Beyond the Guided Reading Table:  
Independent Tasks for Elementary School Literacy Learners

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**Introduction (Learner and Learning Context)**

Step foot into any elementary classroom and you will quickly see the vast range of differences among the students in attendance. These differences require the teacher to meet several different sets of needs throughout each school day, which can often leave novice teachers feeling overwhelmed. To attend to these differences that exist in every classroom, research continually points to one word: differentiation (Thomlinson, 2001; Watts-Taffe, Laster, Broach, Connor, Walker-Dalhouse, 2012; Wharton, McDonald, Pressley, & Hampton, 1998). Differentiation or ‘Differentiated Instruction’ is a student-centered approach to teaching that acknowledges student’s academic diversity and plans lessons that anticipate howstudents will learn best (Bush, 2006). If done thoughtfully, differentiation also has the power to honor diversity in gender, ethnicity, language, socioeconomic status, interests, and exceptionalities. It is not just a single strategy of instruction but an approach that incorporates a variety of strategies that can meet the needs of every child (Watts-Taffe et al, 2012). This powerful tool of validating student’s differences, strengths, and areas for growth has an ultimate goal however: to teach students in the most effective way possible (Bush, 2006). In a study conducted by Connor (2011), teachers who differentiated had students with higher gains in word reading and comprehension than teachers whose students received effective research driven strategies that did not differentiate instruction. Teachers can differentiate in any subject area, however the focus of this paper will be differentiating reading instruction through independent literacy tasks in the elementary school classroom.

Independent literacy tasks occur during a teachers English Language Arts time and often allow teachers to meet with guided reading groups. Guided reading is a process that enables teachers to differentiate instruction by meeting with strategically organized, small groups of students to foster reading skills and strategies by using developmentally appropriate books (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). I explored the research behind guided reading, as well as best practices concerning assessment, planning and instruction during small group literacy instruction in a previous inquiry project entitled, “Support for Guided Reading and Practical Ideas for Implementation” in the course Literacy Development EDUC6400 taught by Dr. Deborah Rowe. Because of the scope of that particular inquiry project, I was not able to explore the question that accompanies almost every discussion of this practice: “But what are the rest of the students doing?” (Opitz & Ford, 2004, p. 394). Consequently, I was left with an incomplete picture of how to practically implement this practice in a real classroom, because guided reading only works if the teacher is free from distraction and able to focus her attention on teaching the small group. This paper is a continuation of the inquiry project in EDUC6400 in that it has allowed me to complete the puzzle of classroom management during guided reading. I will attempt to draw out some answers to personal lingering questions by looking deeper into the design, implementation and management of literacy tasks as a valuable and transformative model of learning.

So then, what *are* the rest of the students in the class doing while the teacher is conducting a guided reading group? Simply put, they are engaged in independent work. However research does not support just keeping students busy and quiet coloring or doing worksheets. Fountas and Pinnell (1996) note that too much valuable learning time is lost if students are just ‘kept busy’ and if the management plan depends on these inauthentic tasks. Instead, research says that students should be independently engaged in authentic literacy tasks that allow learners opportunities to practice and extend critical literacy skills (Diller, 2003; Fountas and Pinnell, 1996; Richardson, 2009). In this case, independent means ‘without the teacher’s assistance;’ so students may be working by themselves, in pairs, or even small groups without the teachers help during this time.

While differentiating instruction via guided reading groups is an excellent start, using literacy tasks to provide even more differentiated, developmentally appropriate activities in addition to these small groups is even better. Technically, a teacher can differentiate literacy tasks with different sets of worksheets that still theoretically allow children to practice skills on their own developmental level. However, research strongly suggests literacy tasks that are authentic, social, and open ended are much more powerful and efficient (Diller, 2003; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Maurer, 2010; Turner, 1995; Turner & Paris, 1995;). In some very diverse classrooms, teachers may have many different guided reading groups to accommodate various reading levels. This forces students to spend a large amount of time away from the teacher during the literacy block (Ford and Opitz, 2002). Therefore, it is essential that the use of this time be just as powerful as the instruction that takes place with the teacher.

