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Thematic Units: A Scottish Approach to Literature-Based Education

Barbara Erwin
Cheryl Hines
Carol Curtis

Lisa Nicoli and Sara, both aged seven, stood at the computer composing the following retelling of the story *Katie Morag and the Two Grandmothers* by Mairi Hedderwick.

LISA NICOLI AND SARA

Katie Morag McColl helps her mother in the post office. She helps her mother deliver the mail. Soon Katie Morags Granma was coming to stay with her. Granma Mainland was her uther Grannie. Granma mainland was coming on a ferry to the Isle of Struay Granma Mainland brot her brush and comb Katie Morag was fascinated. Grannie Island said ok her in her fancy ways. The days went by quickly and soon it was Show Day. katie morag hat to run round the bay to give Alecina an extra special brush and comb but on the way Alecina went into the Boggy Loch. Grannie Island was furious Grannie Island said a hole hill side of grass to eat and she has to go for that piece of grass. Katie Morag said Granma Mainland has sume fancy stuff. We could use her stuff so everything went well when it was Show Day the judges could not believe there eyes. Alecina was definately the winer. they had a ceilidh everybody caime Neilly Beag said my youre still a smart wee Bobby Dazzler. How do you do it

*a thats my secret said Granma Mainland Katie Morag
and Grannie Island smiled there new haff of the secret
but they could never tell. The End.*

The girls, pupils in Carol Curtis' Primary II class (composed of six and seven year old children) at Tillicoultry Primary School in Scotland, had no trouble at all reconstructing the plot of the original story. While the pupils had not thoroughly mastered the mechanics of writing (periods or full stops, capitalization, spelling, etc.), they enthusiastically used language to write and read. Using a literature-based thematic unit to teach language arts in concert with science, social studies, mathematics, and art this Scottish teacher instilled in her pupils an understanding of their own lives, a love for language, and a feeling of satisfaction and pride in their accomplishments.

Using themes to integrate instruction

The idea of integrating instruction is not a new one. The American Progressive Education movement of the early twentieth century proposed a project approach to instruction which led to units being taught in science and social studies in the 1960s and 1970s (Spodek, 1972). The use of units in early childhood programs was (and still is) seen as a way to coordinate activities, strengthen and reinforce desired teaching concepts, and meet the specific needs of young children (Eliason and Jenkins, 1986). Pappas, Kiefer, and Levstik (1990) write that thematic units link together content from many areas of the curriculum, depict the connections that exist across disciplines, and provide children a sense of ownership over their own learning.

Using children's literature as a method for coordinating instruction has been suggested by several sources. Zarrillo (1989) describes literature units written around a unifying

element such as genre, author, or theme from social studies or science. He recommends that teachers read aloud books that are good examples of the unifying element. Literature is indicated as a rich source of ideas and starting points for thematic units by Pappas and others (1990). Sutherland and Arbuthnot (1991) state that if literature is associated with many curricular areas, it can become an important part of every school day for children.

Advice about how to plan such programs is provided by Kenneth Goodman in a discussion of thematic units in *The Whole Language Catalog* (1991). Goodman suggests that in planning units, teachers need to show how thematic units 1) build knowledge; 2) develop problem solving and other cognitive strategies; and 3) improve self-confidence in the learner. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that process by describing one classroom where a literature-based, integrated approach to instruction provided an exciting and meaningful program for Scottish children. This program not only improved the pupils' schema for the world around them and their understanding of the organization of text; it aided the development of their ability to solve problems and work cooperatively; and it improved their self-concept as they became more proficient users of language.

Integrated instruction in a Scottish classroom

In May 1991 as part of a research project sponsored by a grant from the Texas State Reading Association, one of the authors spent some time working with teachers and students at Tillicoultry, a small town northwest of Edinburgh, Scotland. Tillicoultry Primary School, a large school of approximately 600 pupils, serves children from Nursery (4 year olds) through Primary VII (12 year olds). It is staffed by 18 teachers, two teachers who also function as Assistant Head Teachers, a Deputy Head Teacher, and a Head

Teacher. While there she observed for several hours each day in Carol Curtis' Primary II classroom.

During the early spring, head teacher Janet Bennie encouraged Carol to develop a topic based upon Mairi Hedderwick's book *Katie Morag and the Two Grandmothers*. The idea of novel studies or units constructed around pieces of literature was one used frequently in classes for older Scottish pupils. Mrs. Bennie thought that the concept might also be applicable in classes for younger children. To assist Carol, Mrs. Bennie bought for the classroom a copy of the study guide *Novel Ideas* by Margaret Burnell and Sallie Harkness (1990) and a big book version of *Katie Morag*. This picture storybook about Katie Morag McColl (as are all of the others in the series) is set on a mythical island off the coast of Scotland (See Figure 1). This particular Scottish version of the book describes a conflict between two very different grandmothers and contains many words and concepts with which Scottish children are familiar such as *tartans*, *ceilidhs* (Scottish dances), and raising sheep. We might note that many terms which are specific to the Scottish language and culture do not appear in the American version of the same book.

