheneum) can be used as a model.

Expressive Activity

Compose a couplet to share in other children's books.

The blank books can be constructed in the bookmaking center.

- Cinquain Poetry Center

- Literature Experience

- A description of a concept or a story about a word.

- Five Lines

- Line 1 1 word - the concept

- Line 2 2 words - Lines 2-4: a description or a story

- Line 3 3 words

- Line 4 4 words

- Line 5 1 word - a synonym or summarizing word

- Expressive Activity

Compose a cinquain about a fellow student with the first line left blank to form a riddle. A group flip book can be developed (see directions in the Bookmaking Center).

- Together Center

- Literature Experience

Read Roxaboxen (1991) by Alice McLerran, B. Cooney, Il. (New York: Lothrop) and The Relatives Came (1995) by Cynthia Rylant, Stephen Gammell, Il. (New York: Bradbury).

- Expressive Activity

Tell or write about an experience you have had with friends and relatives.

- Literature Experience

Read or listen to poems with more than one voice from Joyful Noise (1988) by Paul Fleischman, Eric Beddows, Il. (New York: Harper & Row).

- Expressive Activity

Read poems with more than one voice aloud with your classmates.

Friendship Among Younger Children

Younger children's development characteristics as seen in their responses need to be discussed with the third and fourth graders before they begin to mentor young children. Examples of books that will appeal to the particular age group of young children should be discussed. A bibliography of books that are available in the school library can be made available. Also, the teacher can develop packets of picture books in paperback form with accompanying flannelboard pieces, puppets, and other related ideas.

The teacher can demonstrate read aloud techniques for young children. The third and fourth graders also need to be shown how to take young children's dictation of their stories or how to help them with their spelling as they write.

Friendships Extended to Pen Pals

Teacher-Directed Activity

Pen pal activities are an energizing way to promote student writing abilities (Betzold & Dorotik, 1992). Children enjoy receiving and responding to personally addressed, written messages. Correspondence to pen pals is an opportunity to extend the functions of writing (Platt, 1993).

The teacher can arrange for a letter exchange with third and fourth graders of another school. An ongoing list of topics to discuss with pen pals can be developed on a chart for reference. Also, the form of the friendly letter can be displayed. As the letters are written, the members of the peer groups can collaborate in editing each others' letters for clarity of ideas and correctness of form.

Student-Initiated Activity

The students can establish an ongoing pen pal center. They can describe their pen pals and display their letters, photographs, and other exchanged items.

Friendship With the Elderly

Teacher-Directed Activity

Elderly citizens of the community are an untapped resource for information about community development and historical events. Students can learn first-hand about history from those who have lived it or have heard about it from those of previous generations (Biddle & Sears, 1991).

The teacher will find a site for the children to meet regularly with their assigned elderly friend. After the children have read books in the Listening/Reading Center, the teacher can conduct discussions about the continuum of responses that the elderly can give from the able to the infirm. Then, children can be guided to select appropriate activities to share with their specific elderly friend.

The teacher can present ways to develop oral histories with the elderly. Possible topics for these stories can be developed on a chart paper for display in the classroom. Examples of oral histories in the texts of picture books can be found in the Listening/Reading Center (see Appendix B).

Student-Initiated Activity

Sustaining Centers

These sustaining centers can offer support for the strand of friendship with the elderly: listening/reading, poetry, interesting objects, and bookmaking.

- Listening/Reading Center

Volumes on the topics of the elderly, memories, and oral history can be presented.

The bibliography of these works can be found in Appendix B.

- Poetry Center

The reference of poetry forms can be used in poem-making for the elderly friends.

- Interesting Objects

Based on Wilfred Gordon McDonald Partridge (1985) by Mem Fox, Julie Vivas,

II. (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Kane/Miller), the children can bring memorable articles for display. A written explanation can accompany them, or the articles can be presented orally in Sharing Time. The children can tape, transpose, and publish stories their elderly friends have told. The stories can be displayed in the Oral Histories Center.

- Bookmaking Centers

Books can be constructed for stories and poems to be shared with the elderly friends or for the stories told by their elderly friends.

Centers Specific to the Strand

- Gifts of Writing

Literature Experience

Read or listen to The Mother's Day Mice (1986), by Eve Bunting, Jan Brett, Il. (New York: Clarion).

Expressive Activity

Write a poem. Make a card and put your poem on the card. Give your card as a gift to your elderly friend.

Oral Histories

The stories of the elderly friends can be presented in this center.

Summary

Children in multi-age classrooms make strides in many ways: they make strides in achieving positive peer relationships, in improving their self-esteem, and in respecting the differences in others. Teachers are able to be flexible in planning and implementing programs based on needs rather than grade levels.

Implementing a literature-based thematic unit in a multi-age classroom has many benefits: Children in a print-rich environment with related expressive activities assists children in extending their personal-social and thinking-language abilities. Children are able to learn by creating meaning through the language processes.

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Appendix A

Literature for the Sustaining Centers for Friendship Among Classmates

Borton, L. (1997). Junk Pile!, K.B. Root, (Il.), New York: Philomel.

Gibbons, F. (1995). Night in the barn, E. Ingraham, (Il.), New York: Morrow.

Goffman, M. (1991). Amazing Grace, C. Birch, (Il.), New York: Dial.

Hru, D. (1996). The magic moonberry jump ropes, E.B. Lewis, (Il.), New York, Dial.

Hughes, M. (1996). A handful of seeds, L. Garay, (Il.), New York: Orchard.