Literacy tasks are completed for a specific learning purpose, in a specific ‘stations’ around the classroom. These areas (sometime called literacy ‘centers’) should be stocked with materials that allow children opportunities to practice reading, writing, speaking and/or listening skills on their own level (Diller, 2003; Florida Center for Reading Research, 2016; Fountas and Pinnell, 1996; Maurer, 2010). In these literacy stations the emphasis is on the children’s work and hands on learning (Diller, 2003). Literacy centers should also be a continuation of what has already been taught, allowing students to transfer their knowledge and apply skills independently (Diller, 2003; Florida Center for Reading Research, 2016; Fountas and Pinnell, 1996). If done well, literacy tasks have the potential to meet various students’ individual needs in an engaging and fun way.

Literacy tasks that are authentic, socially oriented, developmentally appropriate and open-ended require teachers to be intentional in the planning process, which may result in more time and effort spent thinking about and designing literacy centers. However, every minute spent designing tasks that are engaging because they encompass these values, allows teachers to maximize learning and begin to create life-long readers. The characteristics of the literacy tasks I will describe don’t just keep students busy, they make a difference in their literacy lives by giving them opportunities to become readers and writers who use literacy efficiently, effectively, and for real world purposes (Boushey & Moser, 2014).

This paper will begin by discussing the research behind designing and implementing literacy tasks that are authentic, developmentally appropriate, social, and open-ended. While there are many more factors than just these that affect students’ success during literary tasks, due to the scope of this paper, I have chosen to focus on only a few. In addition, it should be noted that most research that exists regarding literacy tasks discusses the structure and planning of literacy tasks, not what actually happens within them (Maurer, 2010). Therefore, this paper is more of a hybrid approach to literacy centers, taking overarching themes from several models and various forms of research. Next, I will take a more practical stance as I discuss the planning and implementation of literacy tasks and rotations. Finally, with the principles laid out as a foundation, five different literacy tasks will be described (Appendix B) that I suggest would be a productive and research-based addition to a second grade, native-English speaking, general education balanced literacy curriculum.

**Research Support for Intentionally Designed Literacy Tasks (Curriculum)**

Authentic

The first characteristic that research supports within the realm of literacy tasks is that they should be authentic undertakings. Apart from school settings, reading and writing rarely encompasses just a paragraph of text, a worksheet, or fill in the blanks. Instead, we use literacy in the real world to convey ideas, to argue a point, to express feelings, or to tell a story. Authentic purposes for literacy should exist in the classroom as well (Boushey and Moser, 2014). In addition, studies have found that they should exist not just because they are similar to those children will encounter after their school career, but because they are also more motivating (Turner and Paris, 1995). Authentic tasks have a purpose that children can see the value of, as opposed to skill-focused tasks that are decontextualized and often force students to function on ‘auto-pilot,’ perhaps simply just filling in the blanks or selecting the right answer (Maurer, 2010; Turner & Paris, 1995). Unfortunately, in our schools today these skill-based tasks often drive instruction because of the demands of skill-based standardized tests (Maurer, 2010).

However, literacy tasks that are authentic allow children to simply “become better readers and writers” (Boushey & Moser, 2014), which is ultimately what most teachers want for their students. Though this encompasses a large range of skills and strategies that take years to master, teachers can begin to discuss with even young students the opportunities that being a great reader and writer allows them-- in and outside of school. Through authentic tasks such as discussing a particularly enjoyable book with a partner (Appendix E) or writing a letter to a friend (Appendix F), teachers convey to students the value for literacy as communication and enjoyment (Turner & Paris, 1995).

Developmentally Appropriate

Within authentic literacy tasks, tasks should also be developmentally appropriate, or within a child’s Zone of Proximal Development or ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978). In other words, during the literacy block, children should be participating in tasks that are not too hard, not too easy and that they can complete independently or with the assistance of a peer. This dynamic creates an appropriate challenge for each student. Differentiation of tasks set forth by the teacher, is determined by not only assessments but also observations of who a child is as a reader, writer, and learner (Ford & Opitz, 2002). Teachers can match student’s skills and understanding of the topic at hand with what they are asking children to do (and to what degree) (Bush, 2006 and Watts-Taffe et al., 2012). In the same realm, students can learn to self-select books that are developmentally appropriate as well. Books that children can and want to read extensively, improves automaticity, increases knowledge of sight words, and grows fluency. In addition, it gives students the ability to practice strategies they have learned through whole or small group instruction (Richardson, 2009). Student choice and teacher guidance work together to ensure that students are taking part in developmentally appropriate tasks. This balance allows for two distinct opportunities. The first is that it increases the chances that the teacher can remain uninterrupted during her guided reading lesson, because children will not need assistance with an activity due to lack of understanding since the task it just right for them. Secondly, it also allows students to gain confidence in their literacy knowledge by feeling validated and successful through tasks that they can complete well and independently. Essentially, finding the ‘right fit’ for students during literacy tasks makes this time efficient for both teacher and student.

