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B. Joyce Wiencek

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Literacy Centers in Primary Classrooms

B. Joyce Wiencek, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of reading and language arts at Oakland University, where she is also affiliated with the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement. She is a member of the board of the Oakland County Reading Council, the Michigan Reading Association, and the International Reading Association.

A literacy center is a great place to engage young students in active learning while teachers conduct small instructional groups. Planning for these groups gives rise to questions such as "What do my other students do while I meet with and teach my guided reading or writing groups?" Although the concept of centers has been around for many years, there has been a resurgence of interest in them as a viable way to engage students who aren't participating in a group activity with the teacher (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Morrow, 1993; Routman, 1991). While in centers, students can be active and engaged in independent or interdependent literacy activities with their peers. Students enjoy working with, assisting, and learning from each other as they engage in tasks that might be beyond an individual student's abilities (Vygotsky, 1978).

Fundamentally centers are a great idea, although in practice, planning for, orchestrating, and managing literacy centers can be a complex and time-consuming task for the teacher. Remember that centers are a means to an end. Centers exist to reinforce and extend emerging abilities in students and to free teachers so they can focus their attention on instructing and scaffolding students' development in small groups. When a teacher's planning for centers competes with planning for guided reading or other instructional groups, then it's time to reevaluate what's important in the program and simplify the centers.

Guidelines for planning, initiating, and successfully managing centers are elaborated in the next section. This is followed by suggestions for literacy centers.

Guidelines for Center Activity

The following guidelines apply to all centers whether literacy, mathematics, science, or another type of center. Consistency in rules and responsibilities helps ensure that students work independently.

Make literacy activity the focus of each center

Reading and writing in all their forms should be the driving forces behind student activity at centers. Enjoyable activities allow students to practice, develop, and reinforce their emerging abilities while developing a love of reading and writing. Through independent and interdependent activity with their peers, students will read and write more and, therefore, become better readers and writers.

Engage students at literacy centers in active learning that is simple yet challenging

Centers should engage students as active thinkers and doers rather than passive learners and should reflect developmentally appropriate practice (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). Students need to be able to perform activities independently or with minimal assistance from their peers so they won't have to come to the teacher for assistance. That's why activities need to be simple yet challenging.

Designate center areas using signs and post center assignments

Center areas should be clearly marked so students know where each center is located. Include a picture or icon along with a written label on the sign so that non-readers can utilize them (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Post or hang the sign directly over the center, and

Believe in the ability of your students to work independently and interdependently at centers

make them double-sided if they hang from the ceiling so students can read them from any location.

Assigning and posting students' center assignments

helps avoid confusion and problems such as too many students selecting one center or students continually going to the same center. Post center assignments on a bulletin board using a copy of the sign posted at the center. Make a nametag for each student and post their names under the center to which they are assigned. Some teachers assign students to centers according to the table at which they sit, while others use random assignment. Rotate center assignments on a regular basis so students can predict when the changes will occur. When things are going smoothly and as a motivator, occasionally allow students to choose which center they'll visit. Explain and make students aware of the signage and the posting of center assignments so they use them.

Introduce a limited number of centers to students as a mean of establishing routines and responsibilities

Begin teaching students about one center by inviting the whole class over to that center and talking about the activity that will occur. Establish for all centers basic routines that include what students' responsibilities are, where they do the activity, where materials are kept, what to do when they finish an activity, how to handle materials and clean up, and where finished or incomplete projects are stored. Taking time to establish routines

and responsibilities increases the likelihood that students will work productively without your assistance.

Explain and model how students will participate at each center. For example, when introducing students to the "Read the Room Center," grab a pointer and model how students should be working at the center. Explain, model, and have students participate at a different center each day for three or four days before letting them have a go at working at these centers simultaneously. Gradually introduce additional centers if you choose.

Include routines for students to follow after they complete their center activity. Students may be given several options, such as using the materials at the center to create new products or choosing other centers to visit. Post these options on a chart for handy student reference.

Believe in the ability of your students to work independently and interdependently at centers. If you expect them to succeed at centers and carefully establish routines at the beginning of the year, they are far more likely to be successful. And, although your students are young, remember they are capable of staying engaged in activities and cleaning up after themselves.

