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Independent Student Literacy Activities: What Takes Place During Guided Reading

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Independent Student Literacy Activities: What Takes Place During Guided Reading

by

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Independent Student Literacy Activities: What Takes Place During Guided Reading

by

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Background

In recent years, educators have turned to a balanced literacy approach in their teaching. Balanced literacy encompasses Read-Alouds, Shared Reading, Guided Reading, and Independent Reading. Each phase of this approach involves a different amount of teacher and student responsibility; as students progress as readers, more responsibility is gradually released until they have reached independence (Johnson, 2006). Guided Reading has become an essential part of a balanced literacy approach. When Marie Clay recognized that reading was a strategic process, she designed an instructional framework that allowed children to be actively engaged with books. The successful intervention, known as Reading Recovery, became the basis for what is now called Guided Reading (Massengill, 2004). Guided Reading is now used with readers whether struggling or independent, and it has three fundamental purposes:

To meet the varying instructional needs of all the students in the classroom, enabling them to greatly expand their reading powers; to teach students to read increasingly difficult texts with understanding and fluency; to construct meaning while using problem-solving strategies to figure out unfamiliar words that deal with complex sentence structures, and understand concepts or ideas not previously encountered. (Iaquinta, 2006, p. 414).

Guided reading is taught in small groups and students are usually grouped according to their reading level and what strategies they need to be taught in order to move forward. While this instructional approach is essential to most students’ literacy success, through my own experience and conversations with colleagues, we often find ourselves asking: What should the rest of my class be doing? Are my students learning as they work independently?
Routman (2000) discovered that numerous teachers used to over rely on whole-group instruction because they were unable to manage both the reading groups and the rest of the class. In the past, many teachers relied on "busywork" or worksheets that students were expected to complete while away from the teacher. These worksheets often had nothing to do with reading and they did not build on the strategies taught during their Guided Reading lessons. While students received individualized support in their small reading groups for approximately 66-88 minutes per week, it was found that they were spending about 132 minutes away from the teacher (Ford & Opitz, 2008).

Researchers have concluded that more emphasis must be placed on what the rest of the class is expected to do while the teacher meets with Guided Reading groups (Falk-Ross, 2008; Ford & Opitz, 2004). Teachers have turned to learning centers, Writer's Workshop, and independent projects. Some schools are fortunate to have reading specialists or special education teachers come into the classroom and teach small groups of students while the general education teacher facilitates Guided Reading. No matter what method teachers decide to use in their classrooms, several factors must be taken into consideration to ensure meaningful and effective literacy learning. First, activities should foster students' independent learning habits and reinforcement of previously learned concepts (Falk-Ross, 2008). Secondly, activities should promote motivation and student accountably. Evidence has shown that to encourage motivation, teachers can select independent activities that allow goal setting, choice, and show students that their work is serving a true purpose (Ford & Opitz, 2002; Gambrell, 1996; Peterson, 2008). Lastly, suggestions have been made that teacher expectations must be clear, everything should be modeled, and responsibility of expected behaviors must be placed on the students (Routman, 2000).
Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to investigate the independent activities teachers have their students do while Guided Reading instruction is taking place, and find out their rationale for the methods they follow. I designed the following research questions:

1) What independent literacy activities take place during Guided Reading instruction in first through fourth grade? 2) Why have teachers chosen particular independent literacy activities for their classrooms 3) How do teachers decide if their chosen independent literacy activities are effective in supporting students’ literacy learning?

Rationale

A great deal of stress has been placed on the importance of Guided Reading and what instruction should look like with the small groups of children. I believe teachers work very hard in creating lessons that are meaningful and meet each student’s needs; however, I am curious about the effectiveness of activities provided for the rest of the class. As a teacher, I often question the activities I provide my students during their “center” time. I know several teachers still hand out worksheets intended as busywork, while others struggle week to week creating new centers that promote accountability, motivation, and pleasure. My objective for this study is to learn of numerous ideas and activities that promote effective literacy learning through motivation, goal setting, independence, choice, and accountability.

Definitions of Terms

The following terms are used throughout this study. These definitions will clarify their usage within this context.

- **Guided Reading** is an instructional practice that allows teachers to work with small groups of students to develop effective literacy strategies for processing text (Guasetllo & Lenz, 2005).
• **Independent Literacy Activities**—Meaningful activities that allow students to actively engage in and practice newly learned reading/writing strategies and concepts that will support their growth as learners.

**Study Approach**

This qualitative study will document independent activities that are effective in supporting student’s literacy learning and investigate teachers’ rationale for the methods they follow. A qualitative study is most beneficial because I will be able to analyze descriptive data accumulated through surveys, interviews, and observations.

Anonymous surveys will be delivered to first through fourth grade teachers in a rural school district. The survey will consist of four questions all geared toward revealing answers to the three research questions previously stated. In addition to the initial survey, all teacher participants involved in the study will be interviewed one-on-one. The open-ended questions will allow the opportunity to collect descriptions and explanations of the various activities used during Guided Reading instruction. The questions will also help me to investigate teachers’ rationale for their chosen methods, the level of engagement, and any questions, concerns, or tensions they may have.

Lastly, I will select at least four to six classrooms to visit during their independent literacy times. The classrooms will be determined based on the diversity of the independent activities revealed through the interviewing process. Observations will allow me the opportunity to document the tasks students are expected to do independently, the atmosphere of the classrooms, and how engaged students appear to be.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Guided reading has become an essential part of a balanced literacy approach to reading instruction. While much emphasis has been put on what should be taught during this small-group instruction, many teachers often wonder: What should I do with the rest of the children? In this section I will discuss studies conducted on the various independent activities teachers have selected for their students. The review will be organized in the following subtopics: 1) History of Guided Reading, 2) Organizational Structures, 3) Activities Away From the Teacher, 4) Learning Goals & Considerations for Successful Independent Activities 5) Where do we go from here? This literature review will provide evidence of what should be considered by teachers when selecting meaningful and appropriate independent literacy activities for students.

History of Guided Reading

In the early 1960's, Mary Austin and Coleman Morrison conducted a study that had teachers and administrators report their elementary reading instruction practices. The researchers sent questionnaires out to 1,023 school districts and selected 51 schools to visit for observational purposes. After analyzing their findings, they concluded that “elementary school reading programs were substandard in general and were not capable of preparing students for future literacy demands” (Baumann et al., 2000, p. 341). It was also reported that for reading lessons, children were separated into three groups often labeled the poor readers, average readers, and good readers. Once classified into these groupings, movement to a new reading group throughout the school year was practically nonexistent. Reading instruction has come a long way since the 1960's with a new balanced literacy approach. Teachers have divided their day to include whole-group
reading, shared reading, guided reading, and independent reading. The instructional framework of Guided Reading began with the hard work and theories of Marie Clay. Marie Clay recognized that “reading is a strategic process, and children must be actively engaged in reading text that allows them to solve problems” (Massengill, 2004, p. 589). Clay created an intervention program known as Reading Recovery which aided children who were at risk with reading. Once teachers caught on to the instructional framework, implementation began in general education classes; teachers started forming their own small groups of students to meet with based on their reading abilities and levels. Clay’s work has had a huge impact in teaching children to read. According to Guasetllo and Lenz (2005), Fountas and Pinnell believe guided reading has become a “context in which a teacher supports each child’s development of effective literacy strategies for processing text at increasingly challenging levels of difficulty” (p. 144). Fawson and Reutzel (2000) believe Guided Reading “has become one of the most important contemporary reading instructional practices in the U.S.” (Iaquinta, 2006, p. 413).

When teachers first started meeting with small groups of students for differentiated instruction, the rest of the class was often given busywork activities to be completed at their seats. Routman (2000) described how the seatwork and individual projects were designed for management; the purpose was to merely keep children occupied while the teacher was engaged with the reading group. When Kathy Short (1999) began teaching, she had her classroom structured so that students who finished the worksheets would then have free time reading. She found that many of her students never finished the worksheets so they rarely had the chance to read for enjoyment. She stated:
The worksheets that filled the majority of my students’ time were only keeping them busy and not teaching them anything about reading. In fact, I often felt as if children were learning to read in spite of me rather than because of me. (p.130).

Today, more focus is being put on the students who are not meeting with the teacher. Instead of busywork, teachers are turning to learning centers, writer’s workshop, independent projects, and literacy specialists who push into the classroom. More significance is being placed on curricular expectations, student engagement, and experiences that are meaningful and designed with a purpose. Literacy centers now allow students to take a hands-on approach to learning and students are provided the opportunity to make use of their various learning styles (Falk-Ross, 2008).

**Organizational Structures**

For guided reading instruction to be successful, the teacher must create a classroom structure that allows her the opportunity to work productively with small groups of students while others are independently engaged in meaningful literacy activities. Ford and Opitz (2002) raised the question: How can we make the time away from the teacher as powerful as the time spent with the teacher? The following three organizational structures were suggested: 1) Collaborate with others; 2) Use writer’s workshop; and 3) Use learning centers. In collaborating with others, Ford and Opitz explained how some schools are fortunate to have reading specialists or special education teachers that come into the classroom and teach students while the general education teacher meets with small groups.

The second structure mentioned uses writer’s workshop as a means to keep students engaged (Ford & Opitz, 2002). Once students have been scaffolded on how to independently write, revise, and edit, the teacher can successfully keep her attention on the small group while the rest of the class is participating in a powerful literacy activity.
The last structure mentioned involves using learning centers. Students are expected to work independently in centers set up around the classroom. As the guided reading groups rotate away from the teacher, all of the students are usually cued to move to another activity. Instead of a set rotation, Fountas and Pinnell (1996) suggest using a work board and allowing students to move as individuals through the centers due to the varying amounts of time they need to complete each task. Examples of independent learning centers include word study, listening post, writing corner, and DEAR time (Drop Everything and Read). Centers will be discussed more thoroughly in the following section.

Tobin and McInnes (2008) developed an organizational structure similar to learning centers called wraparound activities. Their case study showed that as students were dismissed from their Guided Reading groups they were offered a menu of work products that were differentiated through tiered activities. Work products were explained as activities requiring students to respond to the text they were introduced to that day during Guided Reading. The teacher allowed each student to choose one work product to complete daily. As students completed their work products, they were then instructed to select wraparound activities of their choice. The independent wraparound activities included reading book bundles, completing Dual and Triple journal entries, creating a top ten list of favorite things, and completing basket activities such as semantic maps or word studies. Overall, work products and wraparound activities resulted in high engagement in the participant’s classroom.

Ford and Opitz (2008) conducted a national survey of guided reading practices and asked how teachers plan for instruction with and away from the teacher during guided reading. Their study consisted of 1563 kindergarten through second grade
teachers from schools that had on average “587 students, 5 classrooms per grade level, and 21 students per class” (p. 313). It was reported that most teachers met with four groups of students for approximately 22 minutes per group. Ford and Opitz concluded that students received 66-88 minutes of instruction with the teacher per week and they spent about 132 minutes away from the teacher per week during guided reading. The researchers suggest that “the greater the percentage of time spent away from the teacher, the greater the need for powerful instruction away from the small group” (p. 321). The survey results regarding what organizational structure the teachers used revealed that they either relied on centers (72%) and/or seat work (62%), some utilized readers/writer’s workshop (30%), and others had access to another adult that worked with the rest of the class (35%).

No matter what structure a teacher chooses for her classroom, the students must be engaged to prevent disturbances within the guided reading group. Peterson (2008) explained the numerous moments she sat at her round Guided Reading table with five small faces looking at her with engagement. Like many teachers, she would no sooner reach a moment when all the students understood a new concept or strategy, when suddenly a student working independently would interrupt asking for help or wondering what he should do. She stated, “My guided reading group was waiting for their teacher to return her attention to them. As I tried to pick up where I left off, I realized my sparkling moment was gone” (p. 17). If structure and student engagement are not in place, this could negatively impact the quality of instruction being provided by the teacher (Ford & Opitz, 2008, p. 321).
Activities Away From the Teacher

Learning Centers

Learning centers seem to be the number one choice amongst teachers to use as they meet with small guided reading groups. Ford and Opitz’s (2008) research on how teachers plan for instruction with and away from the teacher during guided reading revealed that 72% of teachers rely on centers. The most popular centers included a listening post, writing corner, working with words, computer, reading corner, reading/writing the room, math center, art projects, buddy reading, and pocket chart activities. Nine similar centers were explained in their article, *Using Centers to Engage Children during Guided Reading Time: Intensifying Learning Experiences Away from the Teacher* (Ford & Opitz, 2002). The listening post holds students accountable by having them listen to books on tape and then practice the text in a variety of ways to later perform for their classmates. Skouge, Rao, and Boisvert (2007) described how teachers can record their own books on tape or CD and make them accessible at the Listening Center or through use of a computer. “Technology under qualified conditions can serve to build literacy-rich contexts for children, in which stories that otherwise would go untold and unread, can be made accessible to children” (p. 11). They suggest recording the tapes in a fluent and expressive voice to serve as a good model for students’ own reading.