Richard Allington (2002), a well respected researcher and educator in the area of literacy at the University of Tennessee, suggested that children should spend at least 90 minutes a day in *high success reading,* with the stipulation that any and all reading instruction should occur outside of those 90 minutes. High success reading is text that students can read at an independent level with 98% or higher accuracy. Literacy tasks that children can do independently help students meet this 90 minute quota of reading successfully. However just because the literacy block is technically 90 minutes, does not mean that students are necessarily reading or writing for that long. Less effective classrooms might fill this block with worksheets, excessive partner ‘discussion’, or rote copying of information (Allington, 2002). Alternatively, more effective teachers make sure that students are engaged in reading and writing for a maximum amount of time during their literacy block.

Socially Oriented

In addition to allowing children to feel successful and purposeful in their literacy tasks, research also submits that literacy center rotations allows children opportunities for social interaction. If children socially construct their knowledge when they learn as Vygotsky (1978) asserts, then it is important for school tasks to incorporate social activities. Diller (2003) describes the ‘hum’ that one might hear in a well-managed literacy block, as partners work on literacy tasks in pairs, contently and efficiently.

In her research, Maurer (2010) discusses two social ‘worlds’ that children encounter: “the official school world” and “the unofficial social world.” The official school world consists of lessons, spelling tests, math worksheets and reading groups while the social world consists of children’s relationships with their peers and adults. These two worlds can and should collide for children during literacy tasks, as they use dialogue to share ideas about school. This social interaction ultimately allows students to gain control of, and add to, their own learning (Maurer, 2010). During her observation, Maurer found evidence that, in a first grade classroom that allowed for peer dialogue during literacy tasks, children learned, practiced or used 47 of the 79 first grade indicators of literacy skills as described in the academic content standards. These skills included but were not limited to: decoding, vocabulary, and comprehension. Maurer’s finding points to the fact that literacy centers are an effective use of time in which children have an opportunity to use language and grow their skills. Peer interaction is what allows literacy tasks to be more than, “mundane, rote, and meaningless work. Instead the tasks became opportunities for children to discuss ideas, support one another, and use literacy in meaningful ways (Maurer, 2010).” Children can pique interest in others, borrow strategies from each other, and provide an opportunity to meaningful discussion (Tuner & Paris, 1995). Even tasks that could be considered worksheets, such as ‘cloze reading’ tasks can be made more acceptable by allowing children to create their own choice of the best word for a deletion and work together to discuss what they believe that best choice to be (Cambourne, Labbo, Carpenter, 2001).

Open-Ended

The final characteristic is open-ended literacy tasks. In open tasks, students are in control of both the products they create and the process they choose (Turner & Paris, 1995). There is not one correct answer as there is in closed tasks, such as a worksheet, but there *is* a clear purpose that is laid out by the teacher prior to completion of the task. Students have the power to choose how to fulfill that purpose. For example, the purpose of a writing center may be to create authentic, written pieces that lead students to become a better writer (Allington, 2002). However, students are allowed to choose how and what they write to accomplish this purpose (Boushey & Moser, 2014; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Students may choose to write a story, a letter, a list, or a journal entry. It is important that these tasks be completed within a structured framework so students are producing high-quality work (Diller, 2003; Florida Center for Reading Research, 2016). In a structured framework, students know expectations and rules but have agency over how and what to complete. Through open tasks, students are able to offer a range of acceptable answers through the product they create (Cambourne, Labbo, Carpenter, 2001). Coincidentally, these types of activities are also usually by nature, more authentic as well.

In Turner and Paris’ (1995) study, they found that students were more motivated to complete literacy tasks because they took part in open activities that allowed students choice, challenge, control, collaboration, comprehension, and consequences; not because of the ‘type of reading program’ that the classroom followed. Other experts speak on the important of choice as well and its positive effect on student’s motivation (Boushey & Moser, 2014). However, teachers should be cautioned that literacy task choices should be curated and controlled. That is, they should be slowly introduced and not so many in number that children feel overwhelmed or unclear of purposes (Diller, 2003)**.** Through open-ended tasks, students can practice skills and build confidence in their literacies, yet can do so in a way that is interesting and motivating to them.

