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Enhancing awareness of story structure through folk tales in a Chapter I reading program

Abstract

One means of implementing the whole language concept into a Chapter I reading program is providing quality literature experiences that are relevant to the students. Traditional basal texts and remedial materials often present reading as fragments of whole units of language and focus on arbitrary skill development (Goodman, 1987). Such texts give only a partial view of what reading is about and do not promote enjoyment of reading. Children, especially those who tend to be global learners, have difficulty relating to this material (Carbo, 1987).

Enhancing Awareness of Story Structure Through
Folk Tales in a Chapter I Reading Program

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One means of implementing the whole language concept into a Chapter I reading program is providing quality literature experiences that are relevant to the students. Traditional basal texts and remedial materials often present reading as fragments of whole units of language and focus on arbitrary skill development (Goodman, 1987). Such texts give only a partial view of what reading is about and do not promote enjoyment of reading. Children, especially those who tend to be global learners, have difficulty relating to this material (Carbo, 1987).

One literature genre, folklore, offers lively conflict that can engage children in relevant themes. These stories are enjoyed by children because they are good stories that offer new dimensions for their imaginations (Huck, Hepler, & Hickman, 1987; Yolen, 1981). Bettelheim (1976) believes that folk literature enriches children's lives by developing their intellect, clarifying their emotions, being attuned to their anxieties and aspirations, and giving full recognition to their difficulties while suggesting solutions to the problems that perturb them. Therefore, folk tales provide a magical atmosphere within which children can develop an awareness of language, an enjoyment of reading, and a better sense of themselves.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to examine the unique characteristics and functions of folk tales and, in particular,

to focus on the elements inherent in this genre that can nurture an awareness of story structure among low achieving and emergent readers. This paper will describe the nature of folk tales and their elements and will discuss the implementation of folk tales into a Chapter I classroom with students from grades one to five.

Nature of Folk Tales

In this section, folk tales will be defined and their elements discussed.

Definition of Folk Tales

Folk tales like other forms of folk literature are narrations that have been passed down from generation to generation in oral form, and finally, in recent times, have been recorded in written form. They do not have a known author (Huck et al., 1987).

Folk tales are allegories (Baker, 1981). Of folk tales, Yolen (1981) says, "the abstract truths of our common human existence are stated in symbolic or metaphoric terms" (p. 19). These symbolic stories represent the psychological need for cultures to search for competence and self worth (Baker, 1981; Bettelheim, 1976). Children accept without difficulty the many levels of meaning that are created by these allegories (Baker, 1981).

Folk tales are optimistic, imaginative, and predictable (Bettelheim, 1976; Bosma, 1992). For example, the small, the

young, and the poor succeed where others fail. Magic, limited by definite rules, comes to the aid of kind souls (Arbuthnot, 1961; Santino, 1991; Yolen, 1981). Good overcomes evil through simple virtues, resourcefulness, and sacrifice. Poetic justice is dispensed and a happy ending is the rule (Bettleheim, 1976; Huck et al., 1987; Norton, 1991; Yolen, 1981).

Huck et al. (1987) and Norton (1991) divide folk tales into six subcategories and describe them as follows:

(1) Cumulative tales consist of sequentially repeated images that grow and build to a quick climax. Henny Penny, retold by H. W. Zimmermann, is an example of this type of tale.

(2) Pourquoi, or why stories, explain why animals have certain characteristics and how the customs of people came to be. The Scandinavian story, Why the Bear is Stumpy-Tailed, retold by May Hill Arbuthnot, is an example.

(3) Beast tales feature animals that talk and act like people. The Bremen-Town Musicians, retold by Ilse Plume, and The Little Red Hen, retold by Margot Zemach, are two example tales.

(4) Humorous, or noodlehead, stories are universal tales in which absurd situations or the stupidity of the motifs results in a hilarious situation. An example of this type is the Norse tale, The Husband Who Was to Mind the House, retold by May Hill Arbuthnot.

(5) Magic, or wonder tales, usually contain elements of magic or supernatural power. Yeh-Shen, a Chinese variant of Cinderella, retold by Ai-Ling Louie, and The Twelve Dancing Princesses, retold by Marianna Mayer, are examples.

