

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF AN INDIVIDUALIZED, LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE CLASSROOM

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Unusually effective classrooms are like snowflakes. They have several basic features in common, yet each is uniquely detailed and special in its own right. The following description is meant to serve as an example—not a recipe for the “one right way,” but an example meant to help practitioners generate their own vision of how a literacy program might be individualized to meet the needs of a diverse group of children.

The practices described here are based on an approach I developed while working for several years in my own K-2 classroom in an agricultural area of southern California. The children of migrant farm workers made up about half of my class; the rest were the children of the local land owners and the professionals who had chosen to raise their families in the country.

To accommodate the wide spread in these children’s ages and incoming skills, I needed to work out an individualized approach that met each one of them where they came in and moved each forward at a comfortable pace.

This was quite a challenge, and I had to scramble at first to work it out. Primary students in this one-school district had not been doing well, so the administration and school board gave me free rein. But this was my first full year of teaching, and I had only two basic ideas to guide me. First was the belief that for beginners, language arts activities should be based on the child’s own language and interests. Beyond that, I thought I might start with a strategy known as “key vocabulary.” This was the practice of writing down for a child one word each day that they asked for because it had special meaning for them. (Ashton-Warner 1963; Veatch, 1979.)

I had experimented with key vocabulary during my practice teaching the previous year in a kindergarten class. Sitting with a small group of children, I had asked each child to tell me about

something special—something they loved, wanted, or perhaps something they thought was especially scary. A child might talk, for example, about a new puppy they loved playing with at home. After we talked a bit about it, I would ask what its name was, or whether I should just write “puppy.” I would write the word they chose on heavy paper, punch a hole in it and put it on their metal “word ring.”

Following that, I made a duplicate of the word and sent them off to complete their work, which was to glue the duplicate under the picture they would make of their puppy. I repeated this procedure with the next child in the group, who would ask for something different. If a child recognized their word the next day, it remained on their word ring. The children loved this activity, and eventually all had a sizeable collection of words they readily recognized.

I saw great potential in this key word strategy, so now in my own classroom, I set out to see how to make it work in this much more complex situation. First I discovered that these children, too, were enthusiastic about choosing what I have come to think of as “their own special words,” and day after day easily remembered all the words they had collected on their own word ring.

But what next? How could I help these children develop literacy skills through their special words? I needed to develop follow-up activities that would move them into writing and ultimately reading. So I began asking each child to tell me one sentence they would like me to write about their word. Soon I was experimenting with how to help them slowly take over the process of writing that sentence on their own.

At first, I was barely able to stay just one step ahead of them. But eventually, as their skills grew and I responded, I began to see plateaus in their skill development. Finally I identified six stages it seemed every child went through as they became prolific, independent writers. I referred to these as the “Steps.”

Having this structure of the Steps was a big relief. Knowing what they would need to do next allowed me, with much greater confidence, to guide each child forward at their own pace. ***There is nothing magical about these Steps.*** Another teacher might devise a different set of

follow-up activities and call it something else. ***What's crucial is to have a structure of increasingly complex activities to guide such a diverse group of students individually, and at their own pace.***

With the structure of the six Steps to guide us, I needed quality time to assess a few children's work each day with an eye to moving them forward. But during the five years I worked on this, my class size ranged between 28 - 34 students.

Obviously, I needed some help. So I taught the aide who was with me mornings, some parent volunteers, and a few 5th grade students how to take a child's dictation at each of the Steps. I also arranged for my children's bilingual aide to come in during our writing period, instead of taking my children out for other activities.

Eventually we had at least two or three of these "Helpers" coming in each morning during our writing period. The very few times when no one came in, I asked which of my independent writers wanted to write the words the younger ones asked for. Many were happy to do it. So in a pinch, we were able to make it work all on our own.

I also printed up notes to attach to each child's word ring, showing Helpers what Step the child was currently on and reminding them of what that entailed. Beyond that, I created a variety of open-ended activities, interest centers, and self-teaching, self-correcting math games the children could use once they had finished their writing activity.

