

2-1-1990

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Recommended Citation

Homan, S. P., Karl, H. G., Vega, V., & Edgecomb, D. (1990). A Holistic Reading and Language Arts Approach for the Intermediate Grades. *Reading Horizons*, 30 (2). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol30/iss2/2

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A Holistic Reading and Language Arts Approach for the Intermediate Grades

**Susan P. Homan
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The recent push to use a whole language approach in the classroom has generally focused on the primary grade level. However, the integrated reading/language arts model described in this article was designed to meet the needs of Chapter I sixth grade students. The program provides for the integration of reading with the other language arts: speaking, writing, and listening. One of the basic tenets of this model is that children learn best by actively participating in language activities, not just reading about language skills. The IMTC (Integrated Model for Teaching and Conferencing in Reading/Language Arts) was developed specifically for use with Chapter I students; however the heart of the model, activities and patterns that successfully integrate reading with the other language arts, has ramifications for all classrooms.

Several conditions were taken into account before the program was designed. The first set of conditions included:

- the observation that the students enrolled in the program would be those whose past achievements in reading and language arts had been minimal at best;
- the realization that many of the students came from low income, sometimes single parent, families.

It was further presumed that such conditions tend to create other problems. Consistently poor achievement, for example, reduces the motivation of students to try harder. Conditions of poverty are likely to be associated with nutritional and general health problems, as well as feelings of insecurity on the part of the children.

There were other conditions considered by the program developers. Among these were (a) the training and commitment of the Chapter I teachers; (b) the pupil-teacher ratios for the reading/language arts classes; (c) the availability of teacher aides; (d) patterns of scheduling within the target schools; and (e) the availability and use of materials and instructional media such as textbooks, TV cameras and recorders, and personal computers.

The five day sequence

A unique feature of the Integrated Model for Teaching and Conferencing in Reading/Language Arts (IMTC) is its organizational structure — a structure built around certain activities which recur each week. While this arrangement may appear rigid, in practice quite the reverse appears to be the case — insofar, at least, as the results of a recent pilot study indicate. In point of fact, the five-day sequence allows for a great variety of individual activities within the weekly pattern. The sequence, which is presented graphically below, can be summarized as follows:

- Day 1: Reading Focus - pre-reading activities
Writing Focus - pre-writing activities
- Day 2: Reading Focus - silent and oral reading
Writing Focus - drafting/informal conferencing
- Day 3: Reading Focus - silent and oral reading
Reading Aloud - literature selection read aloud by teacher

- Day 4: Reading Focus - silent and oral reading
Oral Language/Related art Activities -
dramatic & art activities designed to extend and develop reading/writing abilities.
- Day 5: Individual Conferences - pre-scheduled
“tutorials” designed to focus on reading
and writing matters which are unique to
individual students

The reasoning behind the five-day sequence began with the belief that an approach was needed which would restore the target students' self-confidence — the kind of self-confidence capable of reversing a pattern of low achievement. It was felt that each student needed to see a pattern and purpose for daily learning tasks. The five-day sequence, by providing a sense of what to expect, was intended to create such a pattern.

