

An On-line Journal
for Teacher Research

Putting Literacy Centers to Work: A Novice Teacher Utilizes Literacy Centers to Improve Reading Instruction

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“Girl, you have got to do something about that reading lesson!” After observing a reading lesson, my mentor shared how most of my students were off-task. She pointed out how some students were playing with the supplies on their tables and some were playing with supplies under the table. She suggested that I make the lesson more hands-on and interactive, possibly utilizing manipulatives, to keep the students engaged.

My frustration mounted as I listened to these words of advice from my mentor because the lesson that I was giving was a scripted Reading First lesson. Reading First is a grant from the federal government that provides funding for both instructional and assessment materials as well as professional development for teachers. Reading First is designed to help Title I schools that have failed to make adequate yearly progress. Schools are defined as Title I schools based on the income levels of the families they serve. Reading First schools must use curriculum that is considered research-based and teachers are expected to adhere closely to curricular guidelines. Several schools in our large urban district in the American Southwest, including ours, received Reading First grants. The previous summer I had been trained to teach this scientifically research-based program. I was taught that I was required to follow the script each day regardless of the children’s needs or their responses to the lesson.

George Deboer (2002) wrote that the current trends toward standards-based education have decreased the opportunities for child-centered teaching and reduced the autonomy of

teachers. Since the adoption of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001, well-meaning authors of educational policy have changed teachers’ curricula, pedagogy and schedules in ways that do not always support best practice (Deboer, 2002). Deboer (2002) found that when content standards are more general and teachers and schools are given more flexibility, then teachers can teach to the interests of their students, thereby maintaining on-task behavior.

My quandary led me to compare my school’s Reading First Program with my prior teaching experiences. The average reading level for my first grade students on the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) at the beginning of the year was level three. The DRA is a series of leveled books designed to assess students’ reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. While a DRA level 3 is acceptable for the beginning of first grade, students should be reading at a level of 16 by the time they move to second grade. However, I was surprised by the level 3’s because the students at the school where I did my student teaching began first grade at an average level of 6. I wondered what the differences were between the Reading First program and the balanced literacy program that was used during my student teaching experience. I wondered if I needed to incorporate some of the balanced literacy practices in order to help my students.

The most noticeable difference between the programs was the emphasis that balanced literacy placed on teaching the writing process. I was confused because the Reading First trainers had told me that I could not teach writing during the reading lesson time.

As a first-year teacher in a graduate induction program, I expressed my frustrations to my university professor. Her response was that I might be able to teach some of the required Reading First lessons through literacy centers. I could give the students more opportunities for hands-on experiences and incorporate the writing process into my literacy centers. This provided a new direction.

In order to compensate for the inflexibility of the Reading First curriculum, some teachers have created hybrid programs that utilize their own knowledge of best practices. Kersten and Pardo (2007) explained that teachers learn to “finesse” or create a precise and complicated system of reviewing available options and making purposeful decisions by attending to some things and ignoring others that are in conflict with their beliefs. When teachers view reforms as opportunities to solve problems rather than limits, they create original pedagogy. As they argue, many teachers are working in environments that will not be productively addressed by a “one size fits all” curriculum.

Literacy centers became the focus of my action-research project which was part of my graduate program. In particular, my research questions included: How does the use of structured literacy centers improve first grader’s reading performance? How can I improve my student’s engagement in reading lessons? How will my student’s DRA scores be impacted by working in literacy centers during reading instruction?

Research on Literacy Centers

Literacy centers are defined as small areas within the classroom where students work alone or in small groups to explore literacy activities while the teacher provides small-group guided reading instruction (Diller, 2003). The version of literacy centers used in my classroom was inspired by the work of Vygotsky (Diller, 2003). Vygotsky proposed the concept of the zone of proximal development and studied the role of play in a child’s education. As Debbie Diller explained, the zone of proximal development is “what a child can do with support today that they can do own their own tomorrow” (2003, p.8).

Through interaction with a teacher, a child may exceed what he could have done on his own; peer collaboration in literacy centers can also help children reach the new levels.

Literacy centers within a learner-centered environment are also consistent with the work of Piaget (as cited in Deboer, 2002) who believed that children develop meaning through their direct experiences and through conversations with others regarding those experiences. Learner-centered environments are supported by the work of Deci and Ryan (as cited in Deboer, 2002) who found evidence that children put more effort into their school work when they are intrinsically motivated rather than teacher motivated. In his book, *Teaching with the Brain in Mind*, Eric Jensen writes that students learn when teachers provide choices, make learning relevant and keep it engaging (as cited in Diller, 2003).

Literacy centers should be introduced in ways that link them to other classroom activities. The teacher should state the purpose of each activity. Ford and Opitz (2005) suggest that the teacher gradually introduce the centers by modeling the activities for the students and giving the students clear, accountable expectations for work produced in each center. Social interaction, found by Johnson and Johnson (1981) to increase productivity and achievement, and the use of more than one language system are also important elements of an effective center. For example, the students are not only reading text, they are also writing and discussing texts. Effective centers require students to transfer meaning and reconstruct it in other contexts such as a center where a student reads a book and then creates a board game based on the plot. Finally, an effective center offers a range of acceptable responses (Cambourne & Labbo, 2001). For instance, some students may create words or sentences with magnetic letters, while others may be placing letters in alphabetical order.