So with all that now in place, a regular routine we called our Writing Work Period had emerged. Before long, we were having so many visitors coming to observe the children in action during this time, that eventually I left the classroom to show teachers how to organize their own unique individualized program. Now I want to help others teachers in that same way.

For many, teaching is an art. Creative teachers spend years working out their own unique approach, and they are never quite finished. They take an idea from here, a new strategy from there — building through trial and error a program that works for them and for their students.

If you are a teacher interested enough to be reading this, then you are one of those creative teachers. So I share these ideas with you in the hope you will find something you can incorporate into what you are already doing and/or perhaps broaden your vision of the program you want ultimately to establish.

There is more to this approach than the individualized curriculum. ***Especially in a diverse student population, children must be actively involved and allowed to move forward at their own pace and in a "fail-safe" way.*** So beyond the structure for skill development, I am describing several other components of a structure needed to allow students to work rather independently in an *active classroom setting*. This includes the classroom environment, recordkeeping, using volunteers and tutors, as well as other organizational matters. Some version of these components ***must*** be in place, but they may look different from the specific strategies described here.

I begin with the following description of my class in action during a typical day. As it unfolds, I pause occasionally to comment briefly on the structure that holds it all together. In later chapters, I will discuss each of the components of that structure in greater detail and provide more examples.. So if questions arise as you read, please keep in mind that I will be saying more later about how and why I operated as I did. But for now, let's consider the approach as a whole, by looking at what the children and I were doing during an ordinary day.

Early Morning

Class begins with all of us sitting in a circle on the rug, the children playing rhythm instruments along with a record that has a strong, lively beat. The Beatles singing *Penny Lane* is a favorite, but we also have classical pieces and some popular songs with a Latin beat.

We have plenty of instruments. Someone has even given us a bongo drum almost as tall as some of the smaller children, plus an adult-sized set of cymbals. One of the new boys, who is still learning to speak English, has become quite a star on the bongo. It does wonders to smooth the way for his full acceptance into the group, as the children are very impressed with the rapid, rhythmic tempo he manages to reach. (I can still see his beaming face

— sometimes grinning, sometimes very serious and intent, as he furiously played.)

The various rhythm instruments have their exact place outlined on the shelving next to the rug, so they are always put back in the same spot. Each type of instrument also has its designated spot on the rug, so once they select an instrument, the children know where to sit. This forms sections, as in an adult orchestra. I am the director, indicating when each of the sections are to play, sometimes one alone, sometimes two or three — or all together. So the children watch my hands carefully, playing only when directed. It's fun, it firmly establishes me as a strong leader, helps establish in them the habit of watching and listening carefully to directions — and sometimes we even make good music!

This is a very upbeat way for all of us to start the day. The children enjoy this so much that several of them regularly come in from the playground before the bell rings each morning, to select their instrument, take the proper place on the rug, and wait for class to begin.

We play for about 15 minutes before the children replace the instruments and someone turns off the record player. Once everyone is seated back down on the rug, the child whose turn it is today changes the date on the calendar, as we watch.

Then it's time for *Today's News*. As a child tells us some special news, we comment on it, and I write it on large chart paper. These newspapers are posted somewhere on the wall, to serve later as a source for spelling and for the pleasure of looking for their names and rereading news items. Tess goes first today, as she is bursting with excitement:

I get to go to Maria's after school today!.... Good, Tess! Did you bring a note to tell the bus driver?.... Yes, here it is.... Okay, let me see it. Do you want me to keep it for you?... No, I can do it.

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Tess is going to Maria's house today. She has a note for the bus driver.

Javier fell off the swing, but he's okay now.... Let me see, Javier, did you hurt your arm?

Javier fell off the swing and hurt his arm. But he's okay now.

Look, my tooth's more looser today, but I wouldn't let my dad pull it out!—Yes, your tooth is looser today, Donny! Be sure you don't swallow it. If it comes out this morning, we'll save it for you in an envelope.

Donny's tooth is looser today. He's not going to swallow it. Instead, we'll save it in an envelope.

After adding a few more news items, we read through all of them once or twice. Then it's time to get to work. So I read out my list of who is to come to my table today. As soon as a child hears their name, they leave the rug to get their writing book (five large, blank pages of newsprint, with construction paper covers, and with their names in large print on the front). Then these first few head for my table.