(6) Realistic tales involve situations that could have happened and people who could have existed. Dick Whittington and His Cat, an English tale, retold by Marcia Brown, and the Japanese tale, The Wave, retold by Margaret Hodges, are examples.

Folk tales reflect the societies that have created them, but basic emotions, such as fear, hope, and joy, as well as common themes and story structures, are found in folk tales around the world (Yolen, 1981). Because traditional tales are shared by all humankind, they create a common human bond between cultures and across time and attest to the universality of the human spirit (Huck et al., 1987; Yolen, 1981).

Literary Elements

The structure of folk tales reflects their traditionally oral form. In order to have kept the audience interested, these stories had to be fast-paced and had to focus on a universal theme (Huck et al., 1987). Phrases such as "Once upon a time" established the setting and quickly transported the audience into the world of fantasy where time was suspended (Baker, 1981; Bettelheim, 1976). By their vagueness, these words also created a universal backdrop for the action so that a story was not

confined to a specific time or place (Lukens, 1990). The audience entered the world of fantasy understanding that the events that occurred offered meaning but did not represent real-life situations (Bettleheim, 1976).

Plot structures and repetition. These elements follow clear patterns of development. From setting and motif identification, the action moves quickly to present the inevitable conflict between good and evil (Huck et al., 1987; Norton, 1991). The story builds to a climax through a series of episodes until the conflict is resolved. The tale usually ends as quickly as it began with ". . . and they lived happily ever after" (Bosma, 1992; Huck et al., 1987).

A quest or journey is a plot structure often found in wonder tales. It may involve a weak or innocent child going out to meet the monsters of the world as in Hansel and Gretel, retold by the Grimm Brothers, or it may be the hero rescuing those in distress. The second type of journey tale, as found in The Water of Life, retold by Barbara Rogasky, tends to be longer and contains romantic elements. Along the way the hero may help the poor, receive magical power, and overcome hardship and adversity before returning to safety (Huck et al., 1987; McClain, 1985).

A story within a story is a plot structure often found in the Uncle Remus tales of African American folklore. They begin with a conversation between Uncle Remus and the little boy, and

then move quickly to a story about Brer Rabbit, Brer Fox, and others that answer the little boy's questions (Arbuthnot, 1961). Ann Grifalconi used this plot structure in The Village of Round and Square Houses to tell the tale of a nation's housing arrangement.

Cumulative patterns of interlocking episodes create plot structures as well as define a subgroup of folk tales (Bosma, 1992). Verna Aardema uses cumulative episodes and rhythmic verse to tell the story of a drought-ending rain in Bringing the Rain to Kapiti Plain.

Pourquoi stories often employ a cause and effect plot structure. Pulling himself loose from the ice caused bear to lose his tail in Why the Bear is Stumpy-Tailed (retold by May Hill Arbuthnot). The effect was that his tail stayed in the ice so now bears are stumpy-tailed. Verna Aardema's Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears combines the cause and effect structure with a cumulative pattern to determine who killed the owl.

A pattern of three is a story structure that repeats a basic element that assists in building the suspense of the plot (Huck et al., 1987). Each of the three Billy Goats Gruff to cross the bridge is bigger than the one before. Goldilocks tampered with three bowls of porridge, three chairs, and three beds belonging to the three bears before being discovered. Each of three sons in The Weaving of a Dream, retold by Marilee Heyer,

set out to recover the brocade that had taken their mother three years to finish. Three obstacles had to be overcome to complete the journey.

Repeated rhymes, chants, and refrains are common elements in folk stories (Huck et al., 1987). "Fee, fi, fo, fum . . ." is a well known verse spoken by the giant in "Jack and the Beanstalk." The true princess in The Goose-Girl, retold by the Grimm Brothers, converses with her dead horse in rhyme and her chant causes the goose-boy's hat to blow away.

The predictability of these tales make it possible for children to tell what will happen next even when they have not heard or read the story before (Pearson & Johnson, 1978). As these structures become familiar, children's comprehension and recall can improve and their sense of security can be nurtured (Baker, 1981; Rand, 1984).