Reader’s Theatre allows students to practice a script that is later read by participants like a play. Routman (2000) observed students during a Reader’s Theatre center and noticed “they had read through the script at least fifteen times and showed no signs of tiring of it” (p. 166). Through practice, students were able to perform in front of classmates with fluency and expression. Also, student engagement was high when props, masks, or puppets were added to the designated practice space.
Reading/Writing the room is a third center Ford and Opitz (2002) found that held students accountable. Students are encouraged to use pointers and move about the room reading labels, displays, and word walls. To “Write the room” they can copy words around the room or participate in scavenger hunts exploring concepts of print. The last six centers include word work using pocket charts, poems/story packs where students recreate sentences and phrases by manipulating letters and words, big books which are easily accessible for students to read, responding through art, writing, and reading.

Routman (2000) also suggested using word work (also known as word study) as a center. Students use multiple resources such as dry erase boards, magnetic letters, chart paper, and Play-doh to conduct word sorts and word hunts or brainstorm words that have similar spelling patterns. Word study provides children the opportunity to apply spelling strategies to isolated words. Williams and Lundstom (2007) conducted a study to determine the effect word study could have on students’ spelling growth and early writing development. Their results “clearly point to the efficacy of both word study and interactive writing instruction for supporting young children’s spelling growth and ultimately, their early writing development” (p. 210).

Reading or DEAR time (Drop Everything and Read) is often suggested as a center that supports meaningful literacy learning. Ford and Opitz (2002) explained “we cannot emphasize enough that the best activity for students to become involved in away from the teacher is reading” (p. 716). Several teachers have students complete reading response logs after reading each book during Reading Center. Routman (2000) explained that many teachers believe these logs help children create deeper understandings of the text by first reading, answering written questions, and then looking up vocabulary words; however, this is often not the case. Routman suggests making students accountable by
responding to one out of every three to five books that are read. Instead of using a
“workbook” model, children can respond in a blank notebook which provides them
more choice and open-ended response (p. 168).

Alternatively, Short (1999) believed that instead of always responding to books
through writing, children simply need a broad range of reading materials at their
fingertips to keep them engaged and provide them meaningful experiences. She stated:

Children learn to read by reading and by being surrounded by other
readers. They need both engagement and demonstration. These
extensive experiences with many different kinds of reading materials give
them the time to gain fluency, integrate their strategies, become familiar
with how stories work, and build a broad background of literature.
(p. 133).

DEAR time has also been referred to as SSR (Sustained Silent Reading). Chua
(2008) conducted a study to examine the effects sustained silent reading had on
cultivating students’ habits and attitudes while reading books for leisure. She used
questionnaires to ask secondary students about their reading habits during SSR,
classmates’ reading habits, reading habits after school, and attitudes to leisure book
reading. Her study led to the conclusion that the SSR program “had a significant effect
on cultivating students’ reading habits...and enjoyment of reading” (p. 183).

The Daily 5

Not too long ago, a new approach to literacy independence evolved called The
Daily Five. Boushey and Moser (2006) were two teachers who began looking into
different ways to keep students motivated and engaged while teachers work with small
guided reading groups. After much research and consulting with literacy instructional
expert Margaret Mooney, Boushey and Moser developed five meaningful and
appropriate independent literacy activities for students. The five tasks include: Read to
Yourself, Read to Someone, Work on Writing, Listen to Reading, and Spelling/Word
Work. In the first task, Read to Yourself, students become better readers through practice each and every day. They select books of their choice at a just-right reading level. The second task called Read to Someone allows children to work on fluency and expression; students are able to hear their own voice as they read to a buddy. According to Allington (2001), “children should spend a minimum of one and a half hours a day reading in school” (Boushey & Moser, 2006, p. 10). These two tasks provide students the much needed time to practice new strategies learned through guided reading and they empower students by providing choice in book selection.

The third task Boushey and Moser (2006) include is called Work on Writing. Students practice writing narratives, letters, reports, poetry, and persuasive pieces. Typically, students use this time to continue the work they do during Writer’s Workshop. When students Listen to Reading as the fourth task, they are expected to learn more about words and expand their vocabulary. Students listen to books on tape and hear examples of fluent and expressive reading. Lastly, the fifth task of Spelling/Word Work has students complete word sorts, list words that belong to a pattern, or practice words that are often misspelled. Materials such as whiteboards, magnetic letters, and Wikki Sticks are placed in a central location for students to access easily.

When looking back at the previous teaching experiences and methods used during guided reading to keep students engaged, Boushey and Moser (2006) noticed a progression from busywork and worksheets, to centers, to the Daily Five. They believe the “Daily Five is a student-driven management structure designed to fully engage students in reading and writing” (p. 12). The following core foundations emerged in thinking what is important and essential to the Daily Five:
• trusting students
• providing choice
• nurturing community
• creating a sense of urgency
• building stamina
• staying out of students’ way once routines are established. (p. 18).

To launch the Daily Five, Boushey and Moser (2006) suggest dedicating the first several weeks of school to instilling literacy habits that allow students to work independently without supervision from the teacher. Teachers help students build stamina and make good choices when selecting books, a place to work, and a friend to read to. Students are told that they must complete all five tasks each day in any order that they wish. To hold them accountable during these tasks, teachers have the students “check in.” Approximately three minutes is used to ask students what task they have chosen for the allotted time period. A chart is used to record each student’s response making sure every child completes all five tasks. “When students verbalize their choices, there is a sense of increased accountability. They take the choice very seriously, get started right away, and stick with it” (p. 93).

Altogether, the Daily Five provides tasks that hold students accountable, keeps them engaged, and most importantly, helps them learn through meaningful literacy activities. According to Boushey and Moser (2006) the Daily Five has not only helped students become better readers and writers, but teachers reported fewer interruptions during guided reading instruction and high student success. There has been little research performed since the development and creation of the Daily Five independent work model.
Kidstations

Guastello and Lenz share the same viewpoints that have previously been mentioned regarding guided reading and the structure needed within the classroom. They explained:

The success of guided reading as an effective instructional practice is contingent upon the implementation of a classroom structure conducive to working with the guided reading group while other students are independently and actively engaged in meaningful literacy experiences. (Guastello & Lenz, 2005. pg. 144.)

Their study consisted of observations and interviews in the Bronx school district. The classrooms were crowded with 30-35 students and the reading scores of students were considerably low. Instead of implementing learning centers in separate areas with a specific function, the study had teachers use Kidstations which are portable activities that are placed where students gather in their groups. Unlike learning centers, students visited one kidstation per day. The teacher did not meet with several guided reading groups each day, but instead met with one group for a longer, more focused period of time. This method allowed the teacher to spend a small amount of time visiting and interacting with students at their stations while her small group was engaged in rereading or responding to a question. Before the study, teachers reported that there were numerous interruptions by students while working with the small groups. One highlight about this method was that during this work time, students at the kidstations were provided all the materials they needed, the directions to follow, and examples of what was expected of them. This caused little need for students to interrupt the teacher.

In total, there were four kidstations (Guastello & Lenz, 2005). At kidstation 1, students could work on word-recognition, compound words, contractions, and prefixes. Activities also might be provided that work on antonyms, synonyms, or word origins.
While activities in kidstation 1 incorporate ELA Standard 1: Language is for information and understanding, kidstations 2-4 also incorporate the corresponding ELA Standards for New York State. Kidstation 2 has children listen to or read several genres, make inferences, or study text structure. Kidstation 3 has students “use language to persuade, explain, describe, make a judgment, think creatively, support an opinion, and engage in problem solving” (p. 150). An example of an activity might be to have students analyze the feelings of a character and create a poem about it. Lastly, kidstation 4 has each child in one group present what he or she has created or completed at a station. Students are held accountable throughout these kidstations by having to present and share evidence of their understanding.

At the conclusion of their study, Guastella and Lenz (2005) reported that teachers described the “student’s successful completion rate of kidstation activities at 98%” (p. 154). Running record scores increased, children appeared to be reading more fluently, students were more accountable for their work, and there were significant improvements in students’ presentation skills. Other than the mentioned authors, there has not been a significant amount of research conducted on the Kidstation model.

In summary, there are numerous activities teachers can provide their students to complete independently during Guided Reading instruction. All of the above mentioned activities require students to engage in tasks that provide extended literacy learning away from the teacher. These tasks involve students reading, listening, manipulating and studying words, and writing.
Of Independent Activities

Many considerations should be taken into account when planning and utilizing any of the above-mentioned methods of instruction away from the teacher. Independent literacy activities should not merely be created to keep students busy and away from the teacher who is facilitating small group instruction. Instead, the goal should be to “provide supportive activities for development of students’ independent learning habits and new thinking about reading” (Falk-Ross, 2008, p. 237). Teachers should strive to create activities that foster reinforcement of previously learned concepts, keep students motivated, and provide opportunities for success. The activities should allow students to experiment with reading strategies, activate independent problem solving, and express themselves in a multitude of ways.

First, teachers should plan activities that meet expectations of the school and state curriculums. With these expectations in mind, teachers must be knowledgeable about their students as readers, writers, and learners (Ford & Opitz, 2002). The activities should build on what students already know and help them progress as readers. In the Kidstation study, Guastello and Lenz (2005) explained how all of the stations built on what the teacher taught during their guided reading group. Fisher and Frey (2008) described how teachers frequently assign activities based on the material they do not have time to cover during the day. If students are not given enough instruction and direction for the tasks, it is likely they will have very little success and become unmotivated. “Teachers should reserve independent work for review and reinforcement of concepts that have been previously taught” (p. 36).

Students must be motivated in order to stay engaged in the tasks they are expected to do. Ford and Opitz (2002) state, “According to Brophy (1987), there are two
keys that motivate learning: perception of the possibility of success and perception that the outcome will be valued” (p. 712). Gambrell (1996) concurs that motivation and reading development are promoted when children are “supported by interactions with adults who have high expectations for their success” (p. 17). In the Kidstation model and activities such as Reader’s Theatre, students are expected to present or perform in front of classmates and the teacher. When they are enabled to show the efforts they have put forth, students know their work is valued and serving a true purpose.

In Peterson’s (2008) study, she introduced the concept of goal setting to get her students motivated for independent work. Prior to her study, her students worked on book club jobs such as reading books and responding to worksheets. After discovering her students were bored, she obtained feedback from them and gained insight to their interests. Peterson developed six literacy workstations: Buddy Reading, Newspaper Fix Up, Prefix/Suffix, Genre Writing, Games, and Comic Book Sequencing. To fulfill her study, she had students complete goal sheets for four weeks, she taped literacy station conversations, and she tallied the frequency of interruptions that occurred during her guided reading lessons. Peterson found that her students were tough on themselves when it came to setting standards and they put forth more effort to accomplish their self-selected goals. Overall, the students seemed to enjoy the independent activities and often boasted about reading books from different genres and working with newspapers. One student exclaimed, “I have learned how to read the newspaper... reading the newspaper is AWESOME!” (p. 22). Similarly, Routman (2000) suggested providing choice. She discussed how a second grade teacher had difficulty transitioning away from the traditional “seatwork,” to allowing students to participate in the activities they wanted. Routman stated, “He acknowledged that initially it was difficult to give up
teacher control and trust students to responsibly manage their chosen activities, but the payoff was huge” (p. 163). Children had greater interest in their work and he was able to focus all of his attention to the students he was working with.

Powell, McIntyre, and Rightmyer (2006) conducted a study on 13 first through third grade classrooms to determine the effectiveness of various literacy instructional models. They wanted to examine the motivational variables (including choice, challenge, and collaboration) to see if they correlated with high student involvement in literacy tasks. Through interviews and observations they found that “learning tasks are motivating when they are purposeful to students...[and] when they provide opportunities for students choice” (p. 24). Altogether, goal setting and constructing activities based on student interest and choice is powerful in keeping children motivated and engaged in meaningful literacy activities.

