

When a teacher works with a small group, other students need independent activities that help them learn and practice reading and writing.

Using centers to engage children during guided reading time: Intensifying learning experiences away from the teacher

While...small-group work is at the heart of guided reading, it must not be seen as an end in itself.... Small-group guided reading, as powerful as it is, must be understood as but one part of a comprehensive literacy program. (Routman, 2000, p. 140)

There is no question that the practice of meeting with readers in small groups to provide guided reading instruction is perceived as a critical part of literacy programs designed to create independent, lifelong readers (Cunningham, Hall, & Cunningham, 2000; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Mooney, 1990). The smaller groups provide a greater opportunity for teachers to use instruction that scaffolds the learning and engages the learner—two key characteristics of exemplary teachers in high-achieving primary classrooms (Pressley, 1998). These small groups allow for a more effective type of strategic coaching to take place, and strategic coaching appears to be one of the key elements that distinguish high-achieving classrooms from those with moderate or low performances (Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 1999). Seeing guided reading promoted and implemented by countless teachers is no surprise. Hearing questions emerge as teachers give their best efforts to implement guided reading is also no surprise. Regardless of the teaching strategy, our own teaching experiences have helped us to

see that translating theory into practice takes time and effort. Why should guided reading be any different?

In our interactions with primary teachers working to effectively implement guided reading practices, many of the questions we receive relate to the issues Routman raised in the comments that introduce this article (Opitz & Ford, 2001). More specifically, questions relate to classroom organization and management. A review of articles and books focused on guided reading helps to explain why this is so (Cunningham, Hall, & Cunningham, 2000; Mooney, 1995). Much of the attention in these publications focuses on the quality of instruction that occurs with the teacher during guided reading, leaving questions unanswered about what the other children should be doing and the quality of their instruction when they are away from the teacher. However, because students spend a significant amount of time away from the teacher during guided reading, the time question is critical. Clearly, the power of the instruction that takes place away from the teacher must rival the power of the instruction that takes place with the teacher.

This article offers some suggestions that can be used to maximize the literacy learning that can and needs to occur during this independent

arning time. After presenting three possible classroom organizational structures, we elaborate on the one that many teachers are (re)discovering: learning centers.

Instruction away from the teacher: Three organizational structures

In traditional classroom organizational patterns, approximately two thirds of a student's time during the designated reading block would be spent away from the teacher (Baumann, Hoffman, Duffy-Hester, & Ro, 2000). For the teacher to focus on the small group at hand, the remaining students had to be engaged in an independent activity. That activity was often defined by workbooks and worksheets (Durkin, 1978-1979; Ford, 1991). In a more contemporary version of that pattern, small groups of children met to talk with their teacher about their books while others were independently engaged in a menu of cut, color, and paste response projects. Neither scenario seemed to provide a level of instruction away from the teacher that was as powerful as the instruction with the teacher.

While we believe strongly in small groups for instruction as one critical element in a balanced reading program, we offer a caution that the concerns of the past do not surface again with the increasing use of guided reading. In some diverse classrooms where guided reading groups are formed primarily with children who are reading texts at the same level, the classroom teacher may be juggling even more small groups than in the past. From what we have observed in some classrooms that are implementing guided reading, a student's time with the teacher is even less frequent than in the traditional models. So the question of just how we make that time away from the teacher as powerful as the time spent with the teacher becomes even more critical.

The success of guided reading as an instructional practice certainly depends on the implementation of a classroom structure that provides teachers with opportunities to effectively work with small groups of readers while keeping other readers independently engaged in meaningful literacy learning activities (Kane, 1995.) Collaborating with others is one organizational structure that is sometimes used to make this happen. Some classroom teachers are fortunate enough to work in schools designed to encour-

age collaboration with other professionals such as reading specialists and special educators. The type of collaboration differs among schools and teachers. Sometimes specialists plan and team teach with teachers within the regular classroom setting. In this model there are two professionals in the room during the guided reading time, and each works with different guided reading groups. This makes work with several groups more likely and more manageable. Other times, specialists and teachers plan together for given groups of students, and some students leave the room to work with a specialist (Tilton, 1996).

Another classroom structure combines the use of an established program like writers' workshop with guided reading. If students are well versed and rehearsed in a more independent classroom routine like writers' workshop, then individual writing, revising, and editing times; peer conferences; and sharing times provide natural ways for students to stay engaged in powerful literacy activities away from the teacher. Teachers may have less need to develop an additional infrastructure for student engagement in order to secure time to work with small guided reading groups.

A third classroom structure involves using learning centers, small areas within the classroom where students work alone or together to explore literacy activities independently while the teacher provides small-group guided reading instruction.

There are many ways to implement centers (Morrow, 1997; Opitz, 1994). Sometimes one center is called "guided reading," and this is where the teacher is stationed. Children rotate through the centers according to a specified time schedule, thereby ensuring that every child does guided reading during the course of the day. Other times, children are grouped and then choose their own centers. The teacher then selects one or two children from the various groups to meet for guided reading instruction. Instead of a set rotation, students stay at the center until the task is completed and then move to other centers until center time is finished (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Regardless of the way that one chooses to use learning centers, there are several considerations that ensure success for students and teacher alike.