Motifs. In folk tales, motifs represent the universal, contrasting nature of humanity, for example, good and evil, wise and foolish, weak and powerful (Bosma, 1992). Motifs add to the predictability of the story (Huck et al., 1987). Children often identify easily with the hero or heroine motif of a folk story. Therefore, folk tales are relevant to their lives (Bettleheim, 1976; Yolen, 1981).

Themes. Folk tales around the world share common themes but also reflect the values of specific cultures (Norton, 1991).

Yolen (1981) points out that every tale is about working through evil to find good. Although there is no assurance of a happy ending, there is a condition of choice that can require the hero to make a sacrifice or become involved in a trial. Folk tales, she says, "operate on the 'old bargain principle.' One cannot receive without first giving" (p. 70).

Universal themes bring assurance that one can succeed. Children can feel assured of receiving help in their endeavors and reward from their efforts if they do not shy away from adversity (Bettleheim, 1976).

Awareness of story structure can improve comprehension and recall (Harris & Sipay, 1985; Perkins, 1986; Rand, 1984). The common themes, predictable plots, recognizable human characteristics represented in motifs, and universal settings found in folk tales give low achieving and emergent readers a secure, familiar framework in which to build their knowledge of story structure while developing an appreciation for quality literature (Huck et al., 1987; Rand, 1984).

Implementation of Folk Tales into a

Chapter I Reading Program

Chapter I students and emergent readers need to have many experiences with complete stories, or whole units of language, before being asked to identify specific literary elements. These students benefit from activities that provide models, allow

choices, require active participation, and offer individual or group projects (Cambourne, 1988).

An example of such a program is the Story Structure Framework for Reading and Writing, developed by Dorothy Strickland and Joan Feeley. This instructional plan can be adapted to a wide range of grade levels and the time considerations of a Chapter I pull-out program. It calls for listening to, reading, and discussing stories from different genres; opportunities to retell these stories in a variety of ways; and writing activities that focus on a particular genre (Strickland, 1987).

Listening, Reading, and Discussing

Studies of experiences with folk tales conducted by Rand (1984) indicated that students do benefit from some direct instruction in the structure of stories but make the greatest gains when immersed in quality literature. Teachers should read folk tales aloud to help children become acquainted with the genre and its structural characteristics and enjoy its unique qualities. Also, hearing these stories read aloud allows children to experience stories they may not have chosen to read or may not be ready to read on their own. From reading aloud experiences, the teacher can point out the elements of story structure and can discuss with the students strategies for organizing information.

Teacher-made cassette tapes of folk tales placed in a listening center provide children with the opportunity to enjoy more stories than a teacher may have time to share. Taped books allow children to choose the story they wish to hear. They can listen to it as often as they like and can read along with it. Quality book and tape sets can also be purchased. Besides being much less expensive, teacher-made tapes, assure the availability of specific titles for highlighting literary elements and increase the range of folk tales that can be experienced.

Discussions that follow a reading/listening experience can nurture children's awareness of important story elements (Strickland, 1987). Results of a discussion can be organized on a story structure map, or web, to provide a visual representation of the learning that has taken place. After several folk tales have been shared, the comparing and contrasting of these stories can be charted. Children enjoy examining the structural elements of tales from different cultures, variations of the same theme, and tales with similar plot structures (Santino, 1991).

An example of such a discussion experience is considering the trickster motif that can be found in tales from cultures around the world. The setting, motifs, plot, and resolution of these specific trickster tales can be considered: Anansi and the Moss-covered Rock, retold by Eric Kimmel; The Badger and the Magic Fan, retold by Tony Johnston; Fin M'Coull: The Giant of

Knockmany Hill, retold by Tomie dePaola; and Tales of Uncle Remus: The Adventures of Brer Rabbit, retold by Julius Lester.