In summary, literacy centers enable teachers to differentiate instruction, address the interests of students, keep the learning child-centered, create socially-based learning, and teach

children within their zones of proximal development.

Methodology

Context of Study

My research was conducted for six weeks during the spring semester in my first grade classroom. Our campus is a Pre-K through 5th grade school that houses approximately 945 students and is located in a large urban district in the American Southwest. The school includes several special education classes. Ninety two percent of the students are classified as economically disadvantaged; therefore, our school is designated a Title I school. The ethnic distribution is 86% Hispanic students, 12% African American students, and 2% White students.

My class consisted of 17 students, 12 boys and 5 girls. The ethnic distribution of my class was as follows, 10 Hispanic students, 6 African American students, and one Caucasian student. Sixteen of my students received assisted lunch benefits. Data was collected on all of my students; six students with varying abilities were chosen as focus students. The focus students were chosen based on the DRA (Development Reading Assessment) scores that were collected at the beginning of the study. Two of the students were high performing, two were medium performing, and two were low performing.

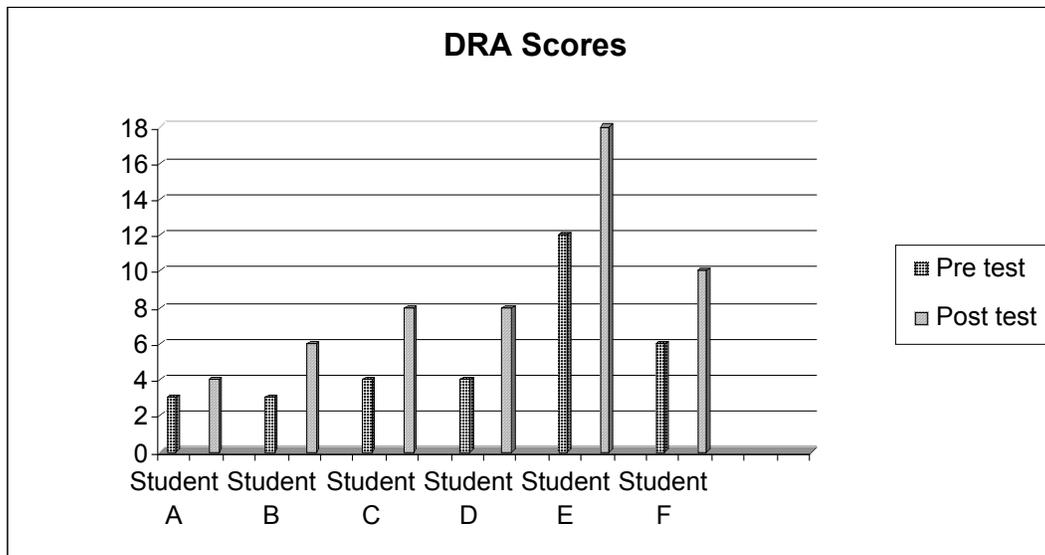
Research Project

I began the study by reintroducing my learning centers with a more clearly defined set of expectations. The centers had been taught at the beginning of the school year with a general set of expectations for all of the centers such as working with a low voice and asking for help from three friends before interrupting the teacher. I now believed that each center should have a very specific set of expectations so I presented the students with a folder for each center. One side of the folder was labeled "What I Can Do" and the other said "Where I Can Get Help". The options on the "What I Can Do" section allowed students to make choices and work at their own ability level. In some centers, such as the computer center, specific students were listed on the "Where I can get

Help" side of the folder. These students had shown that they understood the center and could help others. The new center folders were kept with the center materials as reference for the students. During the reintroduction of the centers, the students were told of the learning purpose and importance of the centers.

I interviewed each student in the class to find out which students they preferred to work with and I created smaller work groups based on their preferences. I feared that the struggling students would ask to work with someone who would want to play instead of work, but I was pleasantly surprised when they preferred to work with classmates who would be helpful. Debbie Diller suggested in *Literacy work stations: Making centers work (2002)* that three is a crowd in literacy centers. Based on her work, I decided to create more centers to accommodate more groups of two students. The students were much more focused in the smaller groups making it well worth the effort. Each student participated in four centers each day with at least two of those centers involving the writing process. Each day the groups rotated to four different centers allowing everyone an opportunity to work with all of the materials every few days.

After reintroducing the library center, ABC center, computer center, listening center, and journal writing center, I set up additional centers with a greater focus on writing. These new centers included science journal center in which the students wrote observations about objects from nature that I brought into the classroom including my collections of rocks, shells, a bird nest and other objects for the children to write about. I posted science words in a pocket chart to provide vocabulary words. In addition, reference books were added so that students could locate the names of the rocks and shells. I added a poetry writing center with poetry books for inspiration. The children enjoyed the books of nursery rhymes at this station. Since they already knew the rhymes, they could rewrite them by changing the words. A card-making center with seasonal stamps and papers was a big hit for Valentines day and Mother's day. Recipe writing center included cookbooks for inspiration and this

Figure 1: Student DRA Test Scores

became an authentic writing experience as we created a class cookbook of student-written and -illustrated recipes that we gave to our moms for Mother's day.