Summary of Characteristics

By creating tasks in which children are participating in activities that are collaborative, successful, authentic, and seeped with choice of process and product, a natural by-product is that students will find tasks more meaningful and as a result, engaging. When students are engaged they are more motivated to complete a task well. Motivation and engagement is of utmost importance when it comes to independent literacy tasks. As mentioned previously, literacy tasks should allow students opportunities to grow their skills as well as free the teacher to conduct guided reading groups. The more motivated and engaged students are the more focused they will be on the task at hand, and less likely to be disruptive or off task. However, a distinction should be made between literacy activities that, “create excitement about reading and writing and those that actually require students to interact with print while reading and writing (Ford and Opiz, 2002).” There seems to be middle ground that incudes tasks that are both efficient AND motivating. According to well-known psychologist, Brophy (1984), these tasks usually contain two factors: the possibility of success and the ability to perceive value in the task. So, if students are able to accomplish a task proficiently and see the usefulness of the task in regards to their academic growth, they are more likely to be motivated to complete it.

**Structure and Management of Tasks**

As discussed above, literacy tasks allow children to not only experiment with written and spoken language but to use it in real, authentic, and successful ways. However, teachers must intentionally set students up for success by laying strong routines and expectations. In addition, setting up the physical space that literacy centers will occur is equally as important. Both of these components will be discussed in this section in the natural order a teacher might implement the entire process: planning, setting up physical space and materials, introducing centers, managing and assessing them. All of these literacy tasks presuppose that students have an underlying understanding of, literacy behaviors, the role of language, the role of school and what it means to learn etc. (Cambourne et al., 2001).

One clarification before moving further, *literacy tasks* should be thought of as the actual practicing of skills that children are doing through various activities, while *literacy work stations (or centers)* refers to the place children complete these activities. In a rotation model of literacy workstations, children will move to and from different stations to complete these literacy tasks. More information will be given about rotations in subsequent paragraphs.

Planning Literacy Tasks

Planning is part of any teacher’s daily routine and planning for literacy tasks is no different. The bulk of the planning will be implemented before kicking off centers for the first time, however due to the nature of tasks that may need to grow with the learners, planning throughout the year will be required as well. If literacy tasks are to be a good use of time, they must meet local, state, and/or national standards. Paired with assessments, these standards will help guide teachers to plan instruction and literacy centers to accommodate various skills that students need to work on. No matter what standards a school attends to, activities in which students are actually authentically reading and writing are a good place to begin. Furthermore, all literacy tasks should focus on the five pillars of reading that The National Reading Panel identifies. These five pillars are: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000).

Assuming a teacher is implementing literacy tasks at the beginning of the year, it may not be clear exactly what students’ needs are before the year begins or even in the first weeks of school without assessment data. As noted above, one can always begin with the task of reading and writing, no matter what level or ability a student is (Ford & Opitz, 2002). After determining basic tasks that students will be successful in as they begin using this model, teachers should spend time thinking through what the purpose of each task is, what they expect students to be doing at a particular center, and the materials needed. Writing these down may help hold teachers and students accountable in each center. However, students should be a part of forming purposes and expectations themselves as different literacy tasks are introduced (Diller, 2003; Fountas and Pinnell, 1996). In a whole group discussion or brainstorm, teachers can help guide student responses during this activity. This allows students to gain ownership of the literacy tasks.

Specifically, Diller (2003) suggests creating “I Can” statements with the students each time a center is introduced to the class. These statements can be displayed at each literacy station to help guide students’ behavior. It is important that these statements are written in a positive way. For an example, an anchor chart shouldn’t say, “Don’t walk around. Don’t talk.” Students should know exactly what the desired behavior looks like by telling them what to do instead of what *not* to do (Boushey and Moser, 2014). Instead, a student might find a list at a work station that says, “I can look for sight words, I can read the word or pictures to myself, I can retell the story, I can take turns reading with a partner.” Lists such as these provide direction, differentiation and choice for students.

Scheduling

Next, teachers need to create a schedule for themselves and students to follow. Scheduling may seem like a complex process, much like a puzzle to be put together, taking into account students, tasks, priorities, and other school based considerations such as assemblies, other academic content areas, special areas, etc. However, an attempt will be made to describe the scheduling process from the broadest aspect (time) to the more narrow (when, what, and how are students participating in independent literacy tasks).