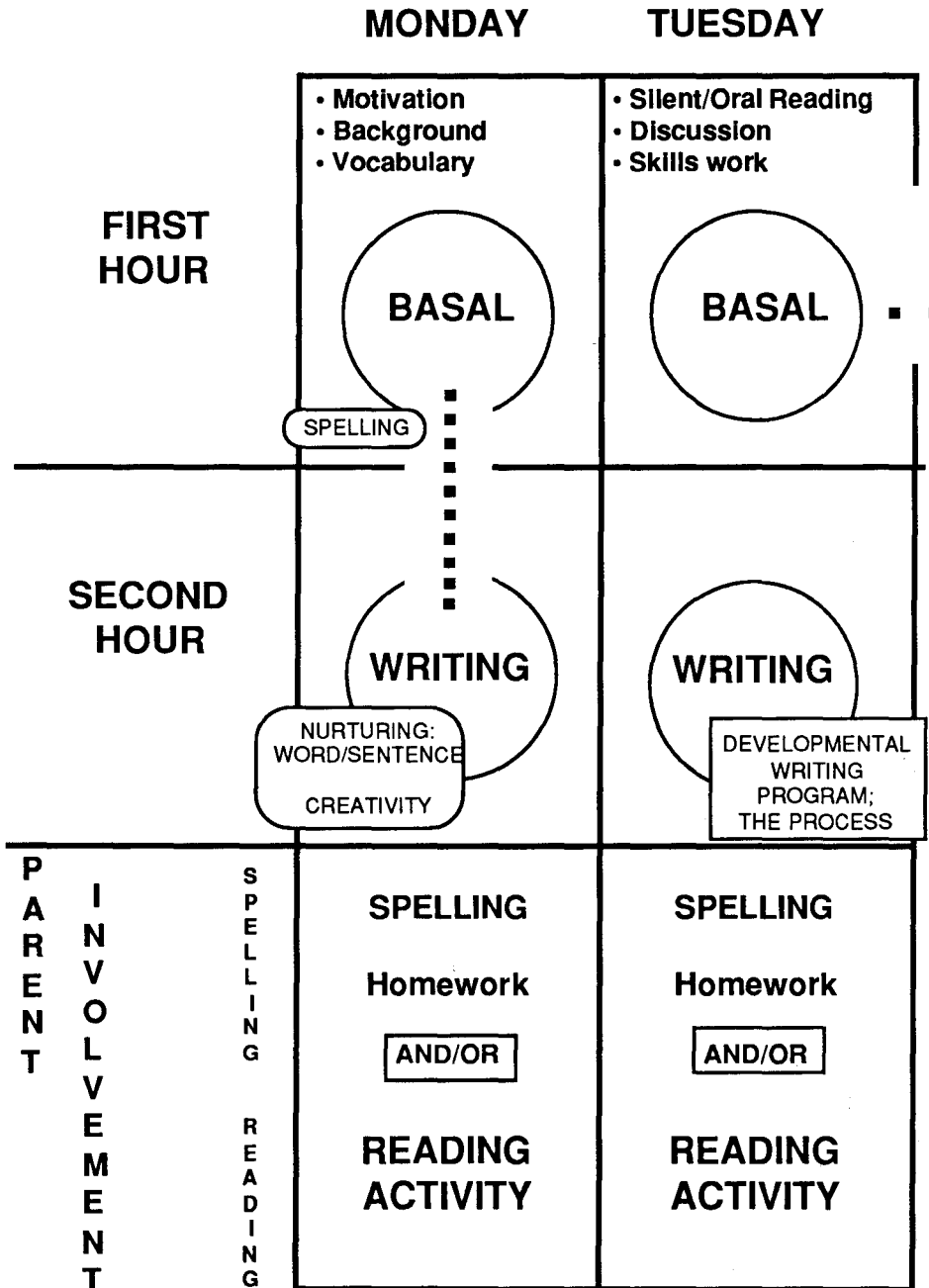
Providing a sense of purpose

In addition to creating a sense of what to expect, the program developers wanted to give both students and daily activities a sense of purpose.

The daily activities typically evolve from a simple and direct purpose: children learn language by using it. They learn to speak by speaking, to write by writing, and to read by reading — but more importantly, they gain significant knowledge from any one of these experiences, which extends to all the others.

In order to convey this sense of purpose, the program is designed to engage students in activities which show the relationship or connection among the language arts. Knowledge about structure and meaning underlies all language — oral or printed; spoken, heard, read, or written.

THE INTEGRATED MODEL FOR TEACHING AND

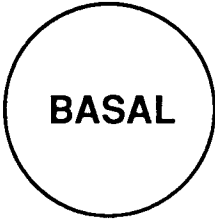


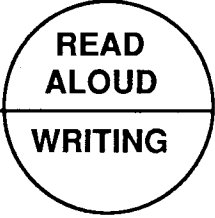

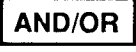



CONFERENCING IN READING/LANGUAGE ARTS

WEDNESDAY

THURSDAY

FRIDAY

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Silent/Oral Reading • Discussion • Skills work <p style="text-align: center;">  </p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Silent/Oral Reading • Discussion • Skills work <p style="text-align: center;">  </p>	<p style="font-size: 2em; letter-spacing: 0.5em;">I N D I V I D U A L</p> <p style="font-size: 2em; letter-spacing: 0.5em;">C O N F E R E N C E S</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">  </p> <p style="text-align: center;">  </p>	<p style="text-align: center;">  </p>	
<p style="text-align: center;"> SPELLING Homework  READING ACTIVITY </p>	<p style="text-align: center;"> SPELLING Homework  READING ACTIVITY </p>	

To compartmentalize language learning activities is to risk creating a misunderstanding about language learning. It has become quite natural, therefore, for the program developers to arrange activities during the five-day sequence so that reading, writing, and speaking are viewed by the students as connected or integrated experiences.

Curriculum elements

Still to be addressed are the specific elements which comprise the pattern of language learning activities over the five-day sequence. At this point, we might do well to ask and answer some “what” and “why” questions. Three programmatic questions are:

- Why retain a basal program as the first element of the IMTC?
- Why begin writing activities on the first day?
- What is the purpose and function of conference day?

The answers to these questions are intended to complete the description and justification of the IMTC.

Why retain a basal program as the first element of the IMTC? The attention to reading instruction on a daily basis is a common, though changing, educational practice in elementary schools. County and state-wide testing — and precedent — have combined to make it an inescapable reality of the classroom.

