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## Reading and Writing Workshop in a Multiage Primary Classroom

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# Reading and Writing Workshop in a Multiage Primary Classroom

*By Pamela Evanshen and Susan Meade Lewis*

Literacy development in the first eight years of life is critical. It is time that sets the stage for future successes in learning to read and write (International Reading Association & National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998). The goal for early childhood educators is to provide a learning climate that is supportive and developmentally appropriate for young children in this most noble quest (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Burns, Griffin, & Snow, 1999). This means that literacy goals and expectations for children are individualized. As teachers make decisions about the education and well-being of young children, we are reminded to consider what is known about child development and learning, the strengths, interests and needs of individual children, and the unique social and cultural dimensions of each child (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997). With informed teacher support, children can be successfully challenged to grow and mature as they move along the continuum from emerging to proficient readers and writers.

A reading and writing workshop approach is child-centered and individualized. The diverse needs of children are met through a flexible format which allows for different ways of knowing and learning. The intention of this article is to share the components of an effective reading and writing workshop implemented in one multiage primary classroom.

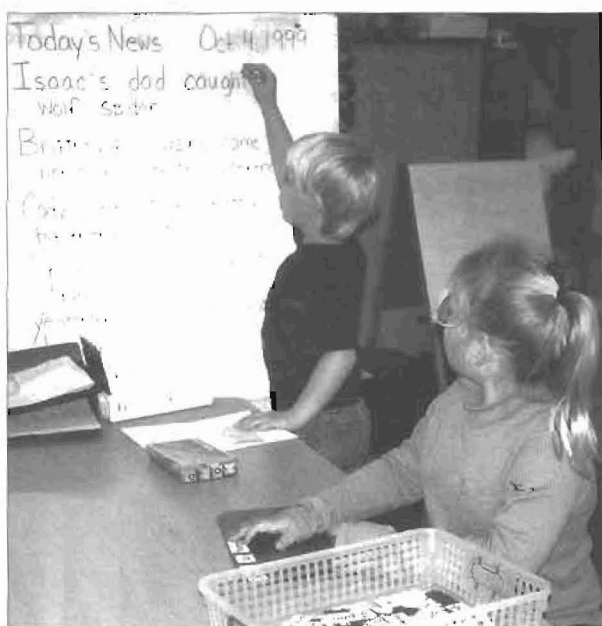
## Literacy Based Community Building

After students enter the classroom and are greeted by their teachers each day they independently complete a morning routine consisting of attendance, lunch count, classroom jobs and journal writing. A daily agenda is posted with words and pictures depicting the day's events. To develop a sense of community, set the focus for the day, and emphasize literacy, the day begins with a large group literacy-related activity. Children gather on the floor and are encouraged to sit comfortably respecting one another's personal space. The teacher is part of the group and leads this activity.

On Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, students participate in 'Today's News'. During this time, the children share what is meaningful in their lives as the teacher

writes their words on chart paper. In this activity, connections are being made between oral and written language as the teacher models correct writing and language skills.

On Tuesday, students engage in literacy challenges called 'Secret Message', 'Editing Sentences', and 'Pattern Play'. The purpose of Secret Message is to share important information about the theme of study with the goal in mind of integrating the curriculum. Students guess letters and then words in a format similar to the game show "Wheel of Fortune." This favorite activity teaches decoding, tracking, and letter and word recognition. The purpose of Editing Sentences is to teach the children to proof-read their own work (McCarrier, Pinnell, Fountas, 2000). The teacher writes an incorrect sentence on the board (i.e. i have a ladybug to show you 2day) and the students take turns correcting the mechanics and spelling errors. The purpose of Pattern Play is to teach word patterns and families. Students write {\_an} on individual marker boards; subsequently, the teacher adds, "If you can write *an*, then you can write *tan*." Students



Today's News

individually create other words fitting the pattern. These words are shared in a large group, and the teacher lists them on chart paper to be posted in the room as a future resource.

On Thursday, students are actively involved in an exercise using a theme-related song or poem, again tying the social studies or science curriculum with reading and writing (Dahl, Scharer, Lawson, Grogan, 2001). The song or poem is displayed on an overhead projector or chart paper so children can read/sing along. An extension of this activity is to use highlight tape or overhead markers to locate sight and pattern words. Literacy-based community building activities take approximately 15-20 minutes per day.

## Literacy Centers

After completing literacy-based community time, students move into literacy centers. A work board, similar to the one designed by Fountas & Pinnell (1996), is utilized as a management tool for small group assignments during guided reading. Icons with key words direct students to their center work. Students are placed into four heterogeneous groups and choose among four literacy centers.

