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TEACHING TIPS

When opportunity knocks: Integrating language arts and the daily calendar

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“**T**eachers, in addition to what you already do, we want you to add this program!” Have you heard your district’s version of this statement lately? How many times have we, as educators, felt that our plate is just too full and there can’t possibly be room for more in our schedules? Yet additional classroom responsibilities continue to invade our days and precious time.

One solution to this problem is integrating curricula whenever possible. This careful orchestration and intermingling of subject matter is referred to as integrated or interdisciplinary instruction because language arts are brought into various disciplines such as social studies, science, and math (Hoewisch, 2001). However, for many, this concept is challenging and difficult to envision. I stumbled across an integrating solution accidentally. Incorporating language arts concepts and daily calendar lessons has become part of my teaching practices. Calendar lessons are a whole-class instruction time that includes pertinent discussion; student interaction; oral language development; grammar skills; writing; and, of course, math concepts, too. Marilyn Burns (2003), an expert in the field of teaching math, stated,

During whole group instruction I try to make the lesson as interactive as possible so that I’m not doing all of the talking. I find ways for students to share their knowledge and ideas, get feedback from their classmates (as well as me), and hear others’ points of view. (p. 12)

Calendar and language arts in action

As in many primary-grade classes, I have a daily calendar time in my classroom. Each day the

days, months, years, dates, and other calendar-type activities are addressed. This calendar time is also a springboard for introducing, reinforcing, and assessing a wide array of math skills that correspond with our curriculum. As the students investigate these concepts of time, the perfect opportunity arises to start talking in present, past, and future tenses. This time also gives me the chance to model many language practices that can be very abstract for 8-year-olds.

Teacher modeling is an important form of classroom support for literacy learning. Implicit and explicit modeling both have places in a well-balanced literacy program. Modeling shows students strategies they can use on their own to understand new material (Sweet, 1994). Implicit modeling is part of the literary experience—for example, reading a fable aloud while engaging students in the meaning of story and conveying a purpose for reading. Explicit modeling shows how to approach a task such as using a table of contents (Sweet). As the students reflect on the date, seasonal information, and important classroom news, it is easy to use their language to demonstrate types of sentences and even kinds of sentences. Possibilities could include the following:

“Let’s ask a question about something special in February.”

“Let’s make a statement, command, or exclamation about February.”

“Ask your neighbor a question about something they did in January.”

Activities around the calendar are a perfect opportunity to model for the students if their under-

standing of the concept is unclear. These applications, regularly revisited, can make a rather dry grammar concept much more alive and personal. Almost any component of grammar can be woven into the discussions. If the students don't naturally dictate sentences that are appropriate, I guide the lesson so that it works toward my objective. Keeping dry-erase boards handy for everyone is important because sometimes it helps to write the sentences as we talk.

The Language Experience Approach and interactive writing are powerful tools for getting students excited about writing, reading, and even math. Through the Language Experience Approach and interactive writing, children quickly become used to the fact that there is a time and a place for writing every day (Clay, 1991) in all subject areas. Because students scribe each word on the board during interactive writing, the teacher can focus on teaching elements of written language—from conventions of print to clarity of message. The process requires constant recognition of the string of “teachable moments” found in the confusion and insights of the lesson (Fisher & Frey, 2003). The instructional value of interactive writing also lies in the oral language development gained through the lesson. Children love to dictate, see their ideas in print, and have teachers use their ideas as a basis for teaching. In addition to the types of sentences and different tenses, subjects and predicates, sentence fragments, adjectives, verbs, and conjunctions are just a sampling of concepts that we have addressed during this one part of the day.

A calendar corner

Because combining the calendar with a language arts component was becoming such a critical part of the curriculum, I soon realized that there was a need for a physical area for this instructional time. I chose the area where I read aloud to the class because it is in a corner with plenty of room for the students to congregate on the floor and to get up to do interactive tasks. There was also some empty wall space there. I keep materials close at hand in containers on a cart. Materials such as dry markers in a variety of colors, dry-erase boards, counters, large chart tablets, a pocket chart, and sticky notes are just some of the materials that I use

regularly and need quick and easy access to. My Calendar Corner also houses a large interactive daily calendar bulletin board that changes monthly but stays up year round. One of the walls of the corner has been transformed into a math word wall, another valuable resource for the class.

The ABCs of math

On the math word wall we put valuable math vocabulary, in alphabetical order, as the words are introduced in the calendar lessons. Word walls not only empower students, they also empower teachers (Brabham & Villaume, 2001). The words are there to be reviewed, applied, and interacted with whenever possible. The following are examples of activities for their use:

- Write 5–10 word wall words on the chalkboard one letter at a time. Encourage the class to predict what the words will be. After all words have been written and reviewed, have students put their heads down. Erase one word at a time and ask students to open their eyes and guess what word you have erased.
- Randomly give two different letters to pairs of students. Allow time for each partner to review and quiz the other on all the words under his or her letter.