At least an hour should be set aside for literacy instruction and practice each day, but 90 minutes is even better (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). This time block may need to be scaffolded by the teacher, as students’ develop stamina to sustain attention for the full hour and a half. One way to do this is to start with a 15-minute block where each student only participates in one center (Diller, 2003). Another option is to pay attention to when the first student begin to loose interest or concentration. When this happens, students have reached the end of their current stamina (Boushey and Moser, 2014). At this point, researchers have suggested to end the independent work session and move to a different activity. It may be beneficial to incorporate a sharing and reflection time to conclude the literacy block, especially when introducing new activities (Diller, 2003). This time allows students to personally reflect on questions such as, “What did I do today to help myself become a better reader/writer? What did I like/not like at work stations today?” As students share their ideas aloud, teachers can informally assess where the students are academically or what does/doesn’t motivate them by listening to student responses and measuring them against expectations/standards for specific tasks. In addition, other students can hear ideas about other activities they could complete in a literacy station. Students may also bring up problems that occur during centers. All of this information shared by students can then be formed in to one-topic mini-lessons that can correct or supplement student behavior (Diller, 2003).

More specifically in the scheduling process, teachers need to come up with a schedule that will allow students to visit at least two or three literacy work stations each day. This rotation schedule will allow the teacher to implement differentiated literacy tasks in which students move from one task to another in a predictable rotation. In addition, it can also permit the opportunity for teachers to schedule students who need extra practice with specific skill to visit a certain center multiple times a week (Watts-Taffe et al., 2012). Teachers may choose to predetermine the schedule of the rotation in both time and/or activity, or they may allow students to choose the order that they go to each station and for how long they stay there. As long as students are visiting a sufficient number and variety of literacy tasks, having the freedom to choose can be beneficial as we humans are naturally motivated by choice (Allington, 2002; Diller, 2003).

It may take some time for learners to develop a sense of self-regulation in regards to how long to stay at a center, when a product is finished or when it is time to move on (Fountas and Pinnell, 1996). To cultivate this self-regulation, teachers can dictate 15-20 minute time blocks at the beginning of the year and gradually release children to manage their own time as the year continues (Diller, 2003). If allowing students the choice of which station to visit, some students may have their favorite stations to attend. They should be encouraged to participate in all activities, however. The way a teacher chooses to organize the rotations, whether it allows for students choice or not, needs to ‘equalize access’ for every learner (Ford & Opitz, 2002). A work station model allows students to experience multiple modalities and tasks over the course of a literacy block, further expanding their skill base and working knowledge of literacy.

To practically implement this rotation schedule, Fountas and Pinnell (1996) suggest that teachers create a ‘work board’ to help students rotate through different literacy tasks each day (Appendix G). A work board not only displays who is in each literacy partnership/group, it also shows the, what they should be doing and when they should be doing it (Florida Center for Reading Research, 2016). Both the groups and tasks should be able to be moved in some way, allowing for flexible grouping and rotations. Essentially, a work board displays the schedule students should follow each day. Each task that children should go to is noted by an icon or simple graphic. Students go through each literacy task on their schedule or rotation until the end of the reading block.

Students must be slowly introduced to a work board and know how to do each task on it completely independently before being expected to use it without a teachers help. For this reason, Fountas and Pinnell (1996) suggest not meeting with small groups for the first six weeks of school. This allows the teacher to be free to oversee rotations and make sure students are following expectations. In addition, these six weeks set aside for introduction also creates time to not only gather assessment data that can be used to create homogenous guided reading groups, but also determine skills that will require explicit instruction and practice in literacy stations. When guided reading groups do begin, if a student’s group is called, they can leave their work to attend guided reading. They then return to where they came from once their guided reading group is finished.

Setting up the Physical Space

Another important aspect that will be essential to effective literacy tasks is a creating a physical space in which rotations will occur. Teachers may ask themselves, “What furniture do I need to create each station? Perhaps a group of desks, a table in the back of the room, a space on the floor, or in another specific area in the room such as the Big Book or easel?” The important thing will be that there is a defined area that the task will occur. In her book, Literacy Work Stations, Debbie Diller (2003) suggests creating literacy work stations out of existing classroom space and equipment. A teacher can use a word wall, big book, or a pocket chart with existing content (words, poems, stories, etc.) and teach students how to use it during whole group instruction. More information on how to implement this process will be discussed in the proceeding section.

