

Centering the **Elementary Classroom**

Successful Use of Learning Centers in the Classroom

Teacher Resource Workbook

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CENTERING THE ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM: SUCCESSFUL USE OF LEARNING CENTERS

WHAT ARE LEARNING CENTERS?

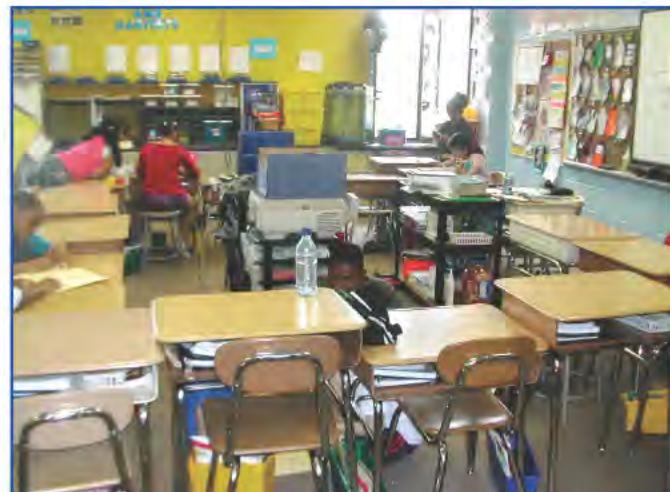
In one corner of a third grade classroom, a small group of five students are writing multiplication word problems at a table with their teacher. At the same time, four other children compete against their computers on timed multiplication flash cards. Three pairs of students are also scattered about the rug; one pair is making tile arrays to match multiplication sentences and the other two are playing a commercial board game that requires students to answer questions about one digit multiplication. Three other students are on the park bench listening to Multiplication Rap songs and singing along with song sheets, while the remaining four children are at their desks creating multiplication flip charts.

After twenty minutes the teacher rings a tone bell and the children quickly clean up. When the second tone bell rings a few minutes later, the groups circulate to one of the other activities. This teacher is using learning centers to effectively engage her students in authentic and differentiated learning activities.

This handbook will detail how learning centers can be successfully implemented into teachers' classrooms. Learning centers not only immerse students in motivating learning activities that support knowledge building, but also develop positive classroom assets in students. These assets include skills in critical thinking, independence and cooperation (See Figure 1).

Figure 1

Positive Assets	Skills
Critical Thinking Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none">solving problemsformulating inferencescalculating probabilitymaking decisionsevaluating factsasking questions/for helplistening to others
Independence Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none">accountabilityleadershipdecision makingproblem solvingtrust building
Cooperative Work Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none">communicationpositive interdependenceface to face interaction



Learning centers are often thought of as a defined area in the classroom with a specific focus for instruction, but learning centers can be designed for mobility too. Teachers carefully design learning centers for students to meet specific state or district standards and curriculum objectives. Learning centers offer teachers a great deal of latitude in meeting student needs through differentiated instruction based not only on academic needs, but social and emotional needs as well.

Learning centers are not new to education. They were first introduced in the form of workjobs for mathematics thinking (Baratta-Lorton, 1975). The workjobs format was extended into learning centers or stations as a way to fulfill individual needs for special

education students within a resource room setting for all subjects (Elman, 1981).

Soon after, intermediate teachers began to apply thematic format to learning stations to connect content through theme (Staab, 1991). In the last decade, literacy centers or learning stations have become a component for exemplary reading instruction (Routman, 2002; Ford & Opitz, 2002; Calkins, 2000).

Today, the terms learning centers, workjobs, workstations and learning stations are often used interchangeably. Although some of the terms have been aligned with specific classroom uses, they all entail students having choices in their learning and involve active participation. Teachers seeking an instructional approach that is goal directed, motivating and meets varying levels among students (Tomlinson, 1999) use learning centers. They offer teachers an instructional approach where successful learning strategies are utilized and practiced within the context of meaningful tasks (Marzano, Pickering & Ollack, 2001).

Vygotsky (1978) offers teachers some key characteristics for successful instruction and they can be directly applied to learning centers. First, his concept of Zone of Proximal Development considers the guidance and support needed to gain independence. The Zone of Proximal Development is the difference between what a child can do with help and what he can do without guidance. Using learning centers acquaints students with concepts by structuring them into manageable portions of activity that can be completed independently. The scaffolding for independence in centers comes from teachers providing clear directions and expectations through the introduction of learning center tasks by direct modeling and guided practice.

Language, too, is central to learning. According to Vygotsky (1962 & 1978), language is the learner's tool for constructing understanding of the external experience to internal understanding. When students are encouraged to experience concepts and skills with their peers as they talk about the task, they co-construct meaning (Goodwin, 1986 & 2000) and increase skill ability.



Motivation is another key component to successful learning. Learning centers can play a major role in providing the elements for intrinsic motivation among students. Intrinsically motivating activities are engaged in for no reward other than the interest and enjoyment of them. When students' learning activities are aligned to individual ability levels, and allow for options and choices, students are intrinsically motivated to participate (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Taylor & Adelman, 1999).

Giving students choices about their learning activities not only contributes to motivation, but also increases positive behavior. When students feel as though they have power over their own learning and the ability to make decisions about the activities they participate in, problematic behaviors decrease and levels of learning increase (Oyler, 1996). Students also believe that teachers who use learning centers care about them as individuals and want to make learning fun.

The number of centers in a classroom depends upon how the teacher wants to use them. Centers offer students purposeful work as a meaningful alternative to seatwork or bell work. Depending upon the teacher's goals, the number of centers in a classroom can vary from three to twenty. Some teachers like to have individual centers so their students can be assigned to them one at a time, while other teachers use center time for group work. Then, there are teachers who employ flexible grouping methods with their classroom centers.