Jackson, I. (1996). Somebody's new pajamas, D. Soman, (Il.), New York: Dial.

Johnston, T. (1998). Amber on the mountain, Robert Duncan, (Il.), New York: Puffin.

McDonald, M. (1992). The great pumpkin switch, T. Lewin, (Il.), New York: Orchard.

Mills, L. (1991). The rag coat. Boston: Little, Brown.

Pilkey, D. (1995). Hallo-wiener. New York: Scholastic.

Polacco, P. (1991). Appelmando's dream. New York: Putnam.

Full-Length

Byars, B. (1989). The Cybil war. New York: Viking.

Hurwitz, J. (1989). Aldo applesauce. New York: Demco Media.

Paterson, K. (1987). Bridge to Teribithia. New York: HarperCollins.

Sachs, M. (1969). The Bear's house. Philadelphia: Doubleday.

Sachs, M. (1968). Peter & Veronica, and Veronica gang. Philadelphia: Doubleday.

Zilpha, K. (1989). The Egypt game. New York: Atheneum.

Poetry Books

Adoff, A. (1997). Love letters, L. Pesimmi, (Il.), New York: Blue Sky.

Grimes, N. (1994). Meet Danitra Brown, F. Cooper, (Il.), New York: Lothrop.

Poems for Classroom Combination

DeRegniers, S. (1980). A week in the life of best friends.

Doyle. New York: Atheneum.

"I Wish"

Esbensen, B. (1995). Dance with me. New York: HarperCollins.

"Shadow Dancers"

Ciardi, J. (1975). Fast and slow. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

"On Being Too Right To Be Polite"

"What Johnny Told Me"

Greenfield, E. (1978). Honey, I love, L. & D. Dillon, (Il.), New York:

Crowell.

"Lessie"

"Moochie"

Greenfield, E. (1988). Nathaniel talking, J. Gilchrist, (Il.), New York: Black

Butterfly.

"Nine"

"Making Friends"

"Education"

Grimes, N. (1986). Something on my mind, T. Feeling, (Il.). New York: Dial.

"Outside"

Kuskin, K. (1980). Dogs and dragons, trees and dreams. New York: Harper &

Row.

"Catherine"

Livingston, M.C. (1994). Flights of fancy. New York: McElderry.

"Good Friends"

"Letter To A Pen Pal"

Livingston, M.C. (1976). I never told. New York: Atheneum.

"I Never Told"

Merriam, E. (1981). A word or two with you. New York: Atheneum.

"A Word Or Two With You"

"Secret Talk"

Merriam, E. (1985). Blackberry ink. New York: Morrow.

"How do You Make Pizza Grow?"

Moore, L. (1985). Go with the poem. New York: Atheneum.

"On Our Bikes", by Lilian Moore

"The New Kid", by Mike Makley

Appendix B

Literature for the Friendships with the Elderly

Elderly

Ackerman, K. (1988). Song and dance man, S. Stephen Gammell, (Il.), New York: Knopf.

Blos, J. (1987). Old Henry, S. Gammell, (Il.), New York: Morrow.

Cooney, B. (1982). Miss Rumphius. New York: Viking.

Garland, S. (1993). The lotus seed, T. Kiuch, (Il.), San Diego: Harcourt.

McDonald, M. (1991). The potato man, T. Lewin, (Il.), New York: Orchard.

Polacco, P. (1992). Chicken Sunday. New York: Philomel.

Polacco, P. (1992). Mrs. Katz and Tush. New York: Philomel.

San Souci, R. (1989). The talking eggs, J. Pinkney, (Il.), New York: Dial.

Sisulu, E. (1996). The day Gogo went to vote, S. Wilson, (Il.), Boston: Little, Brown.

Taha, K. (1986). A gift for Tia Rosa. New York: Dillon.

Yolen, J. (1997). Miz Berlin walks, F. Cooper, (Il.), New York: Philomel.

Memories

Houston, G. (1988). The year of the perfect Christmas tree, B. Cooney, (Il.), New York: Dial.

Livingston, M.C. (1989). Remembering. New York: McElderry.

Mathis, S.B. (1975). The hundred penny box, L. & D. Dillion, (Il.), New York: Viking.

McDonald, M. (1992). The great pumpkin switch, T. Lewin, (Il.), New York: Orchard.

McLerran, A. (1991). Roxaboxen, B. Cooney, (Il.), New York: Lothrop.

Ringgold, F. (1991). Tar beach. New York: Crown.

Ryder, J. (1994). My father's hand, M. Graham, (Il.), New York: Morrow.

Ryland, C. (1982). When I was young in the mountains, D. Goode, (Il.), New York: Dutton.

Oral Histories

Ackerman, K. (1988). Song and Dance Man, S. Gammell, (Il.), New York: Knopf.

Cooney, B. (1988). Island boy. New York: Viking.

Fox, M. (1985). Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge, J. Vivas, (Il.), New York: Miller/Kane.

Houston, G. (1987). The Year of the Perfect Christmas Tree, B. Cooney, (Il.), New York: Dial.

Martin, B. & Archambault (1987). Knots on a counting rope, T. Rand, (Il.), New York: Holt.

McDonald, M. (1991). The potato man, T. Lewin, (Il.), New York: Orchard.

McLerran, A. (1991). Roxaboxen, B. Barbara Cooney, (Il.), New York: Lothrop, Lee Shepard.

Polacco, P. (1991). Some birthday! New York: Simon & Schuster.

Polacco, P. (1989). Thundercake. New York: Philomel.