At the end of each center period, students shared their work with the rest of the class. This held the students accountable for their center time not only to the teacher but to their peers. When interest in a center waned, I removed that center and added a new activity. I generally added two new activities each week. The students were excited when they arrived in the morning to see a new center posted on the chart.

I collected data through anecdotal records and a teacher-research journal. I took notes when the students shared their work at the end of centers time and placed a quick score of 1 to 5 on a chart. Each day I walked through the room with my clipboard and 6 post-it notes and I noted which stations the focus students were working in. I also wrote either an E for engaged or NE for not engaged. I considered the student to be engaged if he or she was working productively with the materials provided. This check only took a few moments and I also reaped additional benefits; students worked harder when they knew that I was taking notes. I transferred these notes to my teacher research journal

and reflected each day in the journal on why particular centers were effective or ineffective. I collected student work samples from my focus students including journals, reading logs, and word lists written. I enjoyed seeing the dramatic progress in the student journals when I compared the beginning work samples with the ending samples. At the end of the study period I assessed the students again to find their DRA levels.

Findings

After six weeks, my students' DRA scores had increased an average of four reading levels (See Figure 1.) Even more interesting was the correlation between my anecdotal notes regarding engagement in the centers and the dramatic improvement in DRA scores. Student A had one of the smallest improvements and he also was the most frequently off task during center time. Conversely, Student E had one of the greatest gains in scores and was consistently engaged in the writing centers.

The students who were the least engaged in the centers were also the students with the lowest reading scores. Even when they were paired with a friend who was more highly engaged, they were frequently off-task. I discovered that some of the centers were too challenging for these students so they avoided

the work that was beyond their ability level. These students were highly engaged in the computer or the listening center because they did not have to think of what to write. Sentence and story starters seemed to help these students to some degree but I felt that the root of the problem was their lack of basic skills such as segmenting sounds. Their writing was inhibited by their lack of knowledge about words. As a result, I soon concentrated on these skills in small groups while the other students were in centers.

I also found that the students were most engaged by novelty in the centers. I replaced centers when student interest waned. Although this increased my preparation time, it was worth the effort to see the students become more engaged.

I tried the “One Strike and You are Out” rule that Debbie Diller proposes (2002). The rule is that if the teacher sees a student not working appropriately in the center then the student is sent back to their own table to work by themselves. They are not allowed a warning or a second chance. I did not find this to be effective for my classroom. I think that the students who were misbehaving were actually avoiding work that was too difficult. Some students seemed relieved to be out of their center. I began to see the misbehavior as my mistake. Perhaps I had inadequately taught the center skill, not provided enough novelty, or created activities that were too difficult for lower performing students.

In addition to teaching the skills necessary for the new centers, mini lessons and reviews of the current centers were beneficial. Students were instructed to go to the person who was listed in the center folder for help. This resulted in some misinformation. I learned that providing a mini lesson on one of the center activities each day was a good idea. Even if the students were comfortable with the materials, I gave suggestions about researching more information or adding more colorful language to their writing. This increased engagement in that center and helped students who were unclear about the original instructions.

I also learned that by stopping to observe how the students used center materials helped identify new ideas for learning centers. We enjoyed a “Wheel of Fortune” type game as a sponge activity in our classroom. A sponge activity utilizes the moments that might otherwise be wasted while waiting for administrative scheduled events. Soon after, I observed two girls using the letter cards from the pocket chart center to make their own “Wheel of Fortune” game during center time. The next day I added that activity to our centers and it remained a favorite.

Conclusions

Next year, I plan to introduce each center at the beginning of the year with the “What I can do” folder. I now know that I need to teach and re-teach both the centers and the expectations for the behavior in those centers and keep the materials fresh. I plan to have a wider range of activities to accommodate the various skill levels in the class and to challenge each and every student. I would like to offer the students choices in terms of activities and learning partners. I believe that when a child is ready for a new challenge he or she will move on to the next level. I want to trust the students more to tell me when they are ready to move forward. I will continue to take anecdotal notes and make time to stop and listen to the students to learn what they need in order to tailor learning activities to their interests.

Behavior in my class improved during center time because instead of reacting to misbehaviors, I prevented them through more clearly defined expectations (Ford & Opitz, 2002) and engaging activities (Jenson, 2005). I believe that all students want to please their teachers but often misbehave when they are not able to work at their own levels. As I learned from Cambourne and Labbo (2001), choice and a range of response within centers helped each student to be successful.

I believe that I learned these important lessons from my students. The notes I took each day and my reflections on those notes were invaluable. Not only did my assessments

drive my instruction but now my observations and reflections informed instruction so that I was able to fine tune my practices each day and my instruction is now much more learner-centered.

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