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ABSTRACT

A description is given of a learning-centers program for classroom organization in which teacher-directed activities are minimized in favor of semidirected and learner-directed ones. Information concerning equipment and physical arrangement and references to sources describing motivational techniques for a listening center, a self-selection center, and a skills center are included. A suggested organization for an individualized buddy-system spelling program and a writing program based on experience and oral discussion are given. The teacher and the learner roles in the reading-thinking lesson are also outlined. References are listed. (CM)

CLASSROOM ORGANIZATION IN MEETING INDIVIDUAL NEEDS

(A Paper Presented at the IRA Convention at Anaheim, May 1970)

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Introduction

> Children differ in their way of learning and in their rates of growth and development. For this reason, school and class organization for instruction plays a major role in school administration. The continuous development of each child, rather than his achievement of arbitrary grade standards is a goal of the modern school. Individual development can take place best in situations for which the child is intellectually, physically, and emotionally ready and in which group stimulation as well as individual instruction is provided. (22, p. 3)

For more than forty years now educational theoreticians and researchers have written such statements. Most of the teachers today, having been educated during this period of time, have read the statements and generally agree with them. During much of this same period, publishers have developed educational materials to help teachers individualize instruction. Once the

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Federal government made educational funds available through NDEA and ESEA, schools purchased large quantities of machines, books and materials for the teacher to use. It seems, then, that teachers should be able to organize the classroom for meeting individual needs.

Yet, most consultants or supervisors who regularly visit classrooms, see that the majority of teachers do not do so. If this is true because they do not know how, it becomes the task of the supervisor to assist teachers to put the theory and research results into practice. The purpose of this paper is to explain how teachers might organize the classroom to meet the individual's language development needs, by establishing multi-group or individualized instruction through a number of learning centers.

One of the most difficult aspects of organizing centers is helping the teacher to plan in terms of varying responsibilities for directing classroom activities. Teacher-directed ones must be kept at a minimum, so that she will have enough "free" time to supervise the over-all operations in the room. Semi-directed activities allow the teacher to direct a portion of the lesson (the readiness or follow up to a story)

but place most of the responsibility for the lesson on the learner. Student-directed activities, e.g., one-to-one reading, library research, a buddy-buddy spelling program, etc., put limited restrictions on the teacher's time. Finally, the self-directed activities permit the teacher the greatest freedom. Once she learns how to plan a number of activities of varying responsibilities, the teacher can make rapid progress towards using learning centers as the classroom organization for meeting individual needs.

Listening Center

With little effort and minimal preparation the teacher can involve a group of students in the listening center, while she is free for other instructional activities. She already has much of the equipment available. She can easily shift some classroom furniture around. Once the center is ready for operation, she can choose from a variety of programs. Establishing a listening center is probably the easiest way for a teacher to begin multi-group instruction.

Much of the equipment that a teacher needs for a listening center in her room is readily available to

her. The record player, tape recorder and film-strip projector are generally standard equipment in schools. If instructional television (ITV) is available, it too can become a part of the listening center. Today, more and more, listening posts are being used for keeping the auditory output of the machines from competing with the teacher for student attention. Because organized listening centers are uncommon to most schools, the first teacher to demonstrate she can use the equipment on a full-time basis will most probably be able to keep it in her room "permanently."

The teacher can close off a section of the room for her listening center by shifting classroom furniture. She might use the table which holds the tape recorder, record player and listening post as part of the inside "wall" of the listening center. By putting the front of the TV set to the inside of the listening center, the teacher can use the back of the set and its stand as another part of the "wall." Teachers have used portable chalk-boards, movable bulletin boards, or room dividers for the same purpose. They find ways to set the listening center apart from other areas in the room.

After she has the audio-visual equipment and has arranged her furniture, the teacher can choose from a

variety of motivational and instructional programs. For reading motivation she might select from programs developed by Storm (20), Kidder (11), Pines (15), Rydell (16), Young, Leary and Myers (23), and others. These programs use combinations of records, tapes, books and film strips to get children more interested in reading. For developing phonic skills the teacher might choose from record, standard tapes, or cassette programs like those developed by Brake (3), Packer and Boag (13), and others. For developing listening skills, the teacher might choose the Bracken (2) listening-skills-builder program. Or, she might prefer to tape the listening exercises from the Parker materials (14) to teach TQLR skills in her listening center.