Cunningham (2000) warned that having a word wall is unproductive unless we are also “doing” the word wall. Pinnell and Fountas (1998) pointed out the critical importance of making the word wall interactive whenever possible. To take the value of the math word wall one step further, from time to time I use the concepts for journal writing prompts. This way the lessons meet both writing and math needs. The results of these journal writings also provide an opportunity for me to use assessment as a teaching tool as well as a means to measure growth. The following is an example of a math concept writing prompt:

What are the missing addends in the following equations? Write the correct answers in the spaces provided. Explain what an addend is and how you got your answers. Be sure to use complete sentences.

$$4 + \underline{\quad} = 12$$

$$\underline{\quad} + 9 = 16$$

Timely lists

Creating a monthly or seasonal word list is also another interactive part of a calendar math routine. Brainstorming is a way of life in the elementary classroom that taps prior knowledge, ensures maximum participation, and opens the door to numerous extensions. Classifying is the most obvious objective for listing, and the need for this skill is found in all subjects. The students share words that they associate with the month or season. The words are written for all to see as they are dictated. On another day, we'll categorize the words on a large graphic organizer. T-charts work particularly well. A T-chart is a simple organizer that has the headings for columns written horizontally on a top line and vertical lines to divide sections for each heading. The space below each category provides ample room for brainstorming. I might categorize each section as People, Place, or Thing or make the lesson more advanced and use Nouns, Verbs, and Adjectives as my headings. In the past, lists have been generated at the beginning of the month and used as a teaching tool throughout the month. The following are examples:

"Today is the fifth of January. Let's highlight every fifth word on the list. Let's sort these words into nouns or verbs."

"Today is the twelfth of November. Let's use the twelfth word from each list and make a November sentence using these words."

On another day we might add strong adjectives to describe the highlighted nouns. The possibilities go on and on. There are lots of good ways to use your calendar time to review language concepts. These descriptive lists are also used as resources for word work, process writing, handwriting, and spelling.

Number synonyms

Synonyms have always been a tricky concept for primary students. And now that state standards assess synonym knowledge, the need for clarity is more crucial than ever. The dictionary defines synonyms as words that have the same meaning as another word in the same language. This concept can apply to numbers, too. So, during calendar time,

why not invent Number Synonyms with the monthly dates? Try an example like the following one:

"Today is March 12, 2007. Let's list the number synonyms for 12."

Possible answers to this challenge could be $4 + 8 = 12$, $20 - 8 = 12$, $3 + 3 + 3 + 3 = 12$, 1 ten + 2 ones = 12, $3 \times 4 = 12$, and twelve. The lesson addresses numeration, place value, computation, number words, and the concept of synonyms. It also forces the students to think at a higher level according to Bloom's Taxonomy. The new information may supplement previous premises and lead to new premises (Benson, Sporkowski, & Stremmel, 1992).

The more I teach using the calendar, the more comfortable I become with branching out and trying different ways to integrate curricula. I never neglect the written concepts provided by textbooks, but I do try to expand upon them. The calendar is an amazing teaching tool, and it lends itself to almost all areas of study. It provides an opportunity to revisit, reteach, and reinforce key literacy concepts. Sometimes it is difficult to put aside the carefully designed lessons that are so easy to rely upon and step out into the unknown. When beginning to integrate the calendar with language arts, start slowly and add something only when you feel comfortable. Less is sometimes more. Many times teaching moments occur without planning. If that happens, take advantage of the opportunity. All skills and objectives are certainly not covered daily; however, these valuable lessons allow the students to return to abstract concepts as they manipulate language and numbers simultaneously.

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Gator's adventures:

A lesson in literacy and community

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As a kindergarten teacher, I knew the importance of family involvement in fostering students' literacy development and achievement (Ordonez-Jasis & Ortiz, 2006). I also knew the value of beginning the year on a positive note to promote an ongoing partnership between the worlds of home and school. An additional challenge involved the fact that I taught in a school that was quite diverse, especially with regard to the socioeconomic status of the students, which sometimes created challenges, even in kindergarten. As such, I worked to create a classroom climate that facilitated friendships between children from the country club, who had attended preschool together, and those children who were bused from the nearby mobile home parks and subsidized housing complexes and who rarely saw their classmates outside school.

The Gator bag

Struggling for an idea that was both innovative and workable, I sat down with my preservice teacher, Tara, to brainstorm. Part of her internship requirements demanded that she create a parent-involvement activity, so we came up with the idea of a take-home literacy bag with a twist. Being

Florida teachers, we elected to use a stuffed toy alligator as the foundation of the activity. I then purchased a couple of disposable cameras and dug up a tote bag that would hold the stuffed animal, some books, and writing materials. Tara created a shared writing cloze form that would allow the parents and their children to write about their adventures with the stuffed animal on his visits to their homes. We chose the cloze format for two reasons: to give support to those parents who might not be sure of what to write about and to create a predictable pattern for the responses, because we planned to use the responses during author's chair and to create a class book at the end of the activity.

To initiate the project, we first held a class election to choose a name for the alligator. Although nominations included "Greenie," "Albert," and "Tom," the children overwhelmingly voted for the highly original "Gator." We reviewed the rules for taking Gator and his books home—no baths, no writing on the book or animal, and no close encounters with dogs or teething siblings. In addition, the children were allowed to take two pictures at home with the camera, which the class would check during circle time by subtracting the new number in the picture counter from the original one.