



Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts

Volume 43

Issue 2 November/December 2002

Article 2

12-1-2002

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Recommended Citation

Green, S. K., Britt, C., & Parker, P. (2002). When Do They Choose the Reading Center? Promoting Literacy in a Kindergarten Classroom. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 43 (2). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol43/iss2/2

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When Do They Choose the Reading Center? Promoting Literacy in a Kindergarten Classroom

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This action research project investigated activities designed to encourage children to visit the reading center in a kindergarten classroom. Three interventions were implemented on alternating days. Analyses suggested that these interventions led to increased voluntary use of the reading center. The days the intern read a story produced the most visits. This process of systematic data collection also increased monitoring of the children with the lowest literacy skills and provided opportunities to tailor literacy activities to their interests.

THE RECENT SHIFT away from viewing teachers solely as consumers of research to viewing them as producers and mediators of knowledge has fueled the popularity of action research as part of educational practice (Richardson, 1994). Reflecting this trend, a recent survey of institutions affiliated with the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education found that almost half of the respondents require their teacher education candidates to participate in action research (Henderson, Hunt, & Wester, 1999).

Perhaps the most frequently stated goal for action research is to provide candidates with skills and the opportunity to improve professional practice (e.g., Auger & Wideman, 2000; Brown & Macatangay, 2002; Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1994; Noffke, 1997). By answering a question or solving a problem that arises in specific classroom circumstances, teachers analyze and modify their practice to become more effective.

The three of us, a classroom teacher, university intern, and the university liaison to the school, decided to initiate an action research project in a kindergarten classroom. We undertook this project to see if action research could viably be completed during a one-semester internship at the school. Both the school administrators and the university liaison had recently learned about benefits of action research, and we hoped to reap such benefits at our school.

Cotton Belt Elementary School is a rural pre-K-5 professional development school associated with Winthrop University in South Carolina. The student body is 75 percent European American, 23 percent African American and 2 percent other ethnicities, with 47 percent eligible for free or reduced fee lunch. Our kindergarten class had 21 students, including 16 European Americans (8 boys and 8 girls) and 5 African Americans (3 girls and 2 boys). Twelve of these students qualified for free or reduced fee lunch. The classroom teacher was a European American female with Bachelor's and Master's degrees in elementary education and 30 hours above the Master's level in early childhood education. At the time of this study, she had been teaching 28 years, including six in kindergarten.

We decided to explore the question of how to entice children to visit the reading center more frequently. The reading center is always a part of the kindergarten classroom, but is often the least-used center. In our experience, many children prefer the more active play of the block center and housekeeping. Many children in our rural area are not exposed to literature, nor do they see their parents reading; consequently, they do not understand the importance or enjoyment of reading. As lifelong readers, the three of us consider getting children and books together as most important.

The reading center is one of six centers that children can choose each morning after large group time. It is in a relatively quiet area of the room near the computer center and the art center. It consists of a two-sided bookcase and two inflatable chairs, with wall art in the area that changes from time to time and may include environmental print, posters of poems, or the children's writings. There is a basket with pointers and eyeglass frames that children can incorporate into literacy activities.

We had noticed that some children willingly go to the reading center and happily spend their time reading, looking at pictures, and sharing books with friends. Other children never choose to pick up a book. We wanted to try different ways of encouraging children to spend time in the reading center. We agreed that participating in reading center activities could be thought of as a good, concrete indicator of children's motivation to read. Watching patterns of attendance at the reading center could yield important insights that we could use to encourage more reading.

Activities to Encourage Reading

Next, we decided to think about putting activities in place that might promote visits to the reading center. We wanted to test three approaches to get books into the hands of children. One of these activities would be presented each day, and every third day we would start again with the first activity.

On the first day, Ms. B, the teacher intern, would introduce a book during early morning group time, telling the children about the book and

that she would be in the reading center later to read it to them. During center time, the children could first listen to the story if they chose the reading center, and then move to another center or stay and look at other books. We called this "Read To" day.

On the second day, baskets of books would be placed on the tables when the children came into the classroom in the morning. At the beginning of the day, children could sit at the tables and talk quietly or look at books. Some of the books in the baskets were easy to read, some were small copies of the big books used in guided reading with the whole class, some were good picture books, and some were specially chosen based on students' interests at that table. We called this "On Tables" day.