To integrate reading with, or connect it to, other elements of a total reading/language arts program requires that the teaching of reading (even within a basal program) be viewed much more broadly than the basal program typically demands. In other words, a great deal more attention is given in the IMTC to discussion of story content *before* reading

begins. It means that preparation for reading assumes a new and more vital position in reading instruction.

Silent and oral reading are still practiced, but with the aim of expanding knowledge of meaning — which in turn serves to generate opportunities for thinking about what has been read, talking about it, and writing about it. In short, a great deal of effort is being made to develop literature-based routines within the basal program.

Why begin writing activities on the first day? Writing begins on the first day because it is expected that, frequently, tasks will grow naturally from the reading or pre-reading activities which will have already taken place. The kind of writing (expressive, informative, literary) will vary. And whether the writing is done individually or as a group activity, the focus is on preparation — the first step in what teachers have come to know as the writing process.

What is the purpose and function of conference day? The conference day is uniquely suited, both academically and logistically, to the five-day sequence. It is a day devoted to individual, private conferences. It is a time for nurturing the writing process, for providing editorial assistance, for teaching directly to the individual language needs of each student. It is a tutorial in the best sense of the word — a time in which the teacher gives undivided attention to every student for ten or fifteen minutes every week. Small classes (12-15 students) and the availability of an aide to assist the teacher during conference time makes this vital activity possible.

Theoretical considerations

There are two theoretical questions which also need to be answered:

- What relationship does a read aloud day have to an integrated curriculum?
- Why is oral language given its own special place in an integrated curriculum?

What relationship does a read aloud day have to an integrated curriculum? Aside from the research which confirms the value of "read aloud" as a means of cultivating emotional involvement and a positive value for literature, "read aloud" has a very practical relationship to an integrated reading/language arts curriculum (Johnson and Louis, 1987). It gives a group of less-than-skilled readers (the target students) an opportunity to observe the reading techniques of a highly skilled reader (the teacher). The program developers share the belief that there is a rub off effect — that students can learn important qualities of skilled reading by listening to a teacher who is modeling these qualities.

Such qualities include, for example, the teacher's ability to chunk the passage being read into meaningful units and to reveal this process through the smooth and cohesive rendering of text with the kinds of intonation patterns and pauses which collectively allow for a clear understanding of what has been written.

The literature selections used for the read aloud day will be part of an in-class library. The library will be accessible to students for independent reading. And while the selections which are read by the teacher will, from time to time, extend a topic or theme introduced in reading and writing activities begun earlier, this kind of content integration is not a stated intention of the IMTC. The purpose of read aloud, as has already been noted, is to give students an opportunity to acquire knowledge about language and meaning that is only

possible while attending to the performance of a skilled reader.

Why is oral language given its own special place in an integrated curriculum? The phrase *oral language* is intended to describe a variety of activities — from small group discussion, to speech-making, to drama. Drama activities, ranging from role playing to Readers' Theater to the enacting of short plays (even some created by members of the class), will receive particular emphasis in the IMTC. The purpose of oral language activities harkens back to the premise that one learns language by using it. This can be especially true of activities in which students are required to speak expressively, and to make themselves clearly understood to an audience that is close at hand.

Through dramatic activities, teachers can create insights into the nature of language that are impossible to achieve in other ways. In a manner which, in a sense, reverses the possibilities of read aloud, students can begin to see, through the process of bringing a playscript to life, how print and oral language are related, how the ability to speak a line naturally and effectively to an audience requires the same kind of knowledge it takes to read naturally and effectively. Clearly, such undertakings shift emphasis to meaning — an essential aspect of all language activities.

Oral language activities will frequently take on a life of their own — a single play spreading out over several weekly drama days, culminating with a live or videotaped performance. At other times, the oral language day will become an opportunity for teachers to have students transform a writing activity into a series of individual recitations — giving students time to read their own original works aloud to classmates.

Pilot program

A two week pilot program of the IMTC model was successfully implemented in March, 1988. Twelve teachers participated in the pilot program. Teachers reported that the five day sequence was a positive experience for their students. Both teachers and students were most enthusiastic about the oral language days. Chapter I students were thrilled to be able to work on play production, while teachers appreciated the change of tone and attitude in their classrooms. Teachers noted that the conference day was extremely helpful. All aspects of the IMTC were well received. Several teachers asked if they could continue using the model for the rest of the school year. Plans were made for an intensive three week training institute to facilitate IMTC implementation in the fall.

By providing this sequence of activities, the developers of the IMTC sought to bring about increased student confidence through both pattern and purpose: one learns language by using it. Teachers agreed that the IMTC activities provide opportunities for students to use language in all its forms, spoken and written, and the activities enabled students to discover and benefit from the interrelatedness of language.

Reference

Johnson, T. D., & Louis, D. R. (1987). *Literacy Through Literature*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

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