Student accountability should also be considered when planning and utilizing independent literacy activities. Several activities previously mentioned hold students accountable through the expectation of performance or presentation. Ford and Opitz (2002) suggested a built-in accountability system to be used with literacy centers. They suggest using a center card where each student is in charge of coloring in or marking off the activities completed during independent work time. This card can help both students and teachers keep track of what is accomplished and the amount of time each student takes to complete a task. For example, if the center card represents six centers that must be completed by the end of the week, teachers can refer to the cards daily to see which students seem to breeze through the activities and which students are not accomplishing what is expected of them.
Planning and preparing students for independent activities can take a great deal of time. Guastello and Lenz (2005) suggest a span of five to seven weeks of demonstration on how to complete various activities. When introducing new activities or centers Fisher and Frey (2008) believe teachers must use the Gradual Release of Responsibility model. They believe “we must give students supports that they can hold on to as they take the lead—not just push them onto the path and hope they find their way” (p. 33). Supports include demonstration of the kind of thinking they will do and explanations on how to solve problems or confusions they may encounter. Similarly, Routman (2000) suggested several procedures that promote effective management during guided reading. Expectations must be clear, everything should be modeled, and responsibility of expected behaviors must be placed on the students. Research indicates that “establishing and teaching clear expectations and routines are significantly correlated with positive student outcomes” (Stichter, Stormont, & Lewis, 2009, p. 172).

While several suggestions have previously been made for students to spend time reading on their own while away from the teacher, Reutzel et al. (2008) warn teachers that silent reading must first be scaffolded. Students need to learn how to select books that are appropriately challenging and come up with suitable time frames for completion. Students can be taught to use the Five Finger Rule (Baker, 2002). For this strategy, the student holds up a finger for every difficult word he comes across or for words that he does not understand. If he encounters more than five difficult words, the student determines the book may be too difficult and then selects another. A second method for book selection is assigning students to book bins that match their reading level. To facilitate this option, teachers must set up the classroom library to support the varying reading levels of students and books must be organized for easy selection.
Where do we go from here?

In the past, so much attention has been put on what the teacher should be doing with the small group that little emphasis has been placed on the children working independently. “Instruction away from the teacher needs to be as powerful as instruction with the teacher” (Ford & Opitz, 2002, p. 717). Very few studies have been conducted that investigate what teachers have their students do as they meet with small reading groups. Ford and Opitz (2008) recommend conducting a survey similar to their own that looks at how teachers plan for instruction with and away from the teacher during guided reading. I believe a survey as well as interviews and observations will provide useful information about my own school district and the practices utilized by teachers. The results can be analyzed, interpreted, and shared with teachers to discuss the best possible practices that will keep students meaningfully engaged in literacy activities independently.
CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate the independent activities teachers have their students do while Guided Reading instruction takes place, and find out their rationale for the methods they follow. I interviewed teachers from first grade to fourth grade in a rural school district. Data was also collected through classroom observations, and a survey that was sent out to teachers before interviews took place.

Questions

I designed this study to gain knowledge of my research questions: 1) What independent literacy activities take place during Guided Reading instruction in first through fourth grade? 2) Why have teachers chosen particular independent literacy activities for their classrooms 3) How do teachers decide if their chosen independent literacy activities are effective in supporting students' literacy learning?

Participants

The participants for this study were first through fourth grade teachers from one rural, western New York school district. The elementary school employed approximately 43 teachers from Kindergarten through fifth grade and educated approximately 480 students. Thirteen percent of the teachers had fewer than three years experience and there was very little diversity; 99% of teachers were white and all but two teachers were female (New York State Education Dept., 2009).

The student population was 96% white, 2% Asian or Native Hawaiian, 1% Hispanic or Latino, and 1% American Indian. The average class size for each grade level ranged from 67-90 students. Most children were from low to middle-income families with 28% of children receiving free or reduced-price lunch (New York State Education...
The rural community had a population of approximately 5,000 people and employment could be found in the fields of secretarial work, farming, small businesses, factory work, and teaching.

The role I had in this study was as a researcher who was also situated as a first grade teacher for the past two years in this school district. Since I had already created great rapport with numerous teachers, I visited each first through fourth grade teacher individually, explained my study, and asked for their support in completing a survey. At that time I asked for permission to come back at a later date to conduct an approximate forty-five minute interview at their convenience. Teachers were only asked to provide their grade level on both the surveys and interviews. It was noted during the interview how long each teacher had been employed by the school district.

Lastly, after the surveys had been collected and interviews completed, I selected four classrooms to visit during their independent literacy times. I determined which classes to visit based on the diversity of the independent activities revealed through the interviewing process. This allowed me to observe the tasks students were required to do as well as the overall atmosphere of the classroom.

**Data Collection and Instruments**

To investigate the various independent activities teachers use during Guided Reading instruction, the reasoning behind their choice, and how they decide if the activities are effective, several techniques were used to collect data. I gathered input through teacher surveys, one-on-one semi-structured interviews with teacher participants, and observations of the independent activities taking place within selected teacher’s classrooms.
Survey

A brief survey (see Appendix A) was used at the beginning of the study. The survey was given to each teacher participant in person as I visited to explain my study and the importance of being honest with their responses. Informed consent was assumed when teachers returned the completed anonymous survey. I allowed teachers one week to complete the survey and asked that they return it to my school mailbox. If at the end of one week I noticed teachers had not responded, I sent out an email explaining the importance of the study and asked for them to respond at their earliest convenience. The survey consisted of four questions. The first three questions were directly derived from the research questions for this study. One question focused on what teachers have their students do independently, the next question asked for reasons why the teacher chose the activities, and lastly, the third question asked the teachers’ perceptions of how effective the independent literacy activities are in supporting student learning. A fourth question was added to the survey to gain insight, questions, and concerns that teachers might have about their use of these activities.

Semi-Structured Interview

A semi-structured interview (see Appendix B) was conducted with each first through fourth grade teacher participant. The interview was one-on-one and took place at each teacher's convenience within a three-week time period. The interview consisted of 13 questions that I developed to gain a deep understanding of what children are expected to do while Guided Reading instruction takes place as well as why the teachers chose the activities they did. Questions also addressed each teacher's perceptions of how effective they believe their method is in supporting students' literacy learning. The interview was developed by brainstorming questions that would uncover teacher thought
processes and reasoning behind their choice of activities. These interviews provided varying perspectives on what teachers believe works best in an independent working atmosphere as well as any questions, concerns, or tensions they had regarding their current method of independent activities. Each interview was audiotaped and then later transcribed for analysis.

**Observation**

After the teachers had been surveyed and interviewed, I conducted observations to investigate the activities taking place in the selected teachers’ classrooms and how engaged students appeared to be. I also examined any teacher concerns that surfaced during the interviews. For example, if a teacher mentioned concern about how engaged her students were during a certain activity, I specifically looked at how engaged they appeared to be; frequent visits to the pencil sharpener, bathroom or friends were documented as “little engagement” in the activity. Students who appeared to be attentive and engrossed in the task at hand were documented as “engaged” in the activity. I spent approximately 20 to 30 minutes making observations of the students working independently. Field notes were taken during the observations and I recorded what students were expected to do for the activities as I visited each classroom. These notes were used as a cross-reference for descriptions teachers provided in the interview stage of the study. I triangulated the documented field notes with answers to both the survey and teacher interviews.

**Limitations**

One limitation to this study was the reliability of teachers providing honest answers to the questions asked. I had good rapport with all the teachers in my school district; however, some teachers may have found it in their best interest to provide me
with answers they thought I was looking for in my study. Another limitation to this study was the amount of time I was able to spend making observations in the various classrooms. As a teacher in the school district I planned to study, there were few opportunities for me to leave my own classroom during the school day. I used my teaching assistant to cover my classroom or asked for a substitute teacher for a half-day. Since I was being mentored as a second year teacher, I was allotted time out of my own classroom to make observations of other teachers and their students.

**Data Analysis**

To analyze the findings of my research I used constant comparison methodology. The surveys were collected first and I analyzed them prior to conducting the interviews. I looked for commonalities as well as differences between the methods teachers used during this independent work time. I looked for themes in their rationale for the activities they chose to use in their classrooms and determined how they learned about the method selected. It was interesting to learn of any questions, concerns, or tensions teachers had regarding the activities they provide their students. The questions and concerns were used to prompt more interview questions and give me something specific to look for when visiting classrooms to make observations.

Next, as teacher interviews were completed, I first examined the findings individually and then across all teachers. Again, I looked for commonalities as well as differences in the activities chosen during independent work time. The amount of time students spent doing independent work was compared across all teachers and the frequency of how often the activities changed was noted. I compared the results of how the teachers felt the independent literacy activities are in supporting students’ literacy
learning and again, took note of specific concerns teachers had (if any) as a starting point when visiting the classrooms to make observations.

Once I met with all teachers and conducted the interviews I took note of four methods teachers used during independent literacy activities that were completely different. Observing four methods allowed me to see a range of activities teachers chose for their students. I visited these classrooms to observe the students and the activities they participate in. The field notes were analyzed by looking at the engagement level of the students and comparing the descriptions the teachers provided in the interviews with what actually occurred in the classroom. I looked for themes and evidence surrounding the questions, concerns, or tensions that were revealed by teachers during the interviews.

Lastly, all of the data collected in this study were triangulated. I looked for commonalities and differences in teacher responses from the surveys and interviews, and teacher responses were compared to the observations I made while visiting the classrooms. Once themes surfaced through teacher responses and my observations, the findings were compared to previous research surrounding this topic mentioned in the literature review.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to investigate the independent activities teachers have their students do while Guided Reading instruction takes place. The study was also designed to find out each teacher's rationale for the methods he/she follows. Three research questions were developed including: 1) What independent literacy activities take place during Guided Reading instruction in first through fourth grade? 2) Why have teachers chosen particular independent literacy activities for their classrooms? 3) How do teachers decide if their chosen independent literacy activities are effective in supporting students' literacy learning?

Sixteen teachers were asked to participate and fifteen signed the consent form. Data were collected through teacher surveys, one-on-one semi-structured interviews with teacher participants, and observations of the independent activities taking place within selected teachers' classrooms. I first analyzed all surveys prior to conducting the interviews looking for themes and rationales. Next, I analyzed the teacher interviews across all teachers and used this information to compare the results found from the teacher surveys. Lastly, the classroom observation field notes were triangulated with the findings from both the surveys and interviews providing a wealth of information of what teachers have their students do independently while Guided Reading occurs, as well as why the activities are chosen and how effective they appear to be.

This chapter addresses what was found after analyzing all of the data. The findings are broken up according to each research question and the data are triangulated throughout. All teachers reported providing their students with activities to be completed independently or in a small group setting when they are not being pulled back for Guided Reading instruction. Most teachers reported having their students rotate
through centers, completing activities such as Word Work, DEAR time, Reading, Computer, and Spelling. Approximately half of the teacher participants explained that their students rotate freely around the room choosing the order they complete activities, while the remaining teachers explained that their students change centers based on a timed rotation cued by the ringing of a bell. The remaining teachers who did not have their students complete centers reported having them do Book Clubs, complete a packet of worksheets, read independently, or complete the tasks of The Daily Five. After asking the teacher participants why they chose particular activities for their students to complete, approximately 75% of teacher participants reported that their activities provide students the opportunity to practice the many skills they are taught each and every day. Additional reasons included: students learn independence, they are provided time to read and improve writing skills, and centers create independent thinkers and learners. Altogether, the data from this study shows that many teachers believe their independent activities clearly support literacy learning. In addition to mentioning the benefits centers or independent activities have for students, teachers have also expressed their tensions and concerns such as off-task students and student accountability.

**Research Question #1: What independent literacy activities take place during Guided Reading instruction in first through fourth grade?**

To begin my study, one of the first questions that I asked in the interview process was, "Do your students participate in independent literacy activities while you meet with students for Guided Reading?" During the interview process, all teacher participants answered, "yes" to this question allowing me to further pursue my study. Before establishing what independent activities occur away from the teacher during the Guided Reading block of time in each classroom, I decided to ask the interview
question: “How often do you meet with students for Guided Reading instruction?” I asked this question to establish what portion of time students were spending with and without the teacher, and to determine if all students remained with the teacher the same amount of time. Out of fifteen teacher participants, six teachers explained that they meet with all students every day of the week. Two teachers meet with every student four days a week and use either Monday or Friday as days to teach a whole-group lesson instead of meeting with Guided Reading groups. The seven remaining teachers described how they try to meet with the lower-leveled readers daily while groups of higher-leveled readers meet every other day for instruction. When asked how long the teachers spend with each group, most teachers reported spending an average of 20 minutes with each group of students. Some teachers explained that quite often more of their time tends to be spent with the lower-leveled reading groups (for example 25-30 minutes) while less time is spent working with above-grade-level readers (for example 10-15 minutes). One teacher (Teacher L) explained, “It depends how long each group meets...if they are enjoying it and wanting to talk about what they have just read then I hold them a little bit longer.” Teacher M explained that at the beginning of the year she met with every student every day in the groups she pulled back. However, toward the end of the year, she discussed how she met more with individual students instead of groups on an every-other-day or every third-day basis. This was due to the varying needs of her students and her pursuit to provide more individualized instruction.