In addition, all areas should be visible to the teacher from her guided reading table (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). This helps students know that they can be seen in any station and are therefore accountable for what they are doing in the literacy work stations. Finally, each station should have an appropriate amount of space and materials so that children are not cluttered or overwhelmed (Fountas and Pinnell, 1996). With regards to materials, data shows that teachers favor activities that had reusable materials (Cambourne, Labbo, Carpenter, 2001). For an example, once a procedure is modeled and practiced with the class, the materials can be applied to many different texts such as a graphic organizer that allows students to sequence any story or directions that instruct students to write on a whiteboard that can simply be erased at the end of a task.

Another piece of creating the physical space in which literacy centers will take place is to create a print rich classroom (Fountas and Pinnell, 1996). Essentially, this means that there are varying levels and types of materials to read in the classroom from posters on the wall, to fiction and nonfiction books, to labels on items around the classroom, to names on desks, to word walls, to students own work. Fountas and Pinnell also suggest that print should be at student’s eye level, have well formed letters, and conventional spelling. A print rich classroom serves many purposes. First, students can be taught to use these materials as aids in their writing, spelling, or word work during literacy work stations (Appendices A-F). Secondly, a whole work station can be created by asking students to ‘read the room’. Students can use pointers to walk around the room reading these aforementioned labels, charts, lists, etc.

Introducing Literacy Centers to Students

A natural time to introduce the concept of literacy tasks is at the beginning of the school year, but they can really begin at any point in the year. Whenever the teacher introduces literacy tasks and the concept of literacy workstations with the rotation model, it is important that expectations and purposes be taught well. Students must know exactly what is expected of them (and practice these expectations) in order for literacy centers to run smoothly and be a good use of students’ time. Grinder (1995) notes that showing, telling and practicing routines and activities allows children to take in information through all three memory systems: auditory, visual, and kinesthetic (as cited in Boushey and Moser, 2014). By introducing information to all three of these systems, students are more likely to remember information. Grinder goes on to say that because information stored through the kinesthetic system, “evokes the longest lasting memory” it is essential that students have a chance to practice these routines and tasks themselves. Through practice, students are able to hear and feel how a behavior is supposed to be, which allows it to become automatic over time (Boushey and Moser, 2014). Athletes don’t become more skilled through listening about how to dribble a basketball or swim swiftly, they become more skilled through practice. In the same way, we should allow students opportunities to become skilled in their literacy actions. Wilson (2012), creator of the Responsive Classroom echoes many of these practices in her book *Interactive Modeling*; especially the practice of actively involving students in the learning process.

To introduce a literacy task, first the teacher talks about and models one specific literacy task (Diller, 2003; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Turner & Paris, 1995). Students will need to know what materials they should use at any given task, if they are to work in groups or individually, what the noise level should be, etc. (Richardson, 2009). As noted above, this allows students to receive both auditory and visual input. Next, one or two children demonstrate the task in the way just described. Teachers can applaud student efforts and provide corrective feedback if needed. At this point, the teacher may want to generate a list of rules, expectations, or “I Can” statements with the group to be hung in the center itself (Diller, 2003; Fountas and Pinnell, 1996). There are some different opinions about whether or not to allow students to provide a non-example of behavior. Some researchers say that allowing students to notice what *not* to do gives them specific examples of inappropriate behavior (Boushey and Moser, 2014). However, other researchers say that providing this non-example may confuse children regarding expectations (Wilson, 2012). Realistically, a teacher can only make a decision regarding this topic when he/she truly knows his/ her class. In addition, it may take some trial and error at the beginning of the year to see what does or does not work. Then, allow the whole class to participate in the task being taught. This satisfies the kinesthetic input and therefore increases the chances that students learn and implement the routine or task correctly.

Some research suggests that the teacher does not provide praise during this practice time (Boushey and Moser, 2014). They note that the reason for this is because if students are expected to do tasks independently the rest of the year, they shouldn’t be used to teachers’ praise. Research does support, however, feedback (which may include noting items students did well and areas to improve upon) after practice time or during a sharing session (Richardson, 2009). Feedback is more likely to increase independence in students than praise (Boushey and Moser, 2014). The important take away is that by withholding praise during the sessions, teachers increase the chances that children will be able to sustain their actions when the praise ceases to exist when teachers are working with a small group and students are left to do tasks independently (Boushey and Moser, 2014). Finally, teachers should observe students practicing a literacy task until they feel confident that students can do it independently (Fountas and Pinnell, 1996). This sequence of events may occur over one or many days and can be repeated for each task that is introduced. As mentioned above, Fountas and Pinnell (1996) advise not to meet with small groups for the first six weeks of school, and perhaps even longer in kindergarten. While this amount of time may seem excessive and perhaps a loss of instructional time, they go on point out that, “introducing a new activity well has productive value for the rest of the year (Fountas and Pinnell, 1996).” During these six weeks, teachers can employ the gradual release model, giving students responsibility, freedom, and choice, a little bit at a time (Diller, 2003; Florida Center for Reading Research, 2016; Pearson & Gallagher, 1983; Richardson, 2009).