Figure 1
American Versions of Books Cited

- Hedderwick, M. (1985). *Katie Morag and the two grandmothers*.
Hedderwick, M. (1986). *Katie Morag and the tiresome Ted*.
Hedderwick, M. (1987). *Katie Morag and the big boy cousins*.
Hedderwick, M. (1988). *Katie Morag delivers the mail*.
Hedderwick, M. (1989). *Peedie Peebles' summer or winter book*.

All books published by Little Brown, Boston MA.

Armed with these resources, the enthusiastic ideas of her students, and her own creative imagination, Carol turned her classroom into a reader/writer's dream. She covered walls in the classroom and hall with large colorful displays that the pupils helped to construct. Many examples of the children's artwork and writing adorned the displays. During the first three weeks of the unit, Carol's class of six and seven year olds broadened their understanding of the Scottish culture, geography, science, mathematics, art, language arts, and literature through activities based upon the book. Described below are just a few of the activities and projects that the children enjoyed. While each activity integrated a number of curricular areas, each is categorized by its predominant content focus.

Social studies and science. After reading the story and using visual descriptions from the book, the children created a mural of the island Struay, using tempera paint and bits of colored paper. They labeled all of the major buildings and areas: the mainland, the post office where the McColls lived and worked, Granma Island's house and farm, the bay (complete with boats), the jetty, the boggy loch (lake), and the fair grounds on Show Day. This activity provided an introduction to the story, gave the pupils a mental image of the setting of the book, and developed an understanding of what it is like to live on an island.

Because Struay was an imaginary island, the class studied islands and the sea. They were very interested in the concept of Great Britain being a very large island surrounded by water. The teacher put a British map, seashells found on the west coast of Scotland, and books about the sea in a geography/science center. The pupils drew and painted pictures of their own islands and wrote about what it would be like to live there.

Figure 2
Illustration and text about Nicola's Island



my island is called
Wales. It has trees
a fox and houses and a
lighthouse and a little bit of
sand and mountains.

Figure 2 shows Nicola's story about her own island. She called her island Wales and described it as having trees, sand and mountains. There were also a fox, houses, and a lighthouse on Nicola's island.

To reinforce the sea concept, the pupils created seashell pictures. At the water table, the children worked in cooperative groups of four choosing small items from around the room, predicting and then confirming whether or not the items would float or sink.

The class discussed Scottish history, specifically the Jacobite rebellion and "Bonnie Prince Charlie" (Prince Charles Edward Stuart). They located the Isle of Skye (off the west coast of Scotland) on a British map. They also learned the Scottish folk song "Over the Sea to Skye."

To reinforce their knowledge of the Scottish culture (Katie wears a kilt in the book), a display of tartan cloth was placed in another center. Because Tillicoultry has a number of tartan mills in the town, it was easy for Carol and the children to get samples of the cloth. To extend the concept the pupils created their own tartan patterns using crayons and a tempera wash.

Several different activities were based upon the topic of sheep and the processing and uses of wool. The pupils made a large picture of Alecina, Granma Island's prize sheep, and in cooperative groups covered the picture with unprocessed wool. They also created first place medals for her. The children dyed wool using natural substances such as red cabbage, onion, beet root, raspberries, etc. Using a spinning wheel, they spun wool and then using a simple loom they wove the dyed wool into cloth. They also learned the parts of the spinning wheel and after discussing simple

machines, drew diagrams of a spinning wheel and labeled the individual components.

Mathematics. In the math center Carol placed a model post office. (In the story Katie's family ran a post office/store on the island.) The children made potatoes and sweets (candy) out of papier-maché to sell in the post office. They also created stamps and postcards. Using British "play" money they sold the items to each other making change in the process.

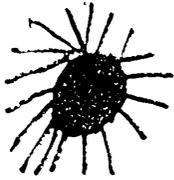
Language arts. During the first weeks of the topic, the teacher read the book to the children many, many times. Each time she asked them to listen for some particular aspect of the story such as characterization, setting, or specific details. By the third week of the topic, each child in the classroom could read the original story. Many of them could also read the other Katie Morag books which the teacher placed in the reading center. The other books were *Katie Morag and the Tiresome Ted*, *Katie Morag and the Big Boy Cousins*, *Katie Morag Delivers the Mail*, and *Peedie Peebles*. Several of the children sequenced the books in the series using only the illustrations and then discussed how the characters changed over time.