Variations of Little Red Riding Hood can also be compared. These stories can be presented: Little Red Cap, retold by the Grimm Brothers; Little Red Riding Hood, retold by James Marshall; Lon Po Po, retold by Ed Young; and Flossie and the Fox, retold by Patricia McKissack. Because of their abundant and unique cultural variations, literary elements from Cinderella are also interesting to compare and contrast.

Patterns of three plot structures can be identified. These tales can be shared with young children: The Three Billy Goats Gruff, retold by Paul Galdone; The Three Little Pigs, retold by James Marshall; and Goldilocks and the Three Bears, retold by Jan Brett. Older students will find several series of three in such tales as The Water of Life, retold by Barbara Rogasky; The Weaving of a Dream, retold by Marilee Heyer; East of the Sun and West of the Moon, retold by Kathleen and Michael Hague; and The Glass Mountain, retold by Nonny Hogrogian.

Linear cumulative plots can be noted and compared in these stories: Henny Penny, retold by H. Werner Zimmermann; One Fine Day, retold by Nonny Hogrogian; and The Old Woman and Her Pig, retold by the Grimm Brothers (in May Hill Arbutnot's collection). Circular plots are found in Marcia Brown's Once a Mouse and Gerald McDermott's The Stonecutter.

Retelling

Retelling stories makes up the second phase of the Strickland and Feeley plan. According to Morrow (1989), such activity helps children focus on specific story elements and internalize the concept of story structure. Retelling requires an understanding of the whole story. It can be done as an individual or as a group activity through speaking, illustrating, or writing. Many times more than one of these forms of expression is used simultaneously (Harms & Lettow, unpublished).

Speaking. Retelling through speaking can include flannelboard stories, puppets, monologues, and group retellings. Flannelboard stories provide concrete reminders of characters and events. Characters and other important images, illustrated on pellen, can be placed on the flannelboard as the story is retold. Placement of the figures also serves to visually represent the total movement of the plot.

Retelling with puppets is another way to visually represent characters and important objects as well as the movement of the story. Simple puppets can be made by students.

Through monologues, the points of view of a story's characters can be told. This technique is appropriate for older children, yet first attempts can be started with simple tales such as The Three Billy Goats Gruff, retold by Paul Galdone, perhaps as seen from the smallest goat's point of view.

Group retellings focus on "understanding different plot structures and how the parts relate to the whole" (Harms & Lettow, unpublished, p. 3). In this activity, children arrange themselves to represent the structure of the plot. For example, as Henny Penny (Zimmermann, 1989) is retold, children can create a straight line to represent the linear cumulative plot. Children can sit or stand in a circle to show the circular plot of McDermott's The Stonecutter (Harms & Lettow, unpublished).

Illustrating. Illustrating a favorite part or important event in a story allows children to visualize before they verbalize, thus supporting their oral retelling. Recreating a favorite folk tale through mapmaking can focus on the parts of the story--the settings and the motifs and their actions. Examples of folk tales that are easily adapted to mapmaking experiences are "The Three Little Pigs" and "Little Red Riding Hood."

Writing. Retelling through writing can include rebus stories and newspaper articles. Rebus retellings focus on motifs, events and settings. Words can be replaced by pictures made with gum eraser stamps. These stamps can be commercially- or student-made. Newspaper accounts retell the story as if it were a current event and can include interviews with the story motifs.

Writing

Composing is the third phase of the Strickland-Feeley plan to build awareness of story structure. The students can create a chart listing the elements that make folk tales unique. This information is used to move students from guided group activities to independent writing (Strickland, 1987).

First, the teacher and the students can work together to retell a favorite story in writing with the teacher acting as the scribe. This activity can also be coordinated with an illustrated retelling. The chart is used to assure that important elements are included.

Second, the teacher, again as the scribe, models revising and editing as the group creates an original folk tale. Elements on the chart guide the writing process.

Third, students are encouraged to write their own story. The predictable structure that helped the listener/reader understand and retell the story now helps the writer formulate a new story.

Conclusion

As children experience whole units of quality literature, their awareness of story structure can be extended. The predictable structure of folk tales can assist low achieving and emergent readers to identify story elements and construct mental

frameworks in which to organize information. Expressive language activities can further these frameworks.

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