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One Way To Manage Language Experiences

by Marylou Bugh, Pinconning

Have you ever stared at a pile of spelling books, a plethora of reading materials, and a list of English grammar skills and wonder how on earth it can all fit in a day, if your children are also going to experience art, social studies, science, and so on? I'm sure there are differences in Sylvia Ashton-Warner's Maori infant school and a nongraded 2-3 level classroom in the middle of Michigan. However, it was her book *Teacher* that moved me to try some language experience methods to make the curriculum more meaningful for my children.

Sylvia Ashton-Warner is the epitome of language experience. Her five-year-olds are taught to read using a key vocabulary from their own oral language. Her day is arranged in output and input sessions, and her curriculum comes from the interests of the children themselves. My own program is more structured.

First, I mapped the year into unit blocks, estimating, not too accurately in places, the time it would take to cover each unit. The units range through areas of social studies and science. Objectives and materials listed were cross-curricular.

Beginning each unit, the class brainstorms the subject. (Brainstorming is a technique that has to be taught.) Then they and I make activity cards incorporating their ideas. In this way the unit is theirs.

Each day thereafter begins with a review of the day before. We discuss,

argue, list ideas, criticize the things that didn't work and laud the things that did. During this first morning block, the children also write a journal. The journal may reflect interest or ideas about the activities we discuss or it may reflect something personal. The subject is open and as varied as the children themselves. It is during this time that spelling and grammar needs surface naturally. These journals actually are the basis for our language arts: Reading and listening since they share the journals with each other, writing since they learn to write in a manner that others will understand, spelling since the words they need to write are listed in the back of their books and these they need to learn to use, and grammar since the skills they learn are the ones they use to communicate effectively.

Once a week the children abandon their personal journal writing and we write our history of the week. This is dictated by the class as a whole and goes into a class history book that the children illustrate and refer to the rest of the year.

The rest of the day revolves around activities using the journal entries and the activity ideas that were brainstormed. Although the children participate in some other self-programmed activities, this is the touchstone of their school day. Predicatably the reading materials in which they express the most interest and choose to share with the class are those that enlarge upon their core unit.