Literacy centers include writing center, language arts (Words Galore), journal writing, word hunt, buddy reading, listening, books, computers, pocket charts, and research. In the writing center, children use a variety of materials engaging in various steps of the writing process. They can copy letters, form words, write stories, create books, and use dictionaries and other resources to develop skills at their own pace. The writing center houses blank books, small marker boards and markers, word cards with pictures, pictionaries, letter stamps, writing prompts, stencils, pencils, crayons, lined and unlined paper, envelopes, cards, and stationery to create authentic writing experiences.

In the *Words Galore* center, children play with letters and words using various manipulatives. Playdough, sand, flannel board stories and pictures, letter tiles, word tiles, magnetic words and pictures, vinyl cling words, word family flipbooks and games such as Candyland, Letter and Sight Word Bingo and other teacher-made games may be found in the Words Galore center. According to Carbo (1997), "games provide multisensory learning experiences that capitalize on students' perceptual

strengths while allowing structured peer interactions" (p.68).

The *journal writing* center offers the student an opportunity to continue morning journal work or create a new piece of writing. The emergent writer begins with pictures and letters. These attempts when met with praise, modeling and other reinforcement evolve into writing as a means of communication. Invented or sound spelling (in recent literature often referred to as "transitional spelling"), is strongly encouraged. Transitional spelling, spelling the way a word sounds to the emerging writer, fosters learning of phonics and encourages children to begin to convey meaning and write more elaborate stories before they know how to produce the conventional spelling of a word (Sampson, Rasinski, and Sampson, 2003). As children move through a variety of levels of invented spelling, their writing transforms to conventional or book spelling (Schickedanz, 1999).

Throughout the classroom, Students actively participate in the word hunt *Read-Around-the-Room* (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Using a pointer, a child practices reading environmental print. Props such as safety glasses, clown glasses, and safe pointers are located in this center.

*Buddy reading* can take place anywhere in the classroom. Two children partner to read to one another. Partners may be on the same or different reading levels, which affords peer and/or cross-age tutoring.

The *listening center* contains books and tapes. This center can either be stationary or individual tape players with headphones can be provided allowing students to listen to a story anywhere in the classroom. Response sheets or journals are available for the students as a form of documentation.



Reading Around the Room



Reading and Writing Workshop



The *book center* is rich with books of varying levels of difficulty. Many genres are represented in the book center. Furniture for the book center consists of pillows, beanbag chairs, a couch or futon, and a rocking chair. Various levels of lighting enhance aesthetics and add a relaxing atmosphere to this center.

Students have access to several reading and writing programs on the computer. Some of these programs are free choice and others are specifically assigned for skill enhancement. Children also may use this center to publish their writing.



Susan Meade Lewis in conference with a young writer.

The *pocket chart center* displays songs or poems previously learned. Students may manipulate words or pictures or use highlighting tape to locate letters, words or names. Props or puppets may also be included so children can dramatize the song or poem.

In the *research center*, resource books and magazines spur students' interest in gaining a deeper understanding of the thematic topic of study. This newly acquired knowledge often leads to project work which encourages collaboration and utilization of higher order thinking skills.

## Guided Reading

As students work independently or collaboratively in literacy centers, the teacher engages small groups in a guided reading session. "Guided reading is a context in which a teacher supports each reader's development of effective strategies for processing novel texts at increasingly challenging levels of difficulty. The teacher works with a small group of children who use similar reading processes and are able to read similar levels of text with support" (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, p.2). The time spent in guided reading affords the teacher an opportunity to learn about each child in regard to reading ability, which

guides the teacher in providing encouragement and support and moves the reader towards independence (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996).

Students may be called at any time to read to the teaching assistant or volunteer while the teacher conducts guided reading groups. Volunteers are an important part of the classroom setting. Volunteers should participate in a training session about components and expectations of the reading and writing workshop.

## Conclusion

According to Anderson (1993) multiage, heterogeneous grouping is the most natural learning environment for children. This developmentally appropriate approach to teaching reading and writing in a primary multiage classroom respects the timing and pattern of growth of each individual student. Reading and Writing Workshop allows for the interaction of students regardless of age or ability and promotes independent and intrinsically motivated learners. Each child learns to become a facilitator of his/her own learning through active engagement in reading and writing activities. Utilizing these effective reading and writing workshop components lays the foundation for literacy development and allows the learner to successfully begin his/her literacy journey in school.

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Pam and Susan participated in redesigning the curriculum at Washington Elementary School. This involved creating thematically based instructional units for students in multiage classrooms, including the reading and writing workshop component.

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