Before asking the teacher participants what kind of independent literacy activities they provide their students, I found it important to determine what amount of time the students were asked to spend working independently. Based on teachers’ responses, I calculated that students spent an average of 50 minutes of their day working
independently while teachers met with Guided Reading groups. Six out of fifteen teachers described how their students used approximately 60 minutes out of the day to rotate through centers or stations and complete various activities. Teacher G explained how the amount of time her students worked independently varied from day to day. This was due to the fact that she was the fifth section in her grade level causing her Reading Block schedule to change every other day (on odd days her students would have Special Area classes in the morning while on even days their Specials would be in the afternoon). Some days her students spent up to two hours working independently while on opposite days they spent about 40 minutes completing their independent literacy centers. Teacher M reported that she only spends 45 minutes a day pulling students back for Guided Reading. Because of this, her students spend approximately 30 minutes working independently (mainly reading their chapter books assigned in Guided Reading groups).

In both the survey and individual interviews, teachers were asked the question, “What do the students do who are not meeting with you? How do you run your classroom?” Out of 15 teacher participants, 10 teachers reported that they provide their students with independent learning centers. Two teachers reported that their students participate in the “Daily Three” or “Daily Five” (which will be described later in more detail), one teacher provides a weekly packet that is to be completed independently, and two teachers allow their students to do independent reading (primarily of their assigned book from Guided Reading groups) or book club activities.

**Free Rotation Through Eight Centers**

Of the ten teachers who provide their students with daily learning centers, five teachers reported that their students rotate freely from center to center while the remaining five teachers reported that their students follow a timed rotation often
signaled through a buzzer or the ringing of a bell. Teachers A and B reported that they run their classroom very similarly—often providing their students identical center activities. In their separate interviews, both teachers discussed the eight centers their students are expected to work on each week. These centers range from Math, Science, Social Studies, Writing, Reading, Spelling, Word Study, and Computer. The type of center does not always remain the same; Teacher B explained that sometimes she takes out one of the above mentioned centers and puts in a journal writing center where the students write a friendly letter to her and then she responds back. Other times there are prompts, an Art center if there is a holiday approaching, or a phonics center. Both teachers reported that their students complete the centers in the order they choose but they are expected to have all eight centers completed by Friday. Sometimes their students are allowed to work with a partner but this is specified at the beginning of the week. Teacher B reported that her students are allowed to talk quietly as long as it is geared toward what they are learning and what is occurring at their centers. Teacher B stated, “Sometimes I call a ‘Center Check Day’ and look over their work. They have a check off list to show what they have accomplished. If I notice they don’t do something correctly, I try to go over the center the next day and better explain what they are supposed to do.”

When both teachers were asked if and how they check over student work, Teacher A explained that she tries to look over their work during her lunch period each day to keep track of what they have completed and what they have left to accomplish. Teacher B discussed how there is always a lot to correct but her Teaching Assistant stays on top of it. Lastly, both teachers explained that if any student finishes all eight centers before Friday, he/she is either given a challenge activity, an educational game to play, or computer time. If students don’t complete all eight centers, it is okay depending on the
student; struggling students are not given a consequence because often times they are pulled to work with a literacy specialist and therefore have less time to complete all activities. However, students who are expected to complete all activities yet do not, are asked to finish them during a different portion of the day.

During my interviews with Teachers A and B, I asked them both how they decided to allow their students to rotate freely from center to center, choosing the order in which they complete them. Teacher A explained that throughout her many years of teaching she has tried several methods and activities for her students. She discussed that when she tried a timed rotation with a set schedule of where each student goes and when, the students were getting upset because the timer would go off and they weren’t finished with an activity. She further explained that each day it was frustrating for both the students and her because there were very rarely any finished products. Teacher B explained that she has never tried a set rotation with students; she has only been teaching a few years and when she began teaching first grade, Teacher A helped her establish her centers which are what they both currently use. Teacher B reported that the way she runs her classroom seems to work so she had not considered changing to the set rotation.

Teachers A and B were both able to explain to me some of the activities they provide in each center. The reading center (often called DEAR time) consists of students choosing their own books from the classroom library to read. Writing center, as I already explained, either consisted of a teacher prompt or writing a friendly letter, while the Spelling Center required students to either write that week’s spelling words three times on paper, put the words in sentences, or write them in alphabetical order. In the phonics center, the teachers explained that they often provide activities that go along with the vowel pattern or digraphs the students are learning that week from the Reading Series.
The Math center activities were hands-on experiences where students also practiced the concepts learned that week during Math instruction. Similarly, Science or Social Studies activities required students to make a craft, read a story, or complete a writing prompt based on the concept being taught that week.

I selected Teacher A for observation and I was able to confirm that the information in her survey and interview matched what I saw taking place in her classroom. I moved about the classroom observing the students and quietly talked with them about what they were expected to do in each center. The following is a description of each center the students were required to participate in for that week:

**Center 1:** Reading Center—Choose a book to read and fill out a response sheet asking for the title, author, a short summary, whether it was fiction/nonfiction, and a personal response to whether the student liked the book or not (and a reason for their opinion).

**Center 2:** Writing Center—Students were required to write a pretend story about Outer Space. (The Reading Series theme for the week was all about Outer Space)

**Center 3:** Spelling Center—put all of the spelling words in alphabetical order and then record them on a provided piece of paper.

**Center 4:** Phonics Center—Students were required to complete a word sort of short /e/ and long /e/ words written on index cards. After all words were sorted, they had to write each word on a recording sheet to be handed in.

**Center 5:** Math Center—Students had to complete a Math worksheet which consisted of adding three addends together.
Center 6: Word Study Center—Students manipulate laminated “broken hearts,” piecing them back together to form compound words. Once completed, students were expected to record all of their new words on a provided worksheet.

Center 7: Words containing short /e/ and long /e/ were written on pictures of animals. Students were required to sort the animals into two different piles based on short /e/ and long /e/ and complete a recording sheet.

Center 8: Journal—Students write a friendly letter to the teacher responding to a question previously asked by her, and then writing at least one question to ask the teacher.

As Teacher A worked with a small Guided Reading group I was able to observe how quietly the rest of the class was working independently. The students were spread out throughout the entire room with some students working on the floor and others working at their desks. There was quite a bit of movement as the students gathered materials they needed as they started a new center. I talked to one student near a plastic bin with eight pullout drawers. I asked her what everyone is supposed to do when they finish a center and she replied, “You put it in the finished drawer.” She went on to explain that each drawer contained the supplies needed for each center and there was a separate drawer where everyone placed their recording sheets, journals, and pieces of writing. Another student showed me his check-off list for the centers and explained, “When you finish a center you have to color in the animal. Then we know what centers aren’t done yet.” The check-off list consisted of eight boxes all containing a different animal; the drawers where the students obtained their supplies had the corresponding
animal to help students easily notice and confirm what was done and where they had to go next.

As I moved about the classroom I noticed one student working on the Word Study center with the “broken hearts.” He had all of the heart pieces spread out on the floor with one half of a compound word in his hand. He held his piece up to several other pieces and slowly said the words he was creating. After a short minute, the child found the corresponding “half” heart, wrote down his new compound word on his recording paper, and placed the heart to the side. Two other students were sitting nearby completing a word sort activity. Each child had pictures of animals with either long /e/ words or a short /e/ words. As one young girl said each word out loud she either placed the picture on the corresponding barn picture labeled “Long /e/” or “Short /e/.” After she placed one word on the picture, she would record it down on her paper. The other young girl waited until all of her animal pictures were in each of the barns before she recorded all of the words on her paper. I also noticed four students working on Writing center, creating a story about Outer Space. Two students were sitting at their desks while two others were spread out on the floor. All of the students seemed to be at different places writing their stories. One was working on his picture without any words written yet, another student was writing her words, and another student was drawing his picture with his words all completed. The final student sat at his desk looking around the room with very little written on his paper. He appeared to be either off-task or thinking about what his story could be about.

Before leaving the classroom, I noticed that one student was working quietly on a computer. I approached him and asked if he had finished all of his centers (remembering that Teacher A had explained that students who finished early were given
the privilege of playing educational computer games). He replied, "No, I have two centers left. I'm just waiting for them to open up." After further questioning him, he explained that only three students were allowed at the two centers he still had to complete. In the beginning of the school year, the teacher told everyone that while they waited, they could quietly play a computer game instead of just wandering around the room. Altogether, my experience observing Teacher A's classroom showed evidence that the independent activities her students participated in correlated with her descriptions and explanations from her survey and interview. Her students seemed to be very engaged and interested in the activities required of them.

**Free Rotation Through Three/Four Centers**

Teachers D, I, and J also required their students to rotate freely through daily learning centers. In Teacher D's interview, she explained how every year she seems to run her classroom differently during independent work time because of the varying groups of students. At the beginning of the school year she provided her students with four centers where they moved on a timed rotation, however; her students were not "organized enough to do them." She explained that her students were getting little to no work completed during this independent time so she decided to get rid of centers and have her students do seatwork. After Easter, Teacher D brought back centers but her students were only allowed to participate in them once they had completed the reading assigned to them from Guided Reading groups, a grammar worksheet, a Math paper from the previous day's Math lesson, and some sort of spelling task. The students were then allowed to rotate freely to four centers: Spelling, Math, Social Studies/Science, and Independent Reading. The centers usually come from task cards where they are expected to read and then answer questions. After further discussion, Teacher D stated that her
centers do not require a lot of preparation because she has recycled many things throughout the years. She tells her students to watch the clock and try not to spend more than ten minutes at each center. On Mondays through Thursdays, Teacher D’s students rotate on their own and only four students can be at each center. She stated, “Friday is more of my catch up day with students I want to meet with. I have a timed 15 minute rotation through the centers which is much more structured.”

Teacher I explained that she requires her students to complete four mandatory centers a week. She stated, “I don’t have the same four centers all the time because I get bored and I know my students would get bored.” Some of the centers Teacher I spirals through include: Dear Pat Journal (students receive a conflict scenario and they must write back to a fictional person named Pat, providing her with a resolution), Response to Reading (students are given a short book to read first and then later a worksheet where they are asked to prove or disprove the provided statement showing evidence), Skill-based activities (such as looking up syllables in a dictionary or correcting grammar based on the ELA exam), and Math Center (for example each letter of the alphabet is given a dollar amount—students are required to add up and record the worth of that week’s spelling words). Teacher I allowed her students to go to any of the centers any day of the week. She explained, “Generally speaking, I can tell them they need everything done by the end of the week and they get it done. If the centers are not done to my liking, they go into the ‘do over’ bin and they have to finish it before they go on to the next batch of centers.”

The last teacher who allows her students to rotate freely through centers was Teacher J. She provides her students with three centers a day including: Reading, Writing, and Word Study. Her students choose what order they complete the centers and
they are allowed to work with a partner. The Reading Center is characterized by silent or quiet reading either alone or with a partner and then completing a response worksheet where they either have to agree/disagree with a prompt, list facts, give opinions, or answer comprehension questions. The Writing Center is run like a Writer’s Workshop where each student is working on a personalized writing piece (when their piece is completed, they head to the computer to type a final copy), and Word Study center is characterized by word sorts, word ladders, or fixing grammatical errors.

*Timed Rotation Through Four Centers*

While five teachers allow their students to rotate freely about the classroom, five other teachers have their students move according to a set rotation. Of these five teachers, three of them run their classrooms very similarly. Teachers C, H, and K have two center charts hanging in their classrooms which contain four centers each. Every day, their students rotate according to one of the charts, and the following day consists of the students rotating according to the other chart. This pattern continues every day so that students participate in four centers one day, and four completely different centers the next day. In all three teacher interviews, they described very similar activities that their students were required to work on (however the difficulty level was obviously different due to each of the teachers teaching a different grade level). The centers ranged from DEAR time (Drop Everything and Read), Word Study (students are required to complete word sorts, fix grammatical errors, etc.), Computer (students play educational games on provided websites), Math Center (a hands-on activity is provided that correspond to the weekly Math concept), Writing (students either respond to a prompt or write a friendly letter to the teacher), Spelling (reinforces spelling words for the week either through manipulation, writing the words alphabetically, or three times each),

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Listening Center (students listen to books on tape/CD), and Choice Center (students work with tan-grams or play an education Math or Reading game).