Figure 1
Word identification skills and strategies

Meaning cues
Using pictures
Using background knowledge
Using information in the selection
Visual memory cues
Letter-sound cues
Spelling patterns
Language structure cues
Comparing an unknown word to known words
Reading on
Rereading
Self-monitoring
Self-corrections

Considerations for successful learning centers

1. As with any good teaching, decisions about learning centers need to be grounded in the teacher's knowledge about the children as readers, writers, and learners. In considering the learners, one often overlooked question for the teacher to answer has to do with independence. Just how well can the children function independently? What do they need to learn to function better as independent learners? Most often, children need to be taught how to be independent. Taking time to teach them how to be independent learners is well worth the effort. Opitz (1994) offered a framework for how to do just that. He emphasized that the teacher must watch children to see what needs to be taught. For example, children may need to learn how to work with others in a group, use a tape recorder, care for materials, and locate help. After identifying these needs, Opitz suggested planning a four-part minilesson focused on each need:

- A focus (purpose for the lesson);
- An explanation, in which children are provided with the information related to the stated purpose;
- Role playing, which gives students opportunities for guided practice; and
- Direct application, which provides children with time to use the information as they complete their center activities for the day.

2. Consider the types of activities in which children will be independently engaged.

Children need activities that will advance their knowledge about literacy. Looking at what children are able to do on their own and how they perform on assessments and during guided reading can provide a wealth of information. Do students need repeated practice with a given story? Do they need to read with a partner to better understand a story? Do they need to write a response to something they have read? Do students need to listen to a given story on tape to better understand how to read with fluency? Answers to questions such as these lead to specific learning center activities designed to address them.

It is important to distinguish between independent activities that create excitement about reading and writing and those that actually require students to interact with print while reading and writing. While any number of cut, color, and paste activities done in response to or in support of reading and writing experiences can help to create some excitement about reading and writing instruction, these activities do little to require students to actually interact with print. This interaction is essential for learning about print and intensifies the power of center-based instruction.

3. Consider state or district curricular expectations. Now more than ever, it seems, teachers are expected to follow curriculum guides and provide evidence that students have been exposed to (if not mastered) the curriculum. Designing centers with the literacy curriculum in mind is an excellent way to ensure that children are exposed to it. Of course, to make some of these documents user friendly, teachers may want to transform them into manageable lists for easy reference. These lists might be housed in a lesson plan book or affixed to a file folder. (See Figure 1.) In some cases, activities can be coded to these lists (Opitz, 1994.)

4. Consider what is known about engagement in instructional settings. According to Brophy (1987), there are two keys that motivate learning: perception of the possibility of success and perception that the outcome will be valued. The instructional activity must be within reach of the learner. In other words, the learner needs to be able to perceive the possibility of success. Most of us withdraw quickly from any activity when we perceive that success is not possible (especially when that perception is based on the

real experience of repeated failure). And so it is with children. We need to set them up for success, and one way to do this is to provide appropriate activities. Another way is to make sure that the children fully understand the activity as the result of discussing, modeling, and practicing it in large- and small-group instructional settings guided by the teacher. By the time the activity is placed in a center for independent use, students can't help but be successful.

Students need to perceive not only that "I can do this!" but also that the outcome will be valued. Perhaps the best way to accomplish this is to offer purposeful and meaningful literacy activities. The challenge for teachers is knowing that students within one class vary quite significantly in their abilities to perceive success and in what outcomes they will value. Giving students a variety of activities is essential when one considers the diversity that exists within any one classroom. All students deserve to be successful, and some will need more support than others. Planning centers that operate with instructional density and multiple goals and outcomes is one way to guarantee this success. Opitz (1994) provided concrete suggestions for accomplishing this.

One example is to design an independent word-family activity. Teachers can identify an anchor word like *bug* but differentiate expectations for different groups moving through that center. Some groups might work with *bug* and create a word family based on the phonogram *-ug* with initial consonant substitutions (e.g., *rug, mug, tug, hug*). Other groups might start with *bug* as a root word and create a word family that is more structurally based by adding endings to the root word (e.g., *bugs, bugged, bugging, buggy*). Another group might start with *bug* at the center of a semantic map and map out meaning-based connections to the word (e.g., *bother, spy, insect*). The instruction at the center thus can address multiple goals and produce different outcomes.

5. Finally, consider the following guidelines for establishing an infrastructure of instruction away from the teacher. This infrastructure needs to do the following:

- Facilitate independent use by students. Any activity that has the potential to interrupt small-group instruction because of the complexity of sustaining its operation may be more of a deterrent than a learning tool.

- Operate with minimal transition time and management concerns. If implementing centers consumes more time, energy, and effort than the instruction and activities that take place at the centers, using them needs to be rethought.
- Encourage equitable use of activities among learners. If all center-based activities have value, it stands to reason that they would be important for all students. While some students may like some activities more than others, they need to be encouraged to participate in all activities. If the organization precludes some students from having access to the same centers as other students, arrangements need to be made to equalize access.
- Include a simple built-in accountability system. Engagement in the center-based activities is critical if students are going to learn what we would like them to learn as a result of completing them. True, we can be comfortable knowing that some students will stay productively engaged in the learning activities in the teacher's absence. At other times, we may well wonder whether all students were productively engaged. Simple accountability measures will motivate some students to stay productively engaged while serving as a window on the level of engagement for each student. One example is a center card issued to each student (see Figure 2). On it, a teacher can identify the independent activity options for students, and students can color in or mark off activities completed during independent time.
- Allow for efficient use of teacher preparation time. Elaborate centers that consume large amounts of teachers' limited preparation time without similar payoffs in duration of student engagement will lead to a quick abandonment of centers. Busy teachers need activities that can be easily changed or altered once established as part of center-based instruction.
- Build around class routines. Routines provide a predictable way for children to engage in learning. Routines also provide a predictable way for teachers to plan