If a teacher uses ITV as a part of her listening center program, it can become the stimulus for many learning activities. Teachers have access to programs which are directly related to reading, e.g., Listen and Say (12), Quest for the Best (10), Wordsmith (18) and Biography (9). Or she might select from some of the content programs like Places in the News, The Adventures of Science (4), etc., for developing the language skills of oral or written reports, sharing ideas in discussion, and as stimulation for library research. Once the

teacher learns how to incorporate ITV into her teaching schedule, it can become an important teaching aid in the room.

Most of time spent in the listening center is self-directed. The teacher will have readiness and follow-up activities to some of the programs there. However, if she is familiar with the contents of the listening materials (and she well should be), the teacher can work elsewhere in the room while the students are meaningfully involved in the listening center.

The Self-Selection Center

As she does in the listening center, the teacher can develop the self-selection center with little effort and minimal planning. She merely needs some materials for the children to read and a place to display them. Then, once she teaches the students when and how to use it, the center becomes primarily self-directed.

Every classroom should have a table, a bookcase or some area of the room set aside as the reading center. The materials for this center might include any materials for independent reading; e.g., trade books, discarded or unused basal readers, magazines, newspapers, etc. Since Barbe (1), Veatch (21) and others have written extensive-

ly on establishing the classroom library for an individualized reading program, it is not necessary to do the same at this time.

When the youngster has chosen a book to read from the self-selection area, the library, or from his own personal collection, he should apply the reading skills he has learned elsewhere. Therefore, the teacher should occasionally check to see that he is doing so. For example, at one time or another she might test the following: (1) Has he set purposes for his reading? (2) Has he surveyed the material in preparation for reading it? (3) Does he readjust his predictions as he reads? (4) Does he use his word attack skills, the context clues, or other word-gathering devices? (5) Is he developing a vocabulary from the new words encountered in his reading material? Because the teacher must check on the student occasionally, the self-selection center is not as self-directed as some teachers might think.

Skills Center

Since teachers have materials in the classroom for skills development, they can easily establish a skills center. It is literally an area of the room for storing skill-building materials. Thus, the skill center need not

be set apart from the rest of the room in the same manner that the listening center is.

The skills center should include any materials which offer the student an opportunity for additional drill in reading skills. These materials include such items as the following: the workbooks which accompany the basal reader, phonic workbooks and games, skill-building kits, The Spectrum of Skills (8), Reading Pacemakers (6), the Reading for Meaning Series (7), the Be a Better Reader Series (17), and many more. The materials mentioned here will give the youngsters an opportunity to practice either his word attack or comprehension skills.

From a variety of teaching situations the teacher will determine at which skill exercises the student should work. She will observe him during the directed reading-thinking lessons or self-selection checks. If he displays a reading weakness which can be self-corrected in the skills program, she will assign the appropriate lessons. If it is a skill that must be taught, she will do so. Then she will assign the appropriate lessons in the skills center as extra practice, to reinforce the skill she has taught. In either case the teacher performs minimal supervision while the student learns in the skills center.

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With the classroom organization that develops from a learning-centers program, the teacher can also introduce a differentiated-level, spelling approach. Some prefer to teach spelling in groups; others, however, become accustomed to individualized spelling. The individualized spelling approach is most effective when the teacher is comfortable letting the youngsters use a buddy-buddy system.

One teacher in Delaware has he· spelling program organized in the following manner. Each day when it is time for spelling, half of the class, (one member of each partnership), goes to the skills area in the room to get the spelling lists for their partners. After they have returned to their seats, the other half chooses spelling lists for the first member of the partnership. For the next five minutes the students dictate the words to their partners. Each student then takes his own spelling list and checks his work for errors. In a systematic manner the youngster marks off the words he has just been tested on, makes a record of his errors, practices the words he missed, and takes a retest of the words he missed in that lesson.

In this particular system the missed words are reviewed after twenty-four hours, after one week, and at the

end of the month. If the youngsters take as few as seven words a day they practice the equivalent of a standard spelling list each week.

The classroom teacher becomes the overseer, once the youngster understands how the spelling system operates and becomes a teacher-learner. She must be certain that the students are practicing the missed words in an acceptable fashion, keeping their records accurately, and making normal progress.

Students who develop their word attack, comprehension and spelling skills in the manner described above, can develop a certain feeling of independence and self-reliance. They become adept at identifying skill deficiencies, at locating the material which will help them overcome these deficiencies, and working with the materials until they are satisfied they have overcome the deficiencies. If they want to learn, they no longer need to wait until the teacher is ready to teach them.