Teacher C reported that 80-90% of the time her students are accountable for the work. She explained, “Some kids’ work I check daily while other students’ I glance at their work weekly.” She explained that in order to keep her off-task students accountable, she reminds them each day that their work will be checked once centers have concluded. Teacher C provides a large bin for each center and there are Team folders with their papers in it which helps keep it a bit organized. The main difference between Teacher C and Teachers H and K is that Teacher C has all of her students work independently; none of the activities are to be done with a partner or in a group. Teachers H and K allow their students to complete their work with a partner or in small groups, however, if they want their students to complete something independently, they let them know ahead of time. All three teachers signal their students to move to the next center by either using a bell or a buzzer. When asked why they chose timed rotations over free rotation, Teacher C explained that she likes to know what activities each student should be working on and when. She stated that at any time she can glance at the chart and see what activity particular (or sometimes off-task) students should be working on. She further explained that her center activities are very open-ended so that if the buzzer rings and students haven’t completed a task, they can merely pick up where they left off the next time they come along to that center. Teachers H and K had similar explanations, probably most due to the fact that Teacher C taught them both how to run their classrooms in this manner.

After interviewing Teachers C, H, and K, I decided to observe Teacher K’s class because I had not yet had the opportunity to visit a third grade classroom. Upon entering
her classroom, I noticed that the students were in the middle of transitioning from
center one to center two. The transition appeared to run smoothly and within three
minutes all of the students were where they needed to be. Out of the eight centers
Teacher K provided for her students, I was able to observe four that were shown on one
of the center charts. The centers included DEAR time (Drop Everything and Read),
Math Center (which required students to manipulate multiplication stacking cups), Word
Study (students had to write the big idea and three details to the book “If You Lived In
Colonial Times”), and Computer Center (an educational website). At one point I noticed
six students working at one table and it was quite surprising that they were all very quiet.
I stopped over to three students working on Math center near each other on the floor.
As I sat there, one student explained to me that you have to pick a set of cups and stack
them. Once they are stacked correctly, you swivel the cups around to create
multiplication problems. As you look diagonally down the cups you can see the bottom
cups creating answers to the Math equations stacked above them. Another student
stated, “It’s fun because you have to be careful the cups don’t topple when you swivel it
to find the right answer.” The students had a pyramid recording sheet where they were
asked to write the equations down that they had come up with (as a way to hold them
accountable). After observing the students with the cups, I noticed one student sitting to
the side working on a file folder game. I asked what she was doing and why; she
explained, “I already finished the stacking cups so I get to play a folder game... You have
to figure out the answer to the multiplication problem on the spaceship and then put the
correct alien on the right spaceship.” Altogether, the students in Teacher K’s classroom
seemed extremely engaged and enthusiastic about the activities they were required to do.
None of the students complained about the activities while I was there and there were very few students wandering the room trying to avoid the tasks at hand.

Teacher F uses the same center chart as the above mentioned three teachers, however, she uses only one chart and switches out the centers by manipulating Velcro Center Icons. Her class is also broken up into four teams and each day they visit Game center (characterized by an educational Reading board game), Computer center (students independently play educational website games), and Reading center (characterized by independent or partner reading of the classroom library books). The fourth daily center is rotated out every day and ranges from Versa Tiles (students manipulate tiles and place them correctly in their plastic case according to Reading, Language Arts, and Math skill books), Pattern blocks, Hot Dots (electronic pens are manipulated to touch dots on a question/answer card—if the pen beeps, the student chose the correct answer), SRA kits (students read a short story on a laminated card—after reading they flip the card over and bubble in the correct answer using an erasable marker), and Writing Center (students respond to a prompt). Teacher F explained, “I try not to have a lot of paperwork because I find their work isn’t the best quality during Centers and I don’t want to correct a million things.”

Since Teacher F’s approach seemed a bit different from the previously mentioned teacher, I decided to choose her classroom as one that I would observe. When I entered the room, I noticed quiet conversations taking place amongst the students. One team of students was playing an Inference Board Game together. It required one student to read a short story on a small card while another student listened in and chose the correct multiple-choice answer. At times the small group of students got a bit loud as they talked throughout the game but they always seemed to quiet one
another down. Another team of students was stationed at the computers. I observed as they played the selected game “Poptropica.” It required the students to steer a person from place to place and stop to read bubble captions to know what to do next. Versa Tiles were another center that students were stationed at. They were spread throughout the room and each student had a plastic case filled with the twelve tiles. One student explained to me how the center worked. She stated, “First you read the sentence and figure out what word is supposed to go in the blank. Next you take that question’s number tile and place it in the corresponding box (shown on the bottom of the worksheet).” She continued to explain that once you have put all twelve tiles where they are supposed to go, you close the case, flip it over, and open it from the back. If it reveals a pattern that matches the one shown on the bottom of the activity sheet, the student correctly completed all of the sentences. All of the students seemed comfortable working independently at this center. There was one point in my observation that I did notice two students with the plastic case already flipped upside down; they appeared to be trying to place the tiles so they would match the pattern at the bottom of the page, and then flip it over to try and figure out the answers. At that time, the Teaching Assistant approached the two students and reminded them of how to complete it the correct way.

The last center that was shown on the center chart was Reading Center. As I walked around the classroom I noticed several students with a paper book holding a purple marker. I chatted with one student and discovered that for this center, all of the students were expected to read the story and highlight all of the words that contain -ar, -air, and -are. Altogether, the information the teacher provided me in her survey and interview corresponded with what I observed in her classroom. All of her students
would visit the Game, Computer, and Reading Centers and the new center for the day appeared to be Versa Tiles.

The Daily Five & The Daily Three

After the interviewing process I discovered that two teachers chose to run their classrooms following suggestions from the book The Daily Five (Boushey & Mosser, 2006). Teacher G used a set rotation through five daily activities consisting of Read to Self, Word Study, Read to Partner, Writing, and Listening. Teacher G explained that she considers theses activities “Centers” and sometimes, instead of using a Listening Center, she throws in computer time or a Math activity. Her daily five activities sounded very similar to many of the centers previously mentioned by the teacher participants. During Word Study, her students were provided the opportunity to manipulate various classroom materials (for example magnetic letters) to practice that particular week’s spelling words and her Writing center was run just like a Writer’s Workshop; students work independently writing about topics in their own lives. She explained, “I think they are accountable… I try to listen to what they are chatting about before I speak to them because a lot of the time I find them talking about what they are working on.” Teacher G later clarified that for Writing, she tries to hold them accountable by selecting days where certain students conference with her so she can check over their work or provide any assistance.

I found that Teacher N based her independent activities around The Daily Five as well. While she has a timed rotation and allows her student to pick the order they would like to complete the tasks, she explained to me that she decided last year to cut The Daily Five down to The Daily Three in her classroom. She explained that she believes Reading to a Partner and Listening are very similar because the students are
hearing someone else read while they follow along in a book. Therefore, every day, her students Read to Self, they have the option of either Reading to a Partner or Listening to a book on tape, and they started the year off doing Word Work (which were described as similar activities to the previously mentioned teacher participants) however she had currently switched over to having her students do Writing tasks. Teacher N explained that she eliminated Word Work because she provides her students the opportunity to do this for a small portion of time during their Guided Reading Instruction, and she believes that three independent activities a day provides her with the right amount of time to complete her instruction of Guided Reading. Teacher N further explained:

It is nice because after 20 minutes, I bring the students back together and do a whole group activity with them. Then they go to their next ‘center’ followed by another whole group lesson and so on...I've found that after 20 minutes they start to buzz and they need to be checked in on otherwise they get off task.

Teacher N further explained that her students choose the order they want to do the Daily Three for the whole week. Monday through Friday they rotate through the Daily Three the same way and the following Monday they can switch if they choose.

Since Teacher N based her independent activity time around The Daily Five, I chose to observe her classroom and determine if the students seemed engaged and actively working. One of the first things I noticed was how quiet the classroom was when I walked into the room. They had already started The Daily Five and the students were spread out throughout the entire classroom. As the teacher met with a Guided Reading group I noticed several students sitting on the countertops, on the carpet, and under their desks either reading to themselves or reading to a partner. Knowing that the students had the option to either read to a partner or listen to books on tape, I looked around the room to see if anyone had opted for the option of listening to books on tape.
From what I could tell, all of the students opted to read with a partner. The remainder of
the students were surrounded by paper, carrying on as if they were taking part in Writer's
Workshop. I was able to move about the room watching the students work diligently. I
stopped to ask one student if she picked out the book she was currently reading. She
responded, “Not yet, we get to pick what we want to read after we are done reading our
assigned reading.” I noticed a group of boys sitting under a table together with chapter
books open but having conversations that did not appear to have anything to do with
their books. I approached them to listen in a bit but as soon as I got closer they all
looked back to their books and began to silently read again. I noticed that where they
were sitting was somewhat out of the view of their teacher.

Altogether, my experience observing Teacher N’s classroom showed evidence
that her interview and survey corresponded to what was actually occurring within her
room. Besides the small group of boys that didn’t seem to be actively reading their
assigned book from their reading group, her students seemed engaged and very few
students were up and about wandering the classroom trying to avoid their work. Her
students knew to rotate when she sounded a buzzer and they used the pocket chart that
reminded them of the order they chose to complete their centers for the week.

The last teacher who appeared to run her classroom using a set rotation was
Teacher E. Similar to many of the above mentioned teachers, Teacher E had her
students rotate through four centers each day. She explained that her students participate
in Spelling Center, Word Work, Listening, and Independent Work. There is a chart on
the front board and the students work together with the people in their rotation group
unless they are at the Independent Work Center. The Independent Work Center
consisted of worksheets that go along with the School’s Reading Series. The teacher
explained that she collects their work and if it isn’t complete by the end of the week, the Teaching Assistant will pull back students to have them complete it. Teacher E stated, “I check over their work and do take some grades from it. It doesn’t take me long to figure out what to put in the centers because it all goes along with what I’m teaching for that week.” If any students finish the centers early, the teacher provides them with dictionary or thesaurus work.

Worksheets, Reading, & Book Clubs

Three remaining teachers chose not to provide their students with Center activities. Instead, Teacher L has her students complete a weekly packet that goes along with the Reading Series. It contains practice of vocabulary, reading strategies, and a writing task. After students complete the weekly packet, they are expected to use the rest of their time reading classroom books silently. Teacher L explained:

As much as I don’t like to give packets, they really aren’t busy work. They give skills and reading strategies. As much as it isn’t the fun thing to do, it gives them the practice of the skills and they retain it.

Teachers M and O also do not provide their students with center work. Instead, their students are expected to first complete their daily assigned reading from Guided Reading groups. If Teacher M’s students finish reading early, they are expected to read a book of choice from the classroom library. When Teacher O’s students finish their assigned reading, they are expected to take on one of the roles in a book club. She explained that her students are allowed to work together and have the necessary conversations that are going to help them better comprehend what they are reading.

Teacher O stated:

I used to do the Daily Three like one of my colleagues however it was too choppy because you would do three mini lessons between all three independent working times...it has gotten progressively noisier since
switching to this method but I have to suck it up and allow those conversations especially because they seem to be on task.

To further understand the way teachers run their classroom while Guided Reading groups meet, I found it important to ask the question, “What do students do if they have questions or do not understand what they are supposed to complete?” Out of fifteen teachers, five explained their students have been taught the saying, “Ask three before me.” Basically, before a student thinks to approach and interrupt a teacher who is with a Guided Reading group, he/she has to ask three other students in the classroom. Many teachers explained that their students are expected to go to their friends in the classroom or the teaching assistant (or classroom grandma) instead of interrupting. Four out of fifteen teachers have weekly Team Captains who have become experts in the tasks the teacher has provided the students. The students again are expected to seek out the Team Captains and ask any questions that may arise. During the interviews, two teachers reported that regardless, students always make their way to the Guided Reading table to ask their questions or tattle on other students. Teacher L explained that she has students reiterate what they are supposed to do in the centers in their own words. She stated,

They tend to work in partners, so if a child doesn’t understand, there is a good chance the other will be able to explain it. They can also slide me a piece of paper if I am with a group and they know that once I break from a group I will take that time to answer their questions.