Those not working with me will go to one of our Helpers to give their dictation. So I begin to tell the children still sitting with me who's coming in today and which person they should go to. As soon as I have assigned them to a Helper, a child leaves the rug, gets their book, decides on a place to sit, and begins to draw. (Independent writers will write on their own, so they have already left the rug to get started.)

Writing Work Period

With no one left on the rug in front of me, we have made the transition now to our Writing Work Period. So I gather my notes and join the children, most of them already working.

The procedures structuring this writing period have become routine. For most, it begins with drawing. When finished with their drawing, those at the beginning levels show it to their Helper for that day, *talk with them about it first*, and then ask for that one special word that describes what their picture is about.* In some cases, they will dictate a sentence about it, too.

Some will simply paste a duplicate made for them of their dictation, others will *copy it directly into their book*, under their picture.

Children a little farther along will still ask for a word. But they will go through the lengthy process on their own of “building” just one sentence, using various resources for spelling. They may search for the words they need on the charts of *Today’s News*, familiar songs, poems we know by heart, class-dictated stories, or popular words posted around the room. They may use individual or class-created dictionaries, and/or sound out words on their own. Advanced writers will draw upon those same resources, spending several days creating complex stories, using as an outline the clusters of words they created for themselves. Or they may begin by spending a day or more creating an elaborate drawing, and then use it as their inspiration for a few days of writing.

Today as usual, the children designated to meet with me have already reported to my table and started to draw. The number of children varies, but from the work done yesterday I decided that **eight** students need my special attention this morning. I told **six** of them to report to me: **Four** of the younger children are ready to move on to the next Step. So I told them to sit at my table and begin their drawing. Also, yesterday I promised **two** girls they could start a report on Killer Whales (something one of them saw on TV at home), and I need to get them started. So as I read out their names, I told them we would meet at the small table near mine. **Two** of the older boys have been working for two days now on unusually complex drawings, so I want to see how they are doing. But I did not mention this to them, so they are sitting elsewhere, already talking to one another as they each work on their own drawing.

I go first to the four at my table now to make sure they are beginning their drawings. They have already started, so I tell them I will be back in a few minutes. Then I sit down with the two girls to talk about their Killer Whale project. They already know how to make a “cluster map” of what they want to know about whales, so I tell them to put Killer Whales in a circle in the middle now, and start clustering their ideas around it. This map will guide their “research” as they read through the two children’s book on whales I was able to find for them.

Just as I finish talking with the girls, the fifth grade tutor scheduled to work on Fridays, arrives late. I quickly fill him in and tell the girls to go to him first if they need help.

Satisfied the two girls know what they are doing and have the help they might need, I sit down beside the two older boys. They are continuing to add to their two separate drawings of what looks like a fierce air battle during WWII, complete with bullets flying between planes bearing opposing insignias. These boys, Javier and Jacob, have been sitting side by side, working on these drawings for two full writing periods now. They seem to be egging each other on, as both drawings are unusually detailed, including two pilots visible in their cockpits, with other planes buzzing around them. This morning, they have started adding speech bubbles floating over the two pilots, who are now angrily yelling at each other.

Our agreement is that spending several days drawing is acceptable during this writing time, as long as these serve as a pictorial outline that will eventually guide their writing. Since they have now started writing within the bubbles, I explain that if by the time they finish, the bubbles are telling the story, then they can write more about the situation itself. Or they can simply write an explanation of how they thought of and created all this. Bottom line is that they will need to do some narrative writing, then edit and publish it with their drawings.

Before I leave them, I want some idea of how much more they plan to draw before they begin to write. Since their work so far is quite intense and creative, I want to give them plenty of latitude, so we discuss what is only a tentative schedule.

Now I return to my table, where the four children are still working on today’s drawing. I require *every* child to check in with me by the end of the period, briefly showing me what they have done. So before others begin appearing to be checked, I want to start introducing these four to their next Step.