The third day the book baskets would be in the centers during center time, available to the children if they wished to stop and read or to incorporate the books into their center activities. For example, the children might read a book to a doll in the housekeeping center. Children in the writing center might choose to copy words and sentences from the books in the basket. In both the writing center and the art center, the children might use tracing paper to trace words and illustrations from books. The basket in the building center included books about construction and vehicles. The only center in which we did not place a book basket during this intervention was the computer center. We called this intervention "In Centers" day. We implemented this three-day alternating pattern for 13 weeks.

Indicators of Participation at the Reading center

We decided that a handy way to keep track of children's use of books and attendance at the reading center would be a chart listing all students' names with dates and the alternating daily activities across the top. Ms. B would note with a check when each student used books to meet the objective of each of the three daily activities (e.g., listening to the story on "Read To" Day, reading at the tables on "On Tables" day, or incorporating books into center activities on "In Centers" day). She entered a star whenever students visited the reading center and read books *in addition* to the daily activities (or sometimes instead of them).

This system proved simple to keep daily track and did not require modification over the course of the project.

First Analysis of the Reading Center Attendance Data

The three of us decided to meet on the average of every two weeks to look at the data Ms. B collected and to see what patterns emerged. The first time we met, we noticed that, of the three activities, children met the reading objective for the day most frequently on “On Tables” days when books were on the tables in the early morning. We thought this was the case because they had only one other choice at this time—quiet talking in their seats.

In looking at which of the three activities generated more stars (visits to the reading center) after the first two weeks, “Read To” day stood out as the clear favorite (9 stars vs. 4 and 5). The children seemed to be spending more free time at the reading center on the days that Ms. B read to them.

We also checked which children had no stars. After two weeks of the project, three of the four students judged to be lowest in literacy skills had no stars. Our discovery led Ms. B to focus on the interests of these children, hand picking books for “Read To” days that suited their interests. For example, she learned that one student had a strong interest in NASCAR, so she found a book to read about auto racing. Several students showed interest in dogs, so she chose *The Most Obedient Dog in the World* (Jeram, 1993) for another session. She also found an interactive book about pizza (Pelam, 1996) for a child who loves pizza. Books with an unusual characteristic were a real draw. For example, children found the shiny scales of *Rainbow Fish* (Pfister, 1992) or the raised web of *The Very Busy Spider* (Carle, 1984) fascinating. Books with wonderful rhythm or literary devices like *17 Kings and 42 Elephants* (Mahy, 1987) or *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom* (Martin & Archambault, 1989) were also favorites and encouraged children to go to the reading center for a closer look and to read their favorite passages. We have developed a list of titles that we have found pique the interest of reluctant kindergarten students, which is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Books for Reluctant Kindergarten Readers

Art

Purple, Green, and Yellow by Robert N. Munsch

My Crayon Talk by G. Patricia Hubbard

Elmer by David McKee

Housekeeping

Dress-up by Anne Geddes

Math Center

Number Munch! by Chuck Reasoner

Bear In A Square by Stella Blackston

Ten, Nine, Eight by Molly Bang

Writing Center

The Jungle ABC by Michael Roberts

Clifford's ABC by Norman Bridwell

Reading Center/Reading with the Teacher

I Love to Eat Bugs! by John Strejan (pop-up)

Alpha Bugs by David A. Carter (Interactive/pop-up)

Monster's Lunch Box by Marc Brown (Interactive/pop-up)

Five Little Ducks Raffi Songs to Read

I Can Read by Rozanne Lanczak Williams

ABC and You by Eugene Fernandes

Where the Wild Things Are by Maurice Sendak

What Makes a Rainbow? by Betty Ann Schwartz

Joseph Had a Little Overcoat by Simms Taback

I Can Read With My Eyes Shut! by Dr. Seuss

The Wheels on the Bus by Maryann Kovalski

Rain by Manya Stojic

The Ants Go Marching (Traditional) Illustrated by Jeffrey Scherer

Sunflower House by Eve Bunting

The Grouchy Ladybug by Eric Carle

The Hungry Caterpillar by Eric Carle

Later Analyses

We continued to meet three more times during the semester to examine the children's patterns of reading activities. We found that voluntary use of the reading center increased over time, with 34 students visiting the reading center on the last nine days of the project compared to 14 during the first nine days (See Table 2). Children tended to visit most consistently on the "Read To" days, with a median of three children per day. On "On Tables" days and on the "In Centers" days, a median of one student per day visited the reading center.