Teacher G reported that she hangs up a NO TRESPASSING sign in front of her Guided Reading table as a visual cue to remind her students. She explained that there really shouldn’t be any questions because the centers are generally repetitive in nature; however, she stated that interruptions do occur quite frequently but due to tattling on others.
The last interview question that pertained to how teachers run their classroom was “Do the activities ever change?” Forty-seven percent of teachers reported putting new activities out each week. Out of this percentage, a few teachers explained that some “centers” remain constant such as DEAR time and Writing Center (such as journals back and forth to the teacher). One teacher reported that she keeps open-ended centers out for two weeks before switching things up. Two other teachers reported changing their center activities every other day while another teacher keeps three centers constant (computer, Versa Tiles, and Reading comprehension game) and switches out a new fourth center daily. The teachers who reported following the guidelines of The Daily Five explained that the only “center” that needed to be changed daily was the word study component. Lastly, Teacher L stated that she puts out a new packet each week for her students to work on independently.

Altogether, an array of techniques have been utilized by teachers to promote independence and the practice of literacy learning in students who are not meeting with the teacher for Guided Reading. Several teachers use centers that encompass activities ranging from Math, Spelling, Word Study, and Games. Other teachers have opted to have their students complete reading assigned from their Guided Reading groups or a packet of work pertaining to the week’s skills and concepts. When students have questions, they are expected to either ask a friend for help or wait until their teacher is no longer meeting with a group of students. Most teachers reported that they change their center activities frequently unless it is an activity that stays constant such as daily reading, a writing prompt, or playing educational computer games. The following research question looks more into why and how teachers chose the methods in which they follow.
Research Question #2: Why have teachers chosen particular independent literacy activities for their classrooms?

While the above information provides great details of what teachers have their students do during independent work time, I found it necessary to investigate why and how teachers chose their particular method. Before analyzing the data provided through the interviews, I looked at the information supplied by the anonymous surveys. An overwhelming 73% of teacher participants reported that their main reason for choosing their particular method of independent work for students was because it reinforces previously taught skills; students are provided the opportunity to practice what they have learned through center work and other independent activities. Other reasons include: students learn independence, students are provided a time to read and improve writing skills, centers allow peer tutoring, centers create independent thinkers and learners, students are provided choice, students practice ELA Test requirements (for example written response), and students are allowed to work at their own pace. One teacher explained on her survey that the activities are helpful in providing balanced literacy for all students. Books on CD (Listening Center) help promote fluency, independent reading promotes love of reading, Word-Study allows students to practice grammar and spelling rules, and altogether, centers encourage critical thinking and problem solving.

When comparing this data to teacher interviews, nearly 75% of teachers responded that they chose their particular ways of running their classrooms due to their students needing practice of the skills they had previously been taught. Teacher B explained, “There’s not enough time to teach and allow practice during the day so putting activities into centers gives them more time to practice.” Most teachers reported creating activities for their centers that went along with the school’s Reading Series; the
series provides ideas for center work such as writing prompts, word work, and listening centers.

Three teachers responded that their ideas came from books. Teachers G and N were both referred to the book, *The Daily Five* (Boushey & Mosser, 2006) by colleagues. Teacher N explained that before she heard about the Daily Five she was providing her students with centers that required a lot of paperwork and correcting by the teacher. The Daily Five seemed to be a much better fit for both her and her students. Teacher G also commented in her interview that her previous centers left her a bucket of things to correct each day. She stated, "Reading the book made me realize what I was having them do was all busy work. I think letting them have just time to read has helped them come so far this year. They have time to practice the skills." Teacher J also looked into a book called, *Differentiated Literacy Centers* (Southall, 2007). She explained that the book gave her several ideas for word study, writing, and reading—the three components she wanted students to work on independently while she met with other students for Guided Reading instruction.

Several other teachers also revealed that many of their ideas and ways of running their classrooms came from colleagues. Teacher K started using two center charts (each containing four various centers) after attending an in-school Professional Development session. She explained how she took what she was taught and molded it into her own creative activities that suited the needs of her own students and grade level. Teacher O explained that her ideas came from having many conversations with people in her graduate classes. She and her colleagues believed it was important to provide their students with more choice.
One teacher explained that her method of running her classroom changes from year to year. She overall tries to stick to centers, however, she thinks it truly depends on the group of students and whether they can function independently and stick to their work. Similarly, Teacher A reported how she used to do centers where students rotated through the same things day in and day out. Now, she has found the need to switch things up and provide new “centers” all the time so students do not get bored and shut down.

To go along with why teachers have chosen their particular method of running their classrooms, I decided to ask the question, “Have you considered what your students think of the activities?” Out of fifteen participants, eight teachers responded “Yes,” four teachers think they had considered their students’ thoughts, and three teachers had never thought to look in to it. Only one teacher responded that she explicitly asked her students whether they liked what they are expected to do. After voting, she explained that her students overwhelmingly enjoyed the centers. The teachers who responded that they think their students enjoy them explained that their students perform well, no one is really complaining, and they seem to enjoy the hands-on-activities. Out of the three teachers responding “No” to the question, Teachers B and H seemed eager to ask their classes about their thoughts while Teacher A explained, “Some like it and some don’t. Sometimes a center is boring but the skill needs to be done.” A few teachers reported that their students seem eager to start centers for the day. Teacher F said that on several different occasions, she had called her students back for reading groups and the students complained that they were missing out on a center that day.

Overall, when asked why they have chosen particular activities for their students, teachers in this study have explained the importance of providing their students with a
time to practice the skills that have previously been taught. Most teachers seemed concerned about the amount of papers they would have to correct if their centers included a lot of paperwork or "busy work." Reinforcement of skills each day allows students to become better readers and more independent writers. Altogether, the teachers appeared to show interest in what their students thought about the work they were required to do and they wanted their students to be engaged and excited to participate in the activities.

**Research Question #3: How do teachers decide if their chosen independent literacy activities are effective in supporting students' literacy learning?**

After looking at the data collected through the anonymous teacher surveys, it became apparent that approximately 50% of fifteen teacher participants feel their independent literacy activities are "very" effective in supporting students' literacy learning. Teacher A explained that students get a chance to use their reading abilities to do quite a bit of practice that would not take place otherwise, and children learn how to manage their time and work independently. Teacher K added that she is very pleased with what occurs during centers because students interact with one another and the conversations and completed work show positive peer communication of ideas. One teacher (Teacher O) explained that she believes the most effective activity is book clubs—she has had the opportunity to see great discussions in her classroom since they were introduced to students. Teacher G wrote, "The activities have been very successful. All of my students have demonstrated steady growth in both their ability to read, write and respond to literature, and develop more conventional spelling patterns." Several teachers reported that they had seen improvements in fluency due to the fact that their students frequently read to a friend or by themselves. In addition, Teacher J commented,
I feel the literacy activities are effective because I can quickly see the areas we need to continue to work on, either individually or whole class. The activities are not 'busy work' but are authentic activities based on what students should be learning.

While the remaining 50% of teachers did not agree that their independent literacy activities were "highly" effective, they still provided explanations showing their support for what they do. Two teachers explained that their centers definitely support student learning, however, some students do not put forth their best effort when completing independent activities. Teachers E and M reported they have difficulty getting the off-task students to focus and be productive. Teacher L did not appear to be completely sure if her activities supported literacy learning. She wrote, "I like to think they are supporting literacy learning. They are working on vocab, high order thinking skills, writing skills, and thinking about what they've read and then communicating." Teacher C reported, "I feel that some of the activities are effective, some may need to be revamped, however all activities are effective in that they create an environment that is quiet and promotes learning while students are in reading groups." Altogether, the data received from the anonymous surveys shows that many teachers believe their independent activities clearly support literacy learning, while others are a bit concerned that several students remain off-task and have difficulty completing the work set out for them. Other teachers seemed to question themselves within the survey stating, "I think..." or "Some of the activities are effective." To further look into the effectiveness of the literacy activities teachers provide their students, I asked several questions within the interview process that would uncover their feelings and beliefs.

One of the questions I asked concerning the effectiveness of independent activities was "What are the benefits of the activities you have chosen for your students?" Twelve out of fifteen teacher participants responded in their interviews that
their chosen methods allow students the time to independently practice the new skills and concepts introduced to them in both whole group and small group instruction. The students review what they have been taught and the activities reinforce their learning. Teacher I explained that the centers she chooses work well when students work together; she wants her students to build a community in the classroom and they do this through working quietly, cooperatively, and with people who are not necessarily their friends. Teacher M reported that her students practice vocabulary strategies, concepts are reinforced from the Spelling program, and the reading comprehension helps prepare them for tests. She stated, “It’s more practice of what I’ve already taught them... it wouldn’t be fair to give them something new that hasn’t been taught.”

Although the three remaining teachers didn’t explicitly state that their independent activities focus on practice and reinforcement of skills, they still provided evidence of the benefits their students are provided. Teacher D explained that her independent activities are a follow through from lessons taught the previous day. She is able to see whether her students got anything out of what she taught and she determines whether she needs to go back and re-teach the new concept. Teacher E seemed to show a bit of concern in her reply to this question. She explained that the activities allow students to grow in their independence, but that’s if they can do it. She stated, “I still don’t really know about those students who can’t do it or if it’s what’s best for them.” Lastly, Teacher O explained that her method of allowing students to independently read and participate in book clubs is an authentic way for students to build a love for reading and practice higher level thinking skills.

While much information was provided showing the benefits teachers believe their activities provide, I found it important to ask about any concerns the teachers have
about their methods of running their classrooms during this independent working time. Six out of fifteen teachers showed concern about student accountability. The teachers explained that while they meet with small groups of students, it is difficult trying to keep an eye on what they are doing and how much they are accomplishing. Students often get off-track and start chatting with their friends making the classroom a bit noisy and unproductive. Teacher G explained, “As soon as you put your head down and focus with the Guided Reading group, the rest of the class tends to wander or start talking.” Teacher H stated that having more adults in the classroom would help alleviate the chatter and hold students more accountable.

Two teachers voiced concern about the challenge aspect of the activities they provide. Teacher B explained that she needs to do better with challenging students, especially those who finish all of their free-rotating centers early. Teacher K reported that she sometimes wonders if her activities are too challenging or not challenging enough. She finds it difficult getting everything leveled appropriately but providing them a bit of challenge at the same time. She stated, “The activities are fun and hands on, but I want them at that middle level that is good for the students.”

Three out of fifteen teachers reported that they had no concerns at this time with the independent activities they have chosen. Teacher F added that her students seem accountable for their work and Teacher L explained that she had a very well minded class that worked consistently. The remaining four teachers had varying concerns: Teacher C explained that she sometimes looks at what they are doing and wonders if they are getting a lot out of it. She stated, “I wonder if it is the most beneficial way to spend their time. I’ve been reading The Daily Five and have been thinking about incorporating some of those things.” Teacher I reported that her biggest complaint is
that her students don’t appear to be doing their best work. She stated that some students do their best work while others hurry through certain activities to get to the ones they like best. She voiced her concern that she doesn’t know how to teach work ethic and she is open to any suggestions to get her students to care about their work.

Teacher M had a completely different concern from any of the above mentioned by other teachers. She explained that it takes a long time to look over all the work her students turn in. She mentioned that in the past she has provided her students with eight centers, however this year she generally had her students do more independent reading and/or paperwork. She reported, “You have to go on what the class is capable of...I don't usually give students a lot of paperwork, but this year it worked.” Lastly, Teacher N reported that her concern mainly dealt with the tracking of books. Her students participate in the Daily Three and she would like to keep track of what and how many books her students are reading independently. Also, she expressed concern about making her Word Study activities more meaningful.

To triangulate the data collected through teacher interviews, I compared the above results to the fourth question teachers were asked on their survey, “What questions, concerns, or tensions do you have about the independent literacy activities your students practice?” Eight out of fifteen teachers reported that the accountability aspect was their biggest concern/tension. They reported that students do not appear to use their time wisely or hand in their best work. One teacher reported that she has tried checklists of everything they need to complete and the same kids would always get behind. She explained that this year she has allowed her students to move at their own pace, but some children slack off and take advantage of this opportunity. She stated, “I
keep track of most of their work but some things I just let go because I feel like I'm becoming a micromanager. I have to find a happy medium!"

The remaining data collected through teacher surveys revealed the same responses to those provided in the interviews. Many teachers expressed not being completely happy with Word Work, others expressed that it would be helpful to have more adult supported centers to help hold the students accountable, and some teachers reported how they were interested in trying to find better ways to differentiate the independent activities to challenge each student individually. Altogether, the data reported in both the surveys and individual interviews revealed the same tensions and concerns held by the teacher participants.