I begin by asking one of the girls to tell me what the picture she’s drawing is all about. We talk about it, then I take her dictation, writing it on her word card, with the word on the front,

sentence on the back. Now for the first time, instead of making her a duplicate, I demonstrate how to *copy* both directly into her book. I watch a few moments to see that she knows what to do and then repeat this procedure with two others in the group, moving them on to the next Step appropriate for them. (For one, it's the first time for her to dictate not only a word, but a sentence, too. For the other, it's how to build for himself the sentence he wants.)

Just as I turn to the last of these four children, Juan, who is seated on my right, two children who have been working elsewhere appear with writing books in hand, ready to be checked. I motion them to my left and put my arm around them, silently gathering them into the circle of concentration on Juan's work.

Today, for the first time, I have written the duplicate of Juan's word and sentence on a long, narrow strip of paper. So his task is to cut between each of the words, letting them fall out of order onto the table. He will scramble them up even more, then put the sentence back in order. After repeating that a few of times, he will take everything to the gluing station, put the sentence back together again, and paste it under his drawing. (Since the original of that sentence is on the back of his word card, which is now on his ring, he can use that to check his work.)

With Juan still cutting, I turn my attention to Chad, one of the children who appeared on my left and has been waiting to be checked. He has written his own sentence, and I show his work to the entire table of children, including them in on my comments:

Do you remember last Friday when Chad told us about his new puppy? Now he says they built him a dog house this weekend. And you helped paint it red, Chad? So that's how this little spot of red got in your hair!...Read it for us.... (He reads.).... Oh, look at Juanita's paper. I think she used some of the same words Chad did when she told me what to write....(They compare.)....I notice you had a hard time with "paint" Chad. If you bring the Wall Strip Dictionary for the "p" sound, I'll help you with it....

Chad goes to the far wall and walks along in front of the class Wall Strip Dictionary— strips

of card-stock paper hanging side-by-side on cup hooks, each headed by a cartoon representing a sound. As he searches for the strip he needs, Sara, one of those who has been waiting on my left, moves forward now to show her work. I comment on her story, while at the same time gathering Chad in on my right when he reappears a few moments later, squeezing in between me and Juan, who is now busy putting his sentence together.

I continue with Sara, reminding her of how to hear where to place commas in a series. I ask her to read it aloud, telling the others at the table to listen to the way she says it to help decide where commas are needed. I then clear a place on the table so Sara can make the changes.

I turn the group's attention back now to Chad, who has returned holding the strip from the Class Strip Dictionary. It is headed by a cartoon of a girl making the "p" sound as she gently attempts to blow a butterfly off the petal of a flower. First I ask if he has checked to see whether "paint" has already been written on the strip for someone else. I read it over to make sure, "*Let's see...popcorn, puppy, perro, push, peso.... No, I don't see it.*" Then, as the others watch I help Chad sound out "paint" and write it on the Dictionary Strip for him to copy.

While Chad makes the change in his work, I turn back to Sara, who is ready to show me where she has now placed the commas in her story. In this way, I am continuously alternating between checking, taking dictation, giving corrective feedback, and demonstrating techniques.

Believing that interest is key to learning, I take time to **teach skills as the need arises in the child's work**. Further, virtually all my assessments are based on a child's work, *as I am most interested in what they are actually able to do with what they are learning*.

By the time about three-fourths of the work period is over, most of the children have finished their work and shown it to me. Each time I finish making some positive comment, accepting their work, *I clip a clothespin onto their collar or sleeve, signifying their work has been checked*, and they are free to go on to an activity of their choice.

Once finished with the four children at my table, I spend the rest of my time circulating, occasionally taking dictation, listening to conversations and noting whether those who have not yet finished are having difficulty or are simply moving along at a slower pace.

With most children now finished with their work, many have turned to the variety of arts, crafts and constructions materials or self-correcting math activities that are always out on shelves within reach. Others may have decided to settle into one of the interest areas, perhaps the restaurant (complete with a cash register, receipt book, and play money), our post office (with actual notes being posted within the class), the listening post, or the class library. Or some will be painting or simply talking.

Still others, working on complex stories over several days, are continuing to write. Those few need only show me, at the last minute, how far they have gotten today. They will go through a lengthy editing process later, first with a Buddy, then with me.

Flashing overhead lights signal the end of this writing period and time to clean up before recess. I stand at the door and collect clothespins as the children go out to recess.