Especially in the younger grades, teachers need to explicitly explain and model routines and expectations that teachers may assume students already know how to do. Routines such as how to share a book with a partner, how to turn the pages carefully, how to choose a ‘right fit’ book, or even how to solve problems such as hurt feelings without interrupting the teacher (Diller, 2003; Fountas and Pinnell, 1996). It is not unusual to have to re-teach routines and re-establish expectations multiple times during the school year. Students may forget or become ‘too comfortable’ with routines and expectations throughout the year, especially if the teacher fails to consistently uphold them.

In addition, teachers need to model how to explicitly transition effectively from one task to another in a structured way. Richardson (2009) suggests practicing transitions until students can do it in less than a minute. These transitions can be both efficient and provide a much needed ‘brain break’ for students. Teachers may also find it helpful to have a signal such as a bell, a timer, or other sound to let children know it is time to stop what they are doing, put materials away neatly, and move to the next task. This, again, will probably need to be explicitly modeled and practiced.

Finally, a part of the planning process that must be done after a few weeks of school is grouping students. Unlike guided reading centers in which students are usually grouped homogenously, Fountas and Pinnell (1996) suggest grouping student heterogeneously for literacy tasks. This allows students opportunities to work with as many students as possible, but also for them to learn from each other. Higher ability students can solidify their knowledge by explaining concepts to lower ability students. Alternately, lower ability students may benefit from hearing something explained in ‘child-speak’ from one of their peers (Turner and Paris, 1995). Teachers will still need to use assessment and the task at hand to drive these groups and/or pairs of students. They will also need to consider personality and habits, in addition to ability level, to create student pairings conducive to productivity and not problems. Groups should remain flexible as students grow, change, and mature in their literacies. Progress monitoring students formally and informally will be an important guide as teachers change groups throughout the year to continually challenge students appropriately.

Creating the Environment

Part of the culture a teacher will need to create as he or she introduces differentiated literacy tasks, is trust and respect within the classroom community. This is particularly important when dealing with varying ability levels and students’ confidence. Even young students can perceive the range of their own and their peers’ abilities. Teachers must take the time to cultivate an environment that values what each child is capable of and acknowledges that all learners are doing whatever it takes to learn best. Creators of *The Daily Five* note that, “establishing trust and respect allows students of different abilities to sit beside each other, reading different levels of text and understand that this is the right fit for right now, and each student is getting what they need (Boushey & Moser, 2014).” Creating an environment where each child feels comfortable enough to participate and where every learner is valued takes time (Richardson, 2009). However, the time devoted to creating a positive environment is essential for classroom management but also for learning (Richardson, 2009). When teachers are not present to defuse conflicts or offer reminders to be kind as in literacy rotations, it is fundamental that students know how to respect each others learning differences.

Students not only need to trust and value each other, but it is also essential that teachers trust that their students are capable of completing independent literacy tasks. Gradually giving students more and more responsibility will develop a sense of pride and confidence, not only that they are independent readers and writers, but also that their teacher trusts them enough to *let* them be autonomous. When these expectations are set, students can help hold each other accountable for behaviors, learning, respect and kindness (Boushey & Moser, 2014). All of these literacy tasks are contingent of the nature of the classroom culture (Cambourne et al., 2001).

Management

Once the groundwork for centers is laid concerning routines, schedules, and expectations, it is important that teachers and students adhere to them. Literacy rotations should be organized and predictable (Ford and Opitz; 2002; Fountas and Pinnell, 1996). This means that it will be important to use a timer so each rotation is not too long or too short (Richardson, 2009). Centers should also be a place where children feel safe and supported. It should be a time that enables children to develop confidence and take risks (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). This is more readily accomplished if students can depend on what is expected of them in literacy tasks. After demonstrating routines explicitly, teachers should require that they be followed.

