



What do I do with the rest of the kids? Ideas for meaningful independent activities during small-group reading instruction

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One of the questions we are asked most frequently when we present staff development sessions focused on guided reading is about how to engage the rest of the class when working with small guided reading groups. Without a doubt, if we want to teach with minimal interruptions, the other children need to be engaged in meaningful activities independent of the teacher. These activities need to enhance children's literacy learning. The books we review in this column are designed to help you do just that. Using specific criteria to guide us in the selection of texts, we reviewed several recently published titles.

Each book had to meet the following criteria:

1. Be accessible to busy teachers who are curious about ways to engage children with meaningful literacy activities.
2. Provide a wealth of ideas to help students extend their understanding of literacy.
3. Be written using concise, clear directions with illustrations or photographs.
4. Offer suggestions applicable to all students (i.e., those who find reading easy as well as those who find it difficult).
5. Provide suggestions that are easy to implement and modify with an efficient use of teacher preparation time.

The titles that appear here fall into one of two categories: learning centers and independent projects.

Learning centers

In *Literacy Work Stations: Making Centers Work* (Diller, 2003) the author distinguishes between literacy work stations and traditional learning centers. After Diller defines literacy work stations, her different chapters focus on the various stations such as classroom library, writing, and drama. Diller also presents ideas for organizing, introducing, implementing, and modifying each of these stations. This resource includes easy-to-reproduce icon signs as well as numerous open-ended, generic reproducible forms for student use in both English and Spanish.

Primary Literacy Centers: Making Reading and Writing STICK! (Nations & Alonso, 2001) is another helpful resource for those looking for ways to implement learning centers with ease. STICK is an acronym that defines the key criteria for Literacy Centers in Nations and Alonso's book: Strategy immersion in centers, Tools that target all learners, Increase time in text, Choice not chaos, and Keys to success. The resource features a focus on seven literacy centers: classroom library, listening, literature response, poetry, research, spelling/word work, and writing. The second part of the book is filled with instructional tools and ideas to support the implementation of centers. Some ideas are specific to individual texts. Others are applicable across texts.

Because we as teachers often use centers that involve working with words, resources filled with ideas and activities for helping children with word identification strategies provide content for planning and implementing centers around these topics. *Phonics They Use: Words for Reading and Writing* (4th ed., Cunningham, 2005), *Building Words: A Resource Manual for Teaching Word Analysis and Spelling Strategies* (Gunning, 2001), and *Word Journeys: Assessment-Guided Phonics, Spelling, and Vocabulary Instruction* (Ganske, 2000) are three examples. Each offers a thorough compendium of ideas including ideas for spelling and vocabulary. Finally, the authors include assessment tools and resource lists.

Independent projects

While learning centers can provide opportunities for children to be meaningfully engaged, independent activities or projects can also be used to accomplish the same purpose. *Independent Reading Activities That Keep Kids Learning... While You Teach Small Groups* (Finney, 2003) is one resource that offers several ideas. The author offers 50 reproducible forms to guide students' independent work. The forms focus on picture books for older readers, exploring literary genres, nonfiction and content skills, vocabulary, and easy long-term projects. Some are specific to certain texts, but most are applicable across texts. Several formats facilitate differentiation of independent instruction.

40 Graphic Organizers that Build Comprehension During Independent Reading (Robb, 2003) is another resource that offers reproducible forms for student and teacher use. Everything from record-keeping forms to those that focus on different strategies students need to use when reading different genres are provided. What's more, written instructions are included on each form.

Readers Theatre is often used to provide children with meaningful reading practice. Two titles that offer a wealth of ideas and scripts are *From the Page to the Stage: The Educator's Complete Guide to Readers Theatre* (Sloyer, 2003) and *Judge for Yourself: Famous American Trials for Readers Theatre* (Barchers, 2004). The first title offers scripts for student use but also a guide for those who are new to Readers Theatre. It shows how to

get Readers Theatre started and how to keep it going. The second title offers Readers Theatre scripts that are based on historical, landmark trials.

Research in the Real Classroom: The Independent Investigation Method for Primary Students (Nottage & Morse, 2003) offers a seven-step process that students use to complete investigations. The authors offer suggestions for how to teach each step as well as student assessment forms. While this method initially requires some instruction from the teacher, once students understand the process they can complete projects independently. Large graphics are included to remind students of the research steps.

The Power of Projects: Meeting Contemporary Challenges in Early Childhood Classrooms—Strategies & Solutions (Helm & Beneke, 2003) is another resource that offers ideas for individual inquiry projects. The authors of this edited volume identify the major challenges facing early childhood education such as overcoming the ill effects of poverty, moving young children toward literacy, responding to children's special needs, helping children learn a second language, and meeting standards effectively. They then demonstrate how the project approach can meet these challenges. Reading about inquiry-based curricula should provide helpful insights and ideas for implementing an inquiry component to engage students away from the teacher.

These are but a sampling of the many available titles that can help us to ensure that the power of instruction that takes place away from the teacher rivals the power of the instruction that takes place with the teacher. Our goal is to keep children meaningfully engaged with activities that will further their understanding of reading and the other language arts—with or without the teacher.

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