The Underlying Management Structure

As the children and helpers carry out the procedures I taught them at the beginning of the school year, I have assumed a role much like that of a doctor in a hospital, using my time primarily for “diagnosis and prescription.” Just as only a doctor prescribes treatment, yet others may carry it out, ***I am the only one who moves a child on to the next, more difficult Step.*** This includes changing the printed instructions on the child’s word ring, which describes what our Helpers are to do at this next Step.

Keeping track of what each child is accomplishing within this active classroom is a challenge. The idea for the clothespin was a breakthrough for me. Without this simple, visible signal, I was never really certain every child was actually accomplishing what I wanted them to do, and sometimes I would discover after class that some had not finished their work.

This made me very uneasy. What good is it to discover — after school — that someone has not done their work? What is this teaching the child about responsibility, to say nothing of the skills he needs to develop? So the clothespin gave me additional confidence. Now with this strategy of the clothespin, ***I always comment on a child’s work with them, soon after they have finished it.*** Adding immediate feedback to the Steps gives me much more confidence that we can and will move everyone forward.

I wear an apron with pockets large to carry over 30 clothespins around in it, along with the wide-tip marking pens for writing words and the thinner ones for sentences. This made it easy to move around taking dictation or checking work, once up from my table.

With the clothespin such an obvious signal, everyone gets their work done. But ***how they go about doing their work is up to them,*** and the adults are too busy taking dictation from individuals to watch over other children, which is exactly the way I want it. In this way, ***I am intentionally sharing responsibility and control, but never completely relinquishing it.***

With these routines firmly in place, the children operate much as adults in a busy workshop. Their work is based on their own language and interests, their tasks are closely aligned to their skill level (not too easy, not too hard); they know what they need to accomplish and that not having their clothespin would make it obvious they have come up short. That only happened twice during the first year, and once during the four years afterward. So rather quickly, a classroom culture developed in which “getting your pin” is the accepted, “in thing” to do.

After Recess

While the Writing Work Period is always the same, the block of time after recess varies. Most days it is devoted to an individualized math program I developed. Occasionally this time is spent on a topic in science or social studies to be used as fodder for writing and for the projects at Step 6.

In math, the children usually work in pairs or small groups, using manipulative materials to develop number concepts and to record simple

calculations. This is an intensive period designed to introduce and develop skills and concepts later woven into other daily classroom activities, especially the self-teaching, self-correcting math materials, and the projects.

Even though this book focuses primarily on how to structure literacy skills, the details of the individualized math program are described in a later chapter.

Story Time Before Lunch

With all of us gathered again on the rug, I end the morning by reading stories to the entire group. When the bell rings, I walk the older children to the cafeteria, while my aide sees the kindergarten children onto the bus.

After Lunch

Book Time

The mid-day break is over, and the 1st and 2nd graders file in from lunch recess. Some bounce in, still flushed from exercise and excitement, needing a few moments to settle down. Others enter more quietly, ready to begin the afternoon activities. Music is already playing, so gathering on the rug, they listen to one of their favorite songs, one which helps the group transition to a quiet mood.

Books are the focus of every afternoon, and the first item on the agenda is a simple book we have been working on together. They know the story well by now. They have acted out portions of it by following narratives in the original and translations made by bilingual volunteers. They have conducted mock interviews of the main characters, and explored the richness, rhythm and patterns of the language by creating chants and poems from some of its special words and phrases.

Today we focus on the central theme: *changes in life*. Before beginning to read, I had asked them to be alert for the various changes the characters have been through. As they discuss this now, first with a partner and then with the entire group, I list on the board the changes they have been through in their own lives: moving to a new school or a new house,

the addition of a sibling, adopting a pet, and so forth.

Often I bring Story Time to a close by describing an extension activity. So now, pointing out that several in the group have been through similar experiences, I suggest that someone might like to organize this afternoon a survey they could do tomorrow morning to find out how many of the children in our class have been through the different changes we just listed.