The class carefully studied each of the three primary characters in the book: Katie, Grannie Mainland, and Granma Island. The teacher introduced each character with a large life-sized drawing. The children decorated each character's drawing using information from the text and the illustrations. The pupils then wrote detailed descriptions of the characters and their actions. These written descriptions along with the large pictures were placed in the classroom and in the hall. Katie's picture wore a kilt made of real tartan cloth and Grannie Mainland's character wore a fancy hat.

Each day the students composed short selections about some literary characteristic of the story: plot, setting, characters, etc. Carol wrote a topic sentence on a portable chalkboard for the children to copy. These beginning sentences helped the children to discover characteristics of the story that they might have missed or misunderstood. Among the story starters used were 1) *Grannie Mainland brought some fancy stuff with her when she came to Struay for the holiday.* 2) *Neilly Beag said "You're still a smart wee Bobby Dazzler"* (something special). 3) *Grannie Mainland lives in a big city. She came to Struay for a holiday.* The pupils wrote these selections first as drafts either in their copy books or on unlined paper. Then they illustrated the selections. Figure 3 shows an example of Adam's story about Grannie Mainland written in his copy book. Adam told where Granma Mainland lived; why she came to Struay; what she thought of the island; and what Katie thought of her. He added something of his own to the story by illustrating it with a picture of an airplane flying toward the sun.

To teach specific language arts skills, Carol created task cards using words from the story. One set which reinforced the *ee* sound in sheep contained 1) a group of *ee* words from the story; 2) instructions to draw pictures of words that contained double *ee*'s, and 3) cloze sentences which supported the meaning of the words. Once a week each pupil worked on one of the sets of cards. The integration of reading and writing was always present. The class used a computer (which they shared with the other Primary II class on an every other week basis) to compose stories. To assist the children in creating their own stories, the teacher placed frequently used words such as Katie Morag, Granma Island, Grannie Mainland, Alecina, and others on a storyboard connected to the computer.

Figure 3
Adam's story about Granma Mainland



Granma Mainland Lives in a
big City She came to
struay for ahdiday. To see
Katie Morag and baby Liam

On Sunday Granma Mainland
took a Walk in the farm
and She thought it was nice



and Katie Morag thought
Granma Mainland was very
nice and that is The end
of the Story.

By simply pressing the word on the storyboard, the word appeared on the screen. The students used the storyboard for common words, sounded out phonetically regular words, consulted a word bank that was hanging on

the wall next to the computer, were free to use invented spellings, or asked the teacher how to spell words that they could not figure out themselves. Freed from worries about spelling, the pupils concentrated on the content of their stories. Able pupils were paired with less able pupils allowing all of the children to be successful. The children read and reread their stories, revised them as they liked, illustrated their finished products, and placed them on display.

Conclusion

Our purpose as reading and writing teachers is to help children become proficient users of language who can talk and listen, read and write, not only about their own thoughts but the ideas of others, and get pleasure and satisfaction in doing so. The look on Matthew's and Kris' faces when they finished the following retelling clearly reflected this sense of accomplishment.

MATTHEW AND KRIS

Katie Morag McColl lives on the Isle of Struay. And she has to Grannies one is called Grannie Island and the uther one is called Granma Mainland. One day the ferry came to Struay and Katie Morag got on to see hur Granma Mainland. and she got hur hair kut and she went to hur Grannie houes to help Alecina get redae for Show Day wen Katie Morag got thear Alecina was in the Bogy Loch. Grannie Island was furious. Alecina fleece had peaty stains on it. They went to the Post Office. and they went to Katie Morag bed room they yoois Granma Mainlands perfume and shampoo and brush and comb and they got Alecina to the show field in time for the judging and Alecina won her 8th trophy.

These pupils know that they are successful users of language. Not only were they able to reproduce the plot of the original story, they were able to relate the story to their

lives in Scotland. The idea of getting “peaty” stains from a boggy loch (loosely translated as grassy stains from a muddy lake) might be foreign to children in the United States, but it is real to children living in Scotland.

The topic was so successful for both Carol and her pupils that at the end of the allotted time, no one was ready to give it up. When Carol was notified that a study of safety was being suggested for the end of the spring term, both teacher and pupils replied, *We will study safety on Struay!*

Yetta Goodman in an article in *The New Advocate* (1988) describes how to help children become aware of the power of language:

It is only as students become actively engaged in wondering why and for what reasons people read and write and how such processes affect their own lives that they understand the power of language (p. 263).

The pupils in Carol Curtis’ class discovered the power of language. During this thematic unit, they learned about living in Scotland, developed a better understanding of the organization of text, worked cooperatively to solve problems, and became more self-confident as they related the language of literature to the language of their every day lives. By doing so all – teacher and children – were enriched in the process.

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