Three remaining questions on the teacher interviews help to further provide evidence of how effective the teachers think the literacy activities are in supporting literacy learning. Question number ten asked, "How satisfied are you with what occurs during these activities?" Four teachers reported being "very" satisfied, eight teachers reported being "fairly" or "pretty" satisfied, two teachers reported being "okay" with what occurs, and one teacher did not seem satisfied at all. Teachers D, G, K, and N reported being the most satisfied of all teacher participants. Teacher K explained that the Center Board she uses helps make everything more clear and organized for the students. The students know where to go and what they are supposed to do. She reported that even the noise level is very low and the turnover rate is great. She looks over their work and corrects it every day; if she notices they aren’t doing what she expects, they are expected to do it over.

Of the eight teachers who reported that they were "fairly" or "pretty" satisfied with what occurred, some of their reasons were that: sometimes it's hard to come up
with new center ideas, students are not always accountable, and the work ethic could be better. Teacher B stated that she looks at what her students are doing now compared to years ago when she was teaching second grade, and a lot of the students have grasped many of the second grade skills which is reassuring. Teacher C expressed that she believes a big part of teaching is taking a look each year to see what works and revamping it a bit. She stated, “I’m never completely satisfied but I think that’s a part of teaching…constantly looking at what is working and what is not.”

Teachers E and M both reported being “okay” with what occurred during the independent activities. Teacher E explained that if she were going to be a teacher longer (she plans to retire), then she would spend more time over the summer setting things up differently for the next school year. Teacher M explained that she feels that 75-80% of the time her students are being productive. Lastly, one teacher (Teacher O) reported not being very satisfied. She explained that she didn’t like the Daily Three set-up and at the time she wasn’t sure what she planned to do for the following school year.

Question eleven on the teacher interview asked, “Are there any aspects to your method that you are not happy with or you wish you could change? If yes, please explain.” Only three teachers (Teachers A, D, and E) reported that they would not change anything about the method they use. The remaining teachers had at least one aspect they would change. Five teachers reported that they wish to eliminate or cut down on the amount of paperwork students do. Not only are the students working on or completing papers, but it makes for more correcting on the teachers’ part. Two teachers (Teachers K and L) explained that they would like more diversity in their centers. Teacher K reported that sometimes she sticks something the students have done into centers for the week, but then later asks herself whether her students are thinking “We
have to do this again?” Similarly, Teacher L explained that she would like to vary the activities she uses but make them high-quality activities instead of mere time fillers.

Additional aspects that teachers would like to change include: adding a listening center with high quality books on tape or CD, finding more educational computer games to use during Computer center, finding a way to get students excited about writing, and finding a way to hold students more accountable.

Question 12 in the interview process asked teachers, “Have you ever considered trying something else? If so, what?” Eight teachers reported that they have changed the way they run their classroom at least once in the past. Out of eight teachers, five of them changed their method at the beginning of this school year. Teacher J used to have students rotate to a new center every 20 minutes, however, this year she decided to have just three centers and allow the students to complete them in any order. All eight teachers reported that they plan to use their current method again next year. Three teachers (Teachers C, E, and F) explained that they would like to either add something to the way they currently run their classroom or look in to something different. Teacher C has read about The Daily Five and she stated that she would like to maybe try that in her classroom next year. Teacher E explained that she would like to maybe have her students do a center that required them to record their own reading and then play it back as they followed along in the book. Teachers M and O reported that they would like to change what they are doing, but they are not quite sure at the time. The remaining teachers (Teachers L and D) said that they are always up for something different and open to new ideas. Teacher D explained, “You have to look at the climate you’re working with and what the kids are capable of doing and then decide how to run your classroom.”
To further triangulate the data provided in the interviews, I chose to compare the results to what I observed in particular classrooms. Teacher A expressed that she believes her centers are very effective. She explained in her interview that centers reinforce skills and give her students the chance to practice what they have been taught. Centers also help children learn time management and how to work independently. Her main concern was that often times her students get off task and a bit chatty with their friends. Overall, she seemed fairly satisfied with centers, however sometimes it is difficult for her to come up with new ideas. There was nothing mentioned in the interview about any aspects she would change at this time. When I entered Teacher A’s classroom to make my observations, I noticed it was very quiet with only whispering voices and the voice of the teacher who was meeting with her Guided Reading group. Students were spread out across the entire classroom with some working on the floor and others at their desks. In my eyes, the activities the students were doing appeared to be educational with an emphasis on previously learned concepts. Most students appeared to be on-task, and very few students were wandering about the room. At times, students did get up and move about the room, however, I noticed it was mainly to hand in an activity they had just finished or to go collect materials they needed for the next activity. One student was working on piecing broken paper hearts together to form compound words. From across the room he appeared to be either day dreaming or watching the work of others. As I approached him however, he started right back in, keeping on task. Overall, Teacher A’s method of using eight independent centers with a free rotation seemed to be effective with most students.

Before observing in Teacher F’s classroom, I was able to analyze both her survey and interview and discover that she finds her center activities to be very engaging and
effective. She also creates activities that allow her students to practice the skills and concepts they have been taught. She had no concerns and commented that her students seem accountable for the most part. When asked how satisfied she is with what occurs during the activities, she stated, “This year more so than in the past.” Teacher F plans to use this method of centers again next year. She doesn’t plan on changing anything other than spending more time in the beginning of the year teaching them how to do the activities she puts out. I chose to observe in Teacher F’s classroom because her method seemed very different from anyone else’s and she boasted about how effective and engaging her activities were. When I went into her classroom I did notice that the students where having quiet conversations but everyone seemed to be engaged and the chatter was geared towards what the students were working on. Five students were wearing headphones playing independently on the computers. I questioned myself on how educational the computer game was that they were playing because they had to basically steer a character the right direction to get him/her to a certain location. I did notice however that it required the students to read captions and talking bubbles of their character to understand the directions, so overall, the activity did require them to read and follow directions. The students playing the reading comprehension game were required to read or listen to a passage and make an inference based on what the game card said; everyone seemed focused on what they had to do in order to try and win the game. The remaining students in the classroom were either at a desk working independently on Versa Tiles or reading a paper book from the Reading Series highlighting certain vowel patterns. Altogether, the activities appeared to be effective and engaging. No one was wandering about the classroom or staring into space. There was one instance however where one student working on Versa Tiles kept asking another
student where certain tiles should go instead of reading the questions herself and completing the task interpedently. Overall, Teacher F's method of using centers appeared to be engaging to the students and the activities supported literacy learning.

From Teacher K's interview and survey I learned that she is very pleased with her independent activities. Her students sometimes work with a partner or in a small group and she has noticed that the conversations and completed work show quite a bit of positive peer communication of ideas. Teacher K explained that her centers allow students to practice skills and review things they have previously learned. One of the concerns she voiced was that sometimes she wonders if her centers are too challenging or not challenging enough. As previously mentioned, she is very satisfied with her method of centers and how it is organized however, she sometimes worries if her students are thinking, "We have to do this again?" When I observed in her classroom, I took her concerns into consideration. Math seemed fairly engaging to her students as they were spread on the floor manipulating the cups. I believe the activity was effective in delivering practice of multiplication facts. The students had previously learned how to multiply, but now they were expected to solve the equations in a fun and challenging way. The students at Computer center and DEAR time were working very quietly and the remaining students were working at a group of desks on the Word Study activity. The word study activity, as previously mentioned, required students to write three details and the big idea from the book, *If You Lived In Colonial Times*. I flipped through the book and noticed that it was 80 pages long. I asked one young girl how long she had been working on this activity and she replied, "For a few weeks." I noticed that the students working on this activity did not seem extremely engaged. Some of the students' papers were filled with sentences while others only had a few words. While the classroom
remained mostly quiet, I did notice the students sitting together at this center whispering about things off-topic. While the other three centers for the day seemed to hold the students' attention, most students at the Word Study center did not appear to be excited or productive. Also, in previous teachers' explanations of Word Study, it has been described that students manipulate letters or vowel patterns to learn more about words and how they work. The task these students were expected to do seemed more like a Response to Reading activity.

Lastly, Teacher N described in her interview and survey that she believes The Daily Five (Daily Three in her case) is very effective. She explained that she has seen her students improve their reading fluency by reading to someone frequently. They also benefit from several mini-lessons during this time period. Some of the concerns that Teacher N had was tracking what and how many books her students were reading each day during “Read to Self,” finding a way to make Word Study more meaningful, and finding a supply of materials to foster more “listening” opportunities. When I observed in Teacher N's classroom, the students appeared to be quiet and engaged. Several students were reading to themselves, writing, or reading to a partner. As I mentioned above, there was a group of boys gathered under a set of desks carrying on conversations that did not appear to have anything to do with the books they were reading. I believe all the activities provided for the students were effective in promoting literacy learning, however I believe this teacher, like several others, might find it difficult to hold students accountable and on task.

Altogether, through the surveys, interviews, and observations, many teachers made it very clear that they believe their independent activities are effective in promoting literacy learning. Almost all teacher participants reported that their activities allow
students to practice the concepts they had previously been taught; the activities are used as review and reinforcement of skills. When asked about each teacher’s concerns regarding the activities they provide, most teachers explained that student accountability is the main aspect they struggle with. Also, students often do not do their best work while performing independently. Most teacher participants expressed that they would like to find ways to differentiate or challenge students and find ways to eliminate activities requiring a lot of paperwork. For the most part, the majority of teachers reported being satisfied with what occurs during the independent activities they provide for their students.

Conclusion

In conclusion, three research questions were addressed in this chapter gaining insight as to what independent activities teachers provide their students, why they have chosen the activities, and how effective they are in supporting students’ literacy learning. Although no two teachers ran their classroom in the same exact way, there were many similarities in the types of activities provided to students. Regardless of a free rotation or a timed rotation, most teachers included activities involving independent reading, writing, word work, and reading response. The most popular response to the question regarding why teachers have chosen the particular activities for their classrooms, was that their activities reinforce previously taught skills and allow students the time to practice what they have learned. Lastly, the benefits appeared to outweigh the concerns held by teachers when they were asked how effective the activities seemed to be. Teachers were overall concerned about student accountability, off-task behaviors, and differentiating the challenge-level of the various activities. Conversely, while many teachers expressed concerns, all of the teacher participants provided explanations of the benefits their
students gain through the independent working opportunities; children practice higher
level thinking skills, learn how to problem solve, learn to function independently,
become fluent readers, and they build a love for reading!
CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

After concluding my study on the various activities teachers have their students do while Guided Reading instruction takes place as well as why they chose their particular activities and how effective they are, many explanations and conclusions surfaced. This chapter will not only summarize the findings of this study, but it will also provide conclusions and recommendations for future researchers and practitioners.

Early on in the study I discovered that most teachers provided their students approximately 20 minutes to work on a particular activity while a Guided Reading group was meeting with the teacher. As stated in the literature review, Ford and Opitz (2008) surveyed numerous teachers about how long their students remain in a Guided Reading group with the teacher. They reported that on average, teachers met with four groups a day and students were held at their group for about 22 minutes. This suggests that students spent approximately 60 minutes away from the teacher working independently. Compared to the participants of Ford and Optiz’s study, the participants in this small, Western New York school also conducted their classes in this manner.

As my research questions asked about independent literacy activities, I quickly discovered that many teachers had their students work with a partner or with a small group of students. Teacher F had her students play a literacy board game in a group of four, Teachers N and G required their students to read to a partner, and several other teachers provided the choice for students to work with a friend to complete certain tasks that were specified by the teachers early in the week. I also quickly realized that not all “centers” or activities were geared toward literacy learning. Teachers A, B, and C made reference to including art activities or holiday crafts as part of their weekly centers. In
looking over the data, I noticed that these three participants were all first grade teachers. Perhaps there was not enough time in the day to fit in crafts such as these or the teachers felt the need to provide young six year olds with hands-on, creative projects that keep them motivated and excited to participate. Teachers A, B, C, F, G, H, I, and K all made reference to including Math and/or Social Studies/Science activities in their learning centers. As stated previously, Teacher B said, “There’s not enough time to teach and allow practice during the day so putting activities into centers gives them more time to practice.” Numerous teachers explained that their centers or activities were designed to allow students to practice what they have learned earlier in the day or week. I believe the reason they put Math and Social Studies/Science activities into “Literacy centers” is due to the fact that children need more opportunity to practice what they have learned regardless of the subject. Also, my findings indicate that teachers are pushing back against the compartmentalization of curriculum. Instead of teaching students each curriculum according to discrete subject areas and specified time blocks throughout a given school day, teachers appear to be intertwining subject matter so that students continually build knowledge across all curriculums. For example, Read and Response activities provide students the opportunity to learn about a particular concept geared toward the Social Studies curriculum while students simultaneously enhance their proficiency with reading and writing.