Table 2. Patterns of Book Use and Reading Center Participation at the Beginning and End of the Project

	First 9 days		Last 9 days	
	√	*	√	*
Read To	15	5	20	12
On Tables	43	4	36	19
In Centers	18	5	7	3
Total	76	14	63	34

Note: √ = Met reading objective for that day
 * = Looked at books in the Reading center

We also continued to focus on the three students with the lowest literacy skills (the fourth had moved away three weeks into this project). We quizzed them about their interests and helped them find books that related to these interests. One boy seemed enthralled with trains, so we kept an eye out for any interesting train books. We also encouraged these

children to reread books and not to give up after one try, even urging them to take their favorite books home. Our focus on them paid off because we found that by the end of the project these students visited the reading center voluntarily a total of 16 times. We even noted that their visits to the reading center occurred on “In Centers” and “On Tables” days, not just on “Read To” days. For comparison purposes, we found that three other randomly chosen boys (who had stronger literacy skills) visited the reading center a total of ten times during the project.

Other issues arose in later meetings. Our data helped us discover that changing books in the baskets and in the reading center helped keep students’ interest. We started changing books in the baskets and in the reading center every two weeks. We wanted to make sure that, as visits increased, we would have fresh books available that children had not seen. When using the baskets less frequently, we only changed them every seven weeks.

Ms. P voiced concern about how to maintain the “Read To” days when Ms. B finished the internship. We brainstormed ideas about having parent volunteers or fourth and fifth graders take turns at reading a story in the reading center. This year we have a fifth grade child who visits twice a week to read to children in the reading center during center time. We also thought about ways the children could keep track of their own visits to the reading center with a specially designed sign-up sheet they could initial.

Conclusions and Implications

This project helped us take a fresh look at our efforts to encourage children to enjoy books and to see them as an important part of life. Our three different interventions seemed overall to make a difference. As the year progressed, children visited the reading center more often, as verified by the increasing numbers of stars on our charts. We also saw children staying longer at the reading center and asking for more books to be read to them.

Collecting data made us conscious everyday of our goal of encouraging literacy, and as such other ideas came to us about that goal.

We put books we read to the whole group in the reading center and told children they could look at them again. We found children going to the baskets to get books to use in the housekeeping center for their pretend play even on the days when we did not place books in centers. We found ourselves saying, "When you go to the reading center..." more often. Articulating our assumption that they would go helped them to understand that a visit to the reading center could be as much a part of the day as going to lunch. We made our higher expectations clear, and the children eagerly met them. We realized again the power of teacher expectations on children's behavior, a phenomenon that has been clearly and broadly established in educational research over the last 30 years (e.g., Brophy, 1983; Jussim, Smith, Madon, & Palumbo, 1998; Rosenthal, 1994).

We found that the more time children spent with books, the more they enjoyed and noticed similarities and differences between them. For example, after reading *Have You Seen My Duckling?* (Tafari, 1984), the children asked that more books where you have to look for something hiding in the picture be in the reading center. Ms. P then suggested children to look for the little deer hiding in every picture in *Anansi and the Moss Covered Rock* (Kimmel, 1988) when they went to the reading center. Sometimes she put two versions of the same book in the center and asked the children to compare the two and tell her what they discovered when the class next got back together again. The children also started comparing Caldecott award winners. They were amazed that *Make Way for Ducklings* (McCloskey, 1941) won because the pictures were not colorful. Upon further discussion about the details in the pictures, they agreed that the sepia tones actually enhanced the pictures.

For us, one implication of doing this project is the importance of collecting data and using it to make some decisions about what goes on in a classroom. We so often get caught up in the day-to-day management of the classroom that we do not have time for reflection, to think about how we can do things better. Collecting the data forced us to reflect. We found it made us think about ways to encourage children to enjoy reading and books. Both Ms. B and Ms. P intend to incorporate data collection and the reflection it engenders into other aspects of their classroom practices next year.

More important, perhaps, the project made us think about individual children and their needs and interests. We could see in black and white that some kids were “falling through the cracks,” and we had to do something about it. One of the most important applications of this project for us will be our future effort to conduct action research with the more reluctant learners in the forefront of our minds and our data collection. Our state has placed a good deal of emphasis on teaching the standards, and doing this kind of action research helps us integrate teaching children with teaching standards.

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