One of the older boys, Jose, has recently done a similar project. He had started his by going around during the morning Writing Work Period asking the children which of five choices of colors was their favorite. He reported his findings with a bar graph, wrote about his procedure, and glued both on a large piece of construction paper. It is still posted on the wall, so I referred to it while suggesting the new survey, saying he could act as a “Buddy” for this new project about change.

So when Victoria and Nichole express interest in the idea, I question them to make sure they know how to begin and pair them up with Jose reminding them to ask him first if they need help. (Experience tells me it will not be long before others want to try this type of project with another topic, as interesting new projects seem to be contagious.)

Carrying out a project is a privilege, rather than a requirement. With at least 20 children still with me in the afternoons, no adult Helpers, and tutors only infrequently dropping in, I need this Buddy system to remain relatively free for individual reading conferences.

Reading Conferences and Quiet Reading

The rest of my afternoon is spent on reading conferences with individual children, or occasionally with a small group with an interest in the same book. For the children, though, **the first 20 minutes is devoted to Quiet Reading**, a time when, as the children like to say, *everyone has their nose in a book*. According to their skill level, they may be reading alone, looking through picture books, listening to a recording as they follow along in the book, or taking turns reading to one another. Upper

grade students have a standing invitation to come in during this time, which coincides with their lunchtime recess. So a few 5th graders are here today reading with the children, but they will leave when the bell rings.

Meanwhile, I begin holding reading conferences with those I have called to my table. Here we discuss the book I had helped them select before today, and they read portions that they have “polished up” for an audience. While the children can choose a book from our class library, we mostly rely on a book program I had found that provides a variety of good quality children’s books that each come with a card suggesting extension activities. So usually after they have finished reading a selection of their book and discussed it in general, I can suggest something they might create or do that reflects the theme of the book. This is a great help to me, as sometimes I simply run out of ideas.

I try to strike a delicate balance in helping my children learn to read. On the one hand, I do not attempt to directly teach reading, yet at the same time, I definitely do not leave it to chance. Instead, a variety of activities set the stage for reading to *emerge*: the carefully structured Steps writing experiences that include a strong phonics component; newspapers, songs, poems written on chart paper that we “read” together; oral language activities woven in into practically every aspect of the daily routine; and many opportunities to listen to someone read to them.

When I see evidence that reading is emerging—that a child, for instance, begins to notice that the words they write also appear in other children’s stories and in books—I carefully guide their early attempts to read. I do all I can to smooth the way for these beginning readers, so that they are not frightened off during this critical time.

At first I take them through a transition activity we call Books and Banks, where they are reading and cutting up duplicates of the sentences from a book they already know. It’s very familiar because in the afternoon Story Time, they have heard me read it several times, acted it out, even chanted most of its sentences. So their first time trying to read a book is with one which has a highly predictable story they already know partly by heart.

As soon as they have gained confidence and skill, I encourage them to choose books on their own that capture their interest and imagination, yet still follow the flow and rhythm of natural language. They find such books in our class library or in the reading program mentioned earlier.

When the children encounter a word or phrase that puzzles them, I encourage them to “think first of what would make sense.” Then I help them “check it out,” by drawing upon what they know of the relationship between various sounds and letters, connections they have absorbed primarily through the daily writing activities.

I provide many opportunities for beginners to practice, seeing them frequently myself. Their name is also placed on a special chart on the wall signaling they are to read regularly with one of the Helpers I have trained for this purpose.

Having set the stage to capitalize on children’s propensity for absorbing the sounds and patterns of language, on their enthusiasm for “doing harder and harder stuff like the big kids,” and on their interest in learning about the world around them, I find reading and writing to be mutually enhancing processes.

I also find that children are delighted when they see they are starting to read, and to them it’s something that “just happened.”

Reading Conferences and Self-Selected Activities

While I continue to call children to my table for reading conferences, the others notice that the twenty minutes for Quiet Reading have elapsed, so that they are free to move on to an activity of their own choice. So now, one child is completing a timeline showing the sequence of the story the whole class is working on. Two are practicing a skit they have been developing, based on one of the scenes. (They are hoping to make it “good enough” so that the primary teacher down the hall will let them perform it for her entire class.)