Another discovery I made early in this study was that no two teachers ran their classroom the same exact way during this time. While some teachers chose to use the same kind of Center chart or the same names of centers such as Word Study, Computers, and DEAR time, every teacher participant put various activities into each center. Looking over the data provided by the first grade teachers, I discovered that two
teachers had students rotate freely through the centers, however their mentioned centers were not always the same. The third first grade teacher used a timed rotation with eight centers and a visible center chart posted in the classroom. The second grade teachers also ran their classrooms differently. One teacher chose to follow the Daily Five, another provided four centers a day with three of them remaining constant throughout the week, and the last two had their students do seatwork followed by centers that were not the same. Three third grade teachers participated in the study; one teacher provided her students four centers to be finished by the end of the week, another provided three centers every day, and the last used a chart similar to Teacher C’s with eight centers.

Lastly, out of the four fourth grade teachers, one provided a weekly packet, one required her students to read independently the entire time, another chose to have her students participate in The Daily Three, and the last had her students read independently and participate in Book Club activities.

Altogether, the data shows that no two teachers provide their students with the same centers or activities. While this information may appear to be intriguing or baffling to some, it suggests that teachers are professionals with the knowledge to decide what is best for their students. All teachers bring their own wealth of information and areas of expertise into the field of education. Advanced degrees, workshops, professional development, and conferences all contribute to teachers’ decisions of how to run their classrooms. Instead of suggesting that teachers provide their students with activities that are consistent across the board, collaboration in each grade level or across grade levels about the activities they choose and methods they follow might open up rich conversations and help teachers become reflective thinkers. This critical reflection would
perhaps help teachers make more informed decisions as to what will help children continually and consistently grow as life-long learners.

After interviewing each teacher participant individually, I learned that many teachers are either comfortable with the system they currently use or their method of running their classroom changes from year to year based on the new group of students they receive. Some teachers seemed to feel more comfortable keeping their students on a timed rotation while others were at ease about providing their students with choice and letting them rotate freely about the classroom. Also, some teachers felt the need to provide several centers (like eight for example) for students to visit throughout the week while others only provided their students with three centers, a packet, or silent reading.

As stated in the literature review, Fountas and Pinnell (1996) suggested that teachers use a work board and allow students to move as individuals through the centers due to the varying amounts of time they need to complete each center or activity. They mentioned examples of activities to be used by teachers such as Word Study, Listening Post, Writing Corner, and DEAR time. I found that Teachers A, B, J, and I followed this set-up most closely. As students finish a center, they gather the materials they will need for the next center and begin their work. The above-mentioned teachers required that their students complete the provided activities by the end of the week.

After observing in several classrooms, I noticed that the activities were very similar to those in the literature I reviewed. Ford and Opitz (2008) reported that the most popular centers they discovered in their research included a listening post, writing corner, word work, computer, reading corner, Math center, art projects, and buddy reading. As discussed in my data analysis, most of the teachers I interviewed made reference to using many of the above activities.
DEAR (Drop Everything And Read) was discussed in the literature review as being a time where students gather books at their reading level and spend the time quietly reading to themselves (Ford & Opitz, 2002). In my analysis I discovered that nearly 100% of teachers required their students to read either independently or with a partner for a portion of the time they spent away from the teacher. In a study conducted by Chua (2009), she concluded there was a significant effect on cultivating students’ habits and attitudes while reading books for leisure.

The Word Work/Word Study center that teacher participants explained to me seemed to be the center characterized by a wide range of activities. Routman (2000) explained that Word Study encompassed students using multiple resources such as dry erase boards, magnetic letters, chart paper, and Play-doh to conduct word sorts and word hunts, or brainstorm words that have similar spelling patterns. In my analysis, I noticed several teachers using a Word Study center for that very purpose; however, I did not notice one teacher in particular calling one of her centers Word Study although it did not include any of the above-mentioned characteristics. Instead, Teacher K’s Word Study center required students to read the book, *If You Lived In Colonial Times* and write down three details and the big idea. I would consider this center as more of a Read and Respond or Writing Center. As I observed the students in her class, I did not become aware of any students manipulating, sorting, or brainstorming words. This may mean that Teacher K might have accidentally labeled this center by the wrong name, she might not have the resources necessary to offer her students activities that provide manipulation of materials, or perhaps she is unaware of Routman’s (2000) suggested way of conducting a Word Study center.
Writer's Workshop was also referenced in the Literature Review. Ford and Opitz (2002) considered Writer's Workshop to be a powerful literacy activity that could take place as the teacher conducted Guided Reading lessons. Teachers G, J, and N all used Writer's Workshop as an activity that could be independently utilized by students. They explained in their interviews that students are either given the time to write whatever they wish or they are given a prompt. Teacher J explained that as her students finish a writing piece, they head to the computer to type the final product. In all three cases, the teachers reported that they try to check in on the students and conference with them at some point in the day to see how productive their independent Writer's Workshop was.

Concerning the listening center, most teachers who reported utilizing it explained their concern for how difficult it is trying to find resources and build up a supply of books on tape or CD for the classroom library. Also, I discovered in the interviews that several teachers expressed their desire for including a listening center in the future however, again, they did not know where to find resources and buying tape players or CD players can become a bit expensive. I found it interesting that Teacher E stated that she would like to try having her students record their reading onto tapes or CDs and then be able to listen to themselves as they follow along in the book. Skouge, Rao, and Boisvert (2007) previously suggested this as an option for the listening center; they explained that allowing students to record their reading and then listen to it could help promote expression, fluency, and excitement towards reading.

The Daily Five was referenced as the new and upcoming way for teachers to run their classrooms while Guided Reading instruction took place. Boushey and Moser (2006) developed five meaningful independent literacy activities for students including Read to Yourself, Read to Someone, Work on Writing, Listen to Reading, and
Spellin g/Word Work. Two teachers in my study adapted their centers from The Daily Five. Instead of The Daily Five, Teacher N chose to use three of the activities; her students choose between either Reading to Someone or Listening to Reading, they all were required to Read to Self, and lastly, they began the school year participating in Word Study activities, however Teacher N switched over to having her students Work on Writing instead. I like the idea that during the Daily Five (Daily Three in this case), the teacher brings the students back together in a whole group between rotations. The students participate in a quick 10-minute mini-lesson and then they move to their next activity. One benefit to running a classroom in this manner is that students are checked in on after the 20 minutes to prevent any off task behaviors. Conversely, Teacher O reported that she used to do The Daily Three but she stopped due to not liking it anymore. She explained in her interview that this method was too choppy because of the three mini-lessons between each activity time.

Lastly, Teacher G also reported doing The Daily Five activities. However, at no point in the survey or interview did she report pulling the students back together after each activity and completing whole-group lessons with them. Instead, she discussed that she primarily used the Daily Five activities, but sometimes would replace certain activities for a Computer or Math center.

There was an array of answers to the question concerning what teachers have their students do if they have questions about certain activities or centers. One third of the teachers reported using the saying, “Ask three before me.” Four more teachers explained that students have to go to the Team Captains to ask their questions. 100% of teachers reported that students are not allowed to come and interrupt during a Guided Reading lesson; however, numerous teachers described the many instances where
students still come to interrupt regardless. Reasons for interruptions include students
tattling, questions pertaining to an activity, or students asking permission to go
somewhere or use a resource in the classroom. The findings indicate that teachers do not
like to be interrupted while teaching a Guided Reading lesson. Interruptions disrupt the
flow of lessons causing the success rate in student learning to be slower. While teachers
try several methods to prevent students from interrupting Guided Reading lessons, I
believe there will always be students who continue to interrupt regardless. Classrooms
are filled with children of varying needs, strengths, abilities, and confidence levels. Based
on the data collected in this study, most teachers reported tattling and asking questions
as the main reasons for interruptions. I believe however, there is more to be uncovered.
The findings might also suggest that students interrupt their teachers based on a lack of
confidence, the need for immediate feedback of whether an activity was completed
correctly, for attention, and for reassurance. While some students seem to have questions
pertaining to an activity, from my own personal experience, I have noticed that students
who are very capable of completing their work independently without asking questions
typically approach the Guided Reading table to obtain instant reassurance that they have
completed the activity perfectly. I believe that if teachers reiterate what to do on
activities or at centers before they begin, and reassure students that their work will be
checked as soon as all Guided Reading lessons have been completed, student tensions
and anxieties may be alleviated. If teachers take note of the many reasons students seem
to interrupt and then find a way to minimize the problems, higher success rates may be
seen in those learning during a Guided Reading lesson.

I was quite astonished with the range of answers teachers provided dealing with
how often their centers or activities are replaced with new ones. Teachers' responses
ranged from every day to two weeks. Without explanation, one might become overwhelmed with both ends of the spectrum. For instance, it sounds like a great deal of work putting new centers out each and every day, however, in this study, the teachers who provided new centers every day used centers that did not require a lot of work or preparation. DEAR time, Computers, Writing, and Reading comprehension games all require very little to no amount of preparation. Teacher F reported that she changed her centers every day, however three of the four centers remained the same while she substituted one new center daily. Teacher C and K reported changing their centers once every two weeks. This may seem surprising to a teacher or come across as boring to students, however their students complete four open-ended centers one day, and then four completely different open-ended centers the next day. The students rotated between two center charts so ideally they are only visiting each center maybe two or three times a week, five times in all. The majority of teachers in this study reported changing their centers/activities once every week.

These findings suggest that teachers typically do not have the time or enjoy thinking about and creating activities or centers that the students will be completing independently. I believe overall that teachers would rather spend the majority of their time focusing on the numerous whole-group and small-group lessons that they teach their students each and every day. Guided Reading lessons are also extremely important and require planning and the gathering of resources. With teachers spending the majority of their time planning and preparing for these lessons, they have perhaps come to the conclusion that centers and activities need to beneficial to students, yet quick to plan and prepare. The evidence in this study also suggests that teachers do value what activities they provide their students, however they have either chosen to change one activity a
day, or all of the centers after one or two weeks. Planning centers weekly or bi-weekly allows teachers to spend a smaller portion of time preparing activities while the majority of their time can be put toward the implementation of new skills and concepts that are taught in day to day lessons.

As clearly stated several times throughout this study, I determined that the main reason teachers chose their activities/centers was due to the fact that their students would be provided the time to practice skills that have previously been taught. The majority of teachers developed their method of activities/centers as a way to reinforce skills, promote independence, and create a classroom community of hard workers. These findings suggest that teachers believe in the phrase, “Practice makes perfect.” The activities that teachers explained to me and the numerous activities I observed throughout this study showed the importance of providing students with activities that reiterate concepts, skills, and techniques introduced throughout the school year. To provide students with activities requiring them to complete tasks they have not yet learned seems arbitrary. As previously discussed, teachers want as few as possible interruptions during Guided Reading lessons; therefore providing them with activities they may become uneasy over or activities that set them up for failure would completely go against the idea of helping children learn to be successful and independent. Also, the time in a school day is limited and teachers are required to provide instruction in all subject areas. With the rapid movement from one lesson to another, teachers are restricted as to how much time they may spend on one concept before moving to another. Since this rapid movement must take place, especially due to students needing to be ready for State Exams, centers and independent activities are great opportunities for students to learn independence, collaborate with others to problem solve, and most
importantly practice the concepts and skills needed to succeed as proficient readers and writers.

Another reason why teachers explained they chose their method of running their classroom was from professional resources (books), colleagues, professional development, and workshops. Ideas have been passed from professional to professional and teachers have adopted newly learned ideas to fit their own classroom and teaching styles. Many teachers explained how they used to do centers a different way, but after several years of trial and error, they have become comfortable with the methods they currently follow. A few teachers reported that they were currently not happy with their method and they were hoping to change the learning centers before next year.

One reason that several teachers reported changing the way they run their classroom was due to the overabundant amounts of paperwork students were required to work on and complete. Not only was the paperwork overwhelming for the students and not a great deal of fun, but also the teachers expressed their concern about the amount of correcting they had to do daily. Teachers explained how their students were having difficulty completing all of the tasks and their work was not the best quality because they were rushing to try and keep up. After analyzing all of the data for this study, it became quite apparent to me that more and more teachers are trying to get away from the “paper aspect” of centers. More of a balance is maintained when teachers provide students with centers such as Computers, DEAR, Listening, and Art (which require little to no paperwork) and centers such as Word Study, Writing, Spelling, and Math (which typically require the use of paperwork). A few teachers in this study have found ways to cut back to almost no paperwork that has to be completed by students.

As discussed in the literature review, Boushey and Moser (2006) conducted a study and
noticed a progression from busywork and worksheets, to centers, to the Daily Five. Teachers seem to be