Writing Center

Unlike the other centers in the room, the writing center is more a method of teaching writing skills than it is a location in the room. The teacher might use composition skillbooks or books from the self-selection

center in attempts to teach writing skills. Because she can do so without using special published materials, however, the teacher can use this writing center approach wherever she decides she wants to start.

According to Burrows (5) and others, the best written language follows from an experience and oral discussion. In the writing-center lesson, therefore, the teacher would direct an experience with the children on one day. Then she would have the group discuss the experience, at which time she would emphasize oral language development, concept development and vocabulary development. Following the extensive discussion, she would allow the youngsters to write about their experience.

On the next day, or when the children have completed their written assignment, the teacher selects a few compositions and makes a transparency of each on a Thermafax machine. While projecting the child's work on a screen, she uses the transparencies to discuss the strength of each composition. In this way the teacher emphasizes the pieces of good writing, rather than having each child focus on his red-penciled errors.

The teacher then asks each member of the group to edit his own composition in relation to those which were projected. She tells him to do the assignment over and imitate the positive features of the composition discussed. In this method she reads the composition and comments on them only after each child has edited and rewritten his work.

Directed Reading Center

In the majority of classes where formal reading lessons are conducted from basal readers, the teacher has already established a directed reading center. It is merely an area of the room which is set aside for the teacher to meet with small groups of students during the reading period. The physical arrangements of this portion of the room are not new or unusual to any experienced teacher.

Stauffer (19) has written about the principles and boundaries of the group directed reading-thinking activities. Essentially, he says that the group offers each of its members a chance to share common materials for the purpose of developing reading-thinking skills. This is done as the students share setting purposes, weighing evidence, seeking answers to their own questions,

adjusting purposes and proving points. In the joint effort the students learn from each other; the teacher plays only the secondary role of "intellectual agitator."

During the directed reading-thinking lesson the teacher observes how each student uses reading-thinking skills. Can he set an appropriate purpose? Does he get his answer? Can he prove it? Does he use the table of contents, glossary and index when he should? Does he know and use appropriate word attack skills? Has he learned the "new" words of the story? Can he interpret figurative language? Can he differentiate between fact and opinion? Can he recall the events of the story sequentially? The teacher then uses her observations to plan how to help students overcome their reading-thinking deficiencies.

The teacher has several options available for correcting a skill deficiency. When it is a minor one, she may merely assign appropriate self-correct exercises in the skills center. If it is more serious, however, she may carefully guide the student(s) through the exercises in the skills center. Or she might use a group directed reading lesson to teach the skill, before letting the students use the skills center for additional practice. In any case, skill assignments are based on observed skill deficiencies.

This unusual way to use the directed reading center in a classroom calls for a rather sophisticated teacher. She must be able to operate a reading program outside the straightjacket of the basal reader. Because she selects stories for group reading on the basis of difficulty and of interest to the group, the content from pages twenty to twenty-five of a particular reader might not be important. Because she selects skill exercises according to the students' demonstrated weaknesses, page five of the workbook does not have to follow page four and precede page six. To be successful in this type of program the teacher must know a sequence of reading skills, assess skill deficiencies accurately and teach the skills that the student needs to read for information and for pleasure.

Other Centers

Depending on the age of her children, the teacher might select other centers for the classroom. She could use an oral-language-development center to house puppets, framing devices (such as a stage or TV set), flannelboards, pictures to stimulate oral language, stories and plays to be acted out, poems for choral reading, etc. The teacher might also set up a games center to store phonic games, checkers, jig-saw puzzles, spill

and spell, password, concentration, etc. When the student has finished the assignments and does not want to participate in any of the other centers, she permits him to come to the game area for learning. Teachers have established a "home" center, with household furnishings for teaching concepts about family living, including dressing habits, behavior and good manners. Possibilities for other centers in the room are limited only by the teachers' imagination for establishing a purpose, and by the space and materials available.

Conclusion

The teacher has an unusual role in the classroom described here. Her primary duty is not to perform from the center of the stage for a captive audience. Neither is it to impart jewels of information from her vast reservoir of knowledge. After creating a stimulating environment for her students, the teacher's concern is to carefully guide them through the experiences and exercises which will not only develop their reading skills, but will also encourage them to seek information and pleasure through reading.

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