The two children working with their Buddy now, are organizing the survey on change. One

pair of boys is editing the several pages of writing one of them finished that morning and plans to publish soon. They are following a form that reminds them what questions to ask themselves about the writing, and they will ask for a meeting with me when they have completed the preliminary edit.

The rest of the class is busy with one of the activities that are a permanent part of the classroom environment. They may, for instance, be in the loft that serves as the class library (built by a parent) or at the Sand Table (same parent). They be making play-dough figures, creating a fabric collage, or taking orders and making change for pretend customers in the restaurant. Several are playing in pairs with one of the self-teaching/correcting math and memory games or playing the Banker Bead and Dice math game being lead by a 5th grader. Or, some may simply be talking.

No specific work is required, as the afternoon work period is meant to be a time when I can give attention to individuals relatively free of interruptions. But as always, one all encompassing rule is in effect: **We don't disturb anyone else's work!** This covers anything from making too much noise to intentionally knocking over someone's carefully constructed Lego rocket ship, or marking on someone's writing paper.

A "Time Out" chair is always set out, facing the class activity, and in the case of disruptive behavior, I do not hesitate to send a child to sit there for a few minutes. Since I am intensely focused on others during this reading conference time, I once left a child sitting for longer than I had intended. So these days I tell the child where the hand will be on the clock when their time is up, so that they can remind me — or sometimes it's another child who calls out a few minutes later, *Johnny's time is up!*

Once the children have learned the boundaries, the need for a time-out is rare — with one glaring exception. One of the boys intermittently acts out in unusually destructive ways, one time going so far as to stab another child in the hand with his pencil. So for the times when his behavior appears to be getting out of hand, I have arranged for him to be walked to the 5th grade teacher's classroom. There he sits in the back of the room, where none of the 5th graders interact

with him. Once he has calmed down for 30-45 minutes or so, he is walked back to class. (His case was referred to the child psychologist who visits the school once a week. She consulted with his mother, the very pleasant wife of one of the professionals living close by, and his behavior did improve a bit. But his problems remained for the rest of the two years he was with me. Yet fortunately, he did well in his work.)

As the clock nears the end of the final hour, I call for clean up, handing over the reading folder belonging to the boy I was just working with. Reading folders stay in the children's cubby, as they contain some notes to the next person who reads with him. I have also made a brief notation on the class chart in my notebook, writing the date beside that boy's name and how soon I need to call him up again.

While the children are cleaning up, I look up at the **Reading Conferences with Helpers** chart on the wall. This is a device to communicate with adults and cross-age tutors. It is a long narrow chart with names placed along the edges, so that when I want someone to read with a child, I can place a clothespin beside that child's name. This allows helpers to come in any time during an active work period and — without interrupting me — select a child "pinned" on the chart. Since they take the pin away from the child's name after reading with them, I can later see at a glance who still needs a conference.

I now place pins beside the names of the children Helpers are to read with tomorrow. Then I station myself in the center of the room, commenting on a few of the special projects and directing traffic as the children put away materials, rearrange chairs and clear away scraps of fabric, yarn and paper.

With the classroom back in order again, the children gather on the rug to watch the skit Paul and Sara say is now ready. It turns out to be "good enough," so during the next morning writing work period they will write a note describing it to the teacher down the hall, offering to present it to her class.

Partly finished work has been put on the "Special Projects Shelf," and most of it will not be taken out again until tomorrow afternoon. But Juanita and Michele show their dioramas to the class, and I say that for tomorrow morning's

writing task they will need to write signs and descriptions to post with them.

The final bell rings. As the children file out of the room calling goodbyes to me and to each other, I think of the envelope with Donny's tooth in it and send someone out to call him back. Searching for it in the top drawer of my filing cabinet, I suddenly remember to ask Tess whether she has still has the note to the bus driver about going to Maria's (thinking that if not, I'll walk with them to the bus and tell him myself).

A startled look crosses the child's face and she lets go of Maria's hand, puts down her lunch box, book and sweater, and finally, produces the note from her pocket. With a mixture of relief and triumph in her eyes, she grins, *See, I told you I wouldn't lose it!*

After School

All seems to be in order as the door closes behind the last child. Alone in the room now, I pause a moment to let the silence move in on me. Then I walk over to the back cabinet, take out the teakettle, and start some water boiling. As it heats, I clear away the odds and ends of papers and materials that have found their way onto my table during the day, straighten a few chairs, check the lids on the paint jars, and turn off the bank of lights at the far end of the room. On the way to pick up my notebook I stop, digging in the back of the filing cabinet for the snack I have been saving to go with my afternoon tea.

