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Jill A. Jones

Liberty University, jajones9@liberty.edu

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Literacy Center Stations: Are they practical for English Language Learners?

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Dr. Jill A. Jones
Teacher Education Department at Florida Atlantic University
13856 Elder Court,
Wellington, Florida, 33414
USA

jajones@fau.edu
(hm) 561-784-5755
(cell) 561-601-2477

Literacy Center Stations: Are they practical for English Language Learners?

This study employed an ethnographic design in order to gain an understanding regarding first grade English Language Learners' (ELLs) social and literacy interactions during literacy center stations. The study took place in first grade, South Florida classroom during the ninety minute literacy block. The literacy block included student instruction in three settings: teacher-led/whole-group, teacher-led/guided groups, and independent student literacy stations.

The participants included four English Language Learners, two Hispanic and two Haitian Creole. The majority of data collection occurred over the length of eight weeks, with the collection of artifacts and informal observations taking place during the entire academic year. Data were collected during the ninety minute literacy block using a student audiotape vest, video camera, student artifacts, teacher interviews, observation notes, a reflexive journal, and home visits. The video and audio tape transcriptions, coupled with the other data, created a vivid and detailed picture of what these four ELLs experienced while working in literacy stations in a regular education classroom.

The data were analyzed using a systematic approach that included transcriptions, a reflexive journal, and several sociograms. Complete transcripts were made from interviews, audiotapes, observation notes, and home visits/parent meetings. The videotapes were watched and observation notes were written. These notes, and the classroom teacher's comments regarding them, were also transcribed for analysis. This process, coupled with student artifacts collected weekly, provided rich data on the four ELLs and their

classroom. The reflexive journal kept an ongoing account of any patterns or categories and forced the researcher to be alert to differentiating between an observable fact and an emerging theory.

Sociograms were also utilized in order to depict a pattern for each of the four children. The purpose of the sociogram was to track student interactions by keeping a record of whom each child interacted with, what type of interaction was occurring, and the location of the interactions. This organizational process was completed in two phases. First, each child's social and academic interactions with teacher(s) were noted and then each child's social and academic interactions with his/her peers were noted. One interaction was marked for each time the ELL entered into the discussion. The sociograms turned the qualitative student interactions into quantitative data, thus allowing the researcher to use bar and line graphs to better comprehend the interaction patterns.

In order to increase validity, this study employed the use of a reflexive journal. This constant memoing process allowed data analysis to begin at the onset of the study and created a vehicle for the researcher to separate ongoing facts and emerging theories. Triangulation of data sources and member checks were also employed. The classroom teacher and the school's English-as-a-second-language (ESL) coordinator were regularly consulted about the patterns emerging from the data. The school's language facilitators were also consulted regarding the transcriptions of the home visits. Rich data, in the form of audio and video transcripts, and quasi-statistics used to create the sociograms also increased the credibility of this investigation.

This investigation revealed three important findings: 1) The students' home culture drastically affects the children's educational experiences, 2) Literacy center stations do not increase English language learners' academic language and 3) Literacy center stations do not provide an effective environment for English language learners to increase their understanding of literacy.

All four children's interaction patterns were dramatically influenced by their home environments, which in turn affected their language and literacy growth. More specifically, the child's family arrangement, the amount of adult guidance, the structure of the home, and the role and support of education in each of the families all contributed to how each child adapted and interacted during the literacy block setting. However, even though each child interacted differently with his/her peers and teachers, all four participants did not interact or create work that demonstrated an increase in their literacy understanding or ability to learn and use new academic language.

The literacy center setting was created in order to allow teachers to meet with small guided groups; however, the time the children work independently in literacy centers greatly outweighed the time they were able to meet with the teacher. In fact, the children spent an average of 40 minutes working independently in literacy center stations and only 20 minutes working with the teacher in a small guided group. Forty minutes a day, times five days a week, times the intensive data collection period of eight weeks equals 1,600 minutes the children spent avoiding literacy work, talking about their school supplies, arguing with each other, or worse yet, completely silent. One participant, Wally,

was almost completely silent, and Raul, another ELL who was not one of the participants in this study, NEVER engaged in any conversation during the entire eight weeks.

Further research needs to be conducted using a larger sample of students; however, the implications from this study alone should coerce educators and district policy makers into investigating different means to occupying students while the teacher meets with a small guided group. The data from this investigation also needs to be re-examined using the guided group as its main focus in order to determine what learning occurred during this teacher-led experience and did that learning warrant the time the children spent away from the teacher in literacy stations.