Students should also understand that they don’t have to complete an entire task in each station. In fact, in a study conducted by Allington (2002), they found that the most effective teachers were those that used long term assignments, such as writing projects that lasted more than a week or conducted research projects. They may have ongoing projects that they are working on and can come back to another day. For this, teachers may want to have two pocket folders that students can put ‘finished work’ in one compartment and ‘work in progress’ in the other (Fountas and Pinnell, 1996) Another option is a box or tray at specific stations, so work is already sorted (Diller, 2003).

Once students are comfortable with tasks and rotations, the activities within each station can change while the general structure of the literacy block stays the same. Each center is designed to meet the needs of all students and provide appropriate challenge, yet accessibility for each learner (Ford & Opitz, 2002). As students show competence and growth, build on the skills they already know and add to their repertoire of independent tasks, teachers can make changes to what is required of student (Fountas and Pinnell, 1996). This keeps interest, challenge, and motivation appropriate.

Students will need to be held accountable for what they are doing in each literacy station. In regards to behavior, Debbie Diller (2003) suggests implement a “one strike and you’re out” policy. If a student isn’t following expectations, it may be beneficial for he/she to sit in a chair beside the guided reading table to contemplate their behavior. Furthermore, Diller advises to instruct these students to draw a picture of how their behavior would change after they return to literacy tasks. Diller notes that in her experience, often children would produce writing to go with the picture. What’s more, she says that often these were some of the most detailed pieces of writing she received all year!

Students also need to be highly engaged in their work if rotations are to be successful. While some students are intrinsically motivated, some students may need to use a physically scaffold to hold themselves accountable for completing work well, attending enough centers, etc. There are many ways to do this, of which I will briefly outline a few. One way to do foster accountability is through task cards in which students can check off or color in which literacy tasks they have completed that week (Ford & Opitz, 2001). Another way to foster high quality work is to post examples of such work in the centers. A non-example may be helpful as well, so students can physically hold up their work next to these examples and compare the two. Richardson (2009) suggests creating contracts for students to document their progress and what stations they attended. Contracts can also include a place for students to note how many pages they read that day during independent reading. Students can also keep reading logs for students who are capable of copying titles when they have completed a book An alternate approach instead of a reading log (especially for younger students) is to conduct one reading conference each week with students to discuss what they are reading (Richardson, 2009). More specifically, certain center may have a writing component to it in which students respond to what they have read or completed (Richardson, 2009). For an example, students may be expected to write or draw the beginning, middle and end for one book per week that they read during independent or partner reading. As always, expectations for these responses will need to be explicitly stated and modeled in front of the class before students are expected to do it. Diller (2003) cautions against using grades to hold students accountable in literacy tasks, because literacy tasks are supposed to be a low-stress. Grading students’ work may create anxiety for some learners. Instead of grades, alternative ways to motivate students may be rewards, an academic growth chart, meeting personal goals or sometimes negative reinforcement.

Assessment

Assessment is essential on two fronts. First, teachers need to assess their center design and how they are being used. They may want to ask themselves if students can use the materials independently, if centers meet national or state standards, and if centers are fostering authentic literacy skills. Assessment of students needs to be a routine practice in a classroom in order to keep activities developmentally appropriate and engaging. Secondly, teachers can informally monitor students by keeping anecdotal notes of their reading behaviors, miscues, strengths, and areas for growth during whole and small group instruction. Teachers can also use the products that students generate during literacy centers to guide instruction and activities as well. While grades should be used sparingly if at all for work completed during literacy stations, teachers should respond with a personal note to students to let them know they are looking at their hard work (Richardson, 2009). As mentioned previously, literacy rotation groups should be kept flexible. As students grow and change, groups may need to be altered. More importantly however, the tasks will need to ‘grow’ with the students.

**Conclusion**

With the demands of the Common Core and high-stakes tests there is more need than ever before to instruct our students *well.* Instructing them well means planning specific daily lessons according to their strengths and weaknesses. Teachers must use the valuable and limited time in the classroom productively in order to foster strong, independent readers. One way to do this is through independent and differentiated literacy tasks. However, as this paper has shown, excellent differentiated instruction should also be highly motivating and engaging. By designing literacy tasks that are authentic, developmentally appropriate, socially oriented, and open-ended, students can begin to achieve the ultimate goal of reading instruction: to see themselves as independent and successful readers (Fountas and Pinnell, 1996). Effective literacy tasks do not end with well designed activities though. Success also rides on the teachers’ ability to teach students how to be independent by laying solid routines, gradually releasing responsibility, and holding learners accountable for their actions.

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