My mind has been racing, still affected by the rapid flow of events throughout the day. But with the routine of tidying up and setting everything out on my table as usual, I find myself slipping into a quiet, reflective mood. Sipping my tea, my thoughts turn to tomorrow morning, and I begin looking through the notes I made as I met with individuals that day.

Record Keeping to Guide Planning

To guide my thinking, I rely on a simple recordkeeping system I keep *as I am meeting with a child*. It has just two basic components: Curriculum Overviews and Class Lists.

Curriculum Overviews. I have devised two overviews of the individualized curriculum — one for the **Steps (with projects at Step 6)** and one for **Math**. The Steps writing overview is a good example. Since I have identified six distinct types of writing activities — the Steps from beginning to advanced stages — I have sectioned one sheet of paper into six boxes and marked them “Step 1, Step 2....Step 6.” Each child's name appears within the appropriate box on this page, according to their current standing in the Steps.

I also created a master back-up page, showing the new skills being developed at each Step. For instance, at Step 1 - where a child uses the index finger of their writing hand to trace over each of the letters in their new word, *one* of the skills listed in the backup overview is *letter formation*. So when I see a child at Step 1 forming the letters correctly, I will make a quick note of this, such as, *forms ok*. Over repeated meetings, I monitor the child's progress until they have mastered almost all of the skills for that particular Step. Then when it's almost time to move on, I write something such as, *ready?* I heavily circle that notation, to remind myself to see that child again *soon*.

So while I am meeting with a child, I mark beside their name the *date* and usually *just one very brief* comment about how they are doing and when they may be ready to move on. If there is some unusual problem, I will also put a note on their word ring, telling my Helpers how to modify the way they take dictation from them.

When a child moves on to the next Step, I cross off their name and write it in the next box. Since this is an overview of the entire class, eventually this sheet fills up with messy notes. So four or five times a year, I make a new one, transferring the names according to each child's current standing.

These records, along with samples of the children's work, help me **document what we are accomplishing**. I also keep previous Curriculum Overviews in my notebook. So reporting to the principal or parents, I can readily show any child's current level of skill development, along with what they can do, what skills they are currently working on, and ***their rate of progress***.

Class Lists. Meeting individually with the children makes it possible for me to be very well informed about a particular child's progress. But that's not enough. *I also need a way to make sure that — over time — I am not overlooking anyone.* For this, the *Class Lists are essential.* With names along the left side of graph paper and dates across the top, it shows which of the children I single out for special attention each morning. As I work with a child, I check their name under the proper date, and I refer to this chart regularly to be certain there are no glaring holes in my checkmarks. *Without this chart, a quiet child, or one who operates very well independently, might be overlooked.*

Planning for the Next Day

Today, going back and forth between the overview and class list for writing, I decide which of the children to call to my table at the beginning of the writing period tomorrow morning. Once these decisions are made, I write the names of those children at the top of the list I will read from as I sit on the rug tomorrow, sending children to my table. I also make a brief notation beside the names on the class list— but *I will not actually check off tomorrow's date beside any child's name until I am actually sitting with them tomorrow.* (If unable to meet with them the next day, I will circle that date beside their name, signaling that meeting with them is a top priority.)

Once these decisions are made, I think back to the new projects just beginning and any old projects I need to keep an eye on, adding them to the list to check in with, as they are working away from my table. I also note those names on the class list. (Next, I go through a similar planning procedure for math.)

This sets in motion—once again—the cycle that allows me to at least attempt to keep close track of what all of my children are doing. Things will come up tomorrow, of course, but this is a solid start.

I am determined to do all I can to meet the unique needs, strengths and interests of this diverse group of children. My goal is to free their creative energies, while at the same time guiding them in the direction I want them to go. It's a challenge, but I love working with them and devising ways to accomplish it.

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