Establish a signal such as the ringing of a bell to get students' attention to call a group of students over to work with the teacher. Make it clear that when students are called to group they simply must leave whatever they are doing and come immediately. Other students are made to understand not to disturb the projects of those engaged in the instructional group. Following group time, the students simply return to their unfinished work.

Debriefings are the time to acknowledge students' accomplishments and actions that need improvement

Each day immediately following center time, hold a class debriefing – a discussion of how things went – acknowledging and praising what went well or providing solutions to problems that may have occurred. For

example, if at the computer center three students got very boisterous while playing a word game, then during the debriefing the teacher talks about this problem and offers solutions. The teacher focuses the discussion on how students need to regulate their voices and reminds them of their responsibility to monitor their peers and, if necessary, advise others to "use soft voices." Because building a sense of shared responsibility and community is essential to the success of centers, encourage your students to find solutions to problems that arise. Debriefings help students learn to self-regulate their own behaviors and those of their peers. Initially, hold a debriefing every day until things are running smoothly and then as needed.

Create and assign new activities for centers, but do not change the activities too quickly

Change center activities every two weeks or once a month, not every week. Students need time to engage in an activity at a center without it disappearing before they get to do it. Pull-out programs or other interruptions may keep a student from getting to a center or from completing an activity on any given day, so some teachers assign students to the same center for two consecutive days.

Teachers who change center activities every week often find themselves overwhelmed by the planning and preparation process. When centers become the focus teachers' attention, they may conclude that centers cannot work in their classrooms and abandon centers and small group instruction. Centers can work, but teachers must plan carefully to ensure their success.

Plan a consistent length of time for centers each day

Center activities might typically last 30 to 60 minutes per day. The length of time for centers may vary based upon the time of year. At the beginning of the year, a shorter time frame makes sense as students learn to be independent. Then, as the year progresses, more complex center activities may lead to a

longer time frame. Nothing is more frustrating for students than just beginning an activity and then being told time is up or repeatedly never getting to finish an activity. Timing is important.

Include written directions at each center

Initially verbal directions may be all that's needed at a center, but, as the year progresses and students become more independent and capable of reading, include written directions. They are especially useful when a series of steps need to be followed. After students complete an activity, you might ask them to write directions for next year's students. They'll love doing it and learn a great deal in the process.

Invite parents to assist in the donation of materials and maintenance of centers

Write a letter to parents asking them to donate spare materials such as cardboard, yarn, fabric, envelopes, etc. Ask parents to assist in the gathering of materials from local businesses, which often give things away. Some parents might be willing to

restock a center or create new materials such as puppets or flannel board characters. Even working parents may be willing to fold flip book pages or cut materials at home. Many parents want to help, so be creative and offer many options.

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Keep a center learning log in which you record rules, routines, and notes about centers

Take time to jot down the rules and routines and note the dates you begin and end a center. Record notes about how students do in each center (e.g.: "Oct. 15, Art Center: Students are having difficulty making sock puppets. Too many written directions that students aren't able to read. Start this center activity later in the year.") These notes will be invaluable as you plan and prepare centers in subsequent years.

Literacy Centers

The following list is a small sampling of literacy centers. Remember to start with only three or four centers and expand and change them as your students are ready to try new and more challenging activities.

Art Center

Students participate in a variety of activities, including making puppets of story characters, illustrating settings from favorite stories, creating murals or mosaics, creating props to accompany a favorite story or nursery rhyme (such as a star on a wand for *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*), etc. The materials and activities available to students are constantly changing and always have a story or literacy connection.

Paint and Write Center

Students paint a picture. After painting, students write about their pictures on strips of paper that are attached to the pictures after they dry. Pictures and messages are hung in a special area of the room to be read and eventually could be made into a class book.

Read the Room Center

Read the Room originated in New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 1994). Students read and reread text found on the classroom walls, ceiling, floor, and at other centers in the room. This might include reading charts, Big Books, poems, student projects, songs, directions, nursery rhymes, lists, and thematic webs. Materials such as chopsticks make great pointers for students to use as they track print.

A variation on this center is the Read and Write the Room. Provide students with clipboards, paper, and pencils. Students wander the room and not only read things that interest them, but they also write down their favorite words and sentences.

Writing Center

Students have access to an array of writing materials such as pens, colored pencils, markers, all types and sizes of paper, stamps, scissors, tape, and staplers. Students create ABC books, birthday and special occasion cards for friends or family members, notes to

classmates, rhyming books, etc. Periodically introduce specific activities such as creating a page for a class collaboration book; writing and drawing about the beginning, middle, and end of a story; or creating a new ending to a favorite story. You may introduce new material such as how to make accordion and flip books. Simple changes help keep the center engaging for students.

Once each month, introduce students to a new form of writing through a special activity. For example, read aloud *The Jolly Pocket Postman* and then invite students to write letters and mail them. Read and model how to create comic strips and then have students write their own.

Computer Center

Students can do a variety of activities using the rich array of computer programs that exist today. Listening to (using headsets) and engaging with interactive storybooks is a favorite of young students. Writing stories on the computer and using clip art is an activity students love because they get to print and share.

Story Drama Center

Students have props that they use to act out stories they've heard or written themselves. For example, making masks for reenactments of favorite stories such as *The Three Billy Goats Gruff* and *Caps for Sale*.

Puppetry Center

An array of puppets is available for students to use to tell stories from their lives and stories they've made up or to retell favorite stories. Puppets may be commercially prepared or student-made, such as bag, stick, and shadow puppets. A puppet stage supports and enhances this activity.

Reading Center

A rich classroom library center is essential to every primary classroom (Morrow, 1993; Routman, 1991). It should be filled with lots of quality literature in many different genres and at many different reading levels. The genres might include: picture and chapter books, poetry, student-written books, maga-

zines, comic books, expository texts, class collaboration books, and big books. Make this center comfortable and attractive. Unusual features such as a sofa, a bathtub, rocking and beanbag chairs, or stuffed animals add to the ambiance of the center. Students may choose to read independently or socially to a friend or stuffed animal.

Recording Center

Students love to hear their voices on tape. A student may read aloud, tape recording a favorite book or story, and then replay it for friends or family. It's a great way to encourage students to read with fluency and expression. Groups of students might tape record a play script and then listen to it themselves.

Poetry, Song, and Chant Center

Students reread poetry, fingerplays, songs, chants, raps, etc. from charts or books. They practice and perfect these for performance with friends, parents, or students in another grade. Adding body movements, creating props, adding a beat or musical instruments, and discovering how to vary their voices can enhance their oral performance and interest in reading.

Listening Center

Students listen to and read along with predictable books, favorite stories, expository books, and books written by their peers. This activity could be followed by a journal activity in which students draw and write about their favorite part of the story.

Theme Center

Thematic approaches to teaching and learning are popular, and this center allows students to explore and work with a variety of materials and texts related to a theme. Students may read, write, view, observe, document, and explore items related to the theme.

Dramatic Play Center

Students engage in play based upon the current theme of the dramatic play center. Themes are based in real-life settings that stu-

dents know about or will visit during an upcoming field trip or topics that really excite them. Themes such as a restaurant, space flight center, department of natural resources, veterinarian's office, or post office are appropriate. Include a variety of literacy materials and objects found in the real setting for students to use during their play. A veterinarian's office may include props such as prescription pads, an appointment book, a receipt book, a patient file, stethoscope, bandages, and stuffed animals as patients. Good props support students' dramatic play and encourage authentic literacy activities (Schickedanz, 1999).

Game Center

Students play simple board or card games that require reading, thinking, and problem-solving. Games can be adapted to include more reading. Create a version of Go Fish that has words related to the theme, or create a version of Concentration that uses wall words. Invite students to create and write games for their peers.

ABC's and Word Play/Study Center

Engage students in a variety of activities that reinforce and extend their letter and word knowledge. Magnetic letters and cookie sheets, dry erase boards with markers, chalkboards with chalk, or letter cards with stands for making words may be found at this center. Often students turn this center into a school where they assume the role of teacher and students as they play with words and create challenges for each other.

Photo Center

Students write text to support photos taken during a field trip or special activity. They might also bring photos from home. Text is written on sentence strips or sheets of paper or on the computer.

Final Thoughts

Be creative and invent for your students other new and challenging centers that actively engage them. Follow your students' lead by noticing what motivates them and use these ideas in new ways in centers.

The primary goal of literacy centers is to reinforce and extend students' emerging abilities while enabling the teacher to meet with small groups of students. Most importantly, good centers and effective center management enable teachers to provide close instruction to students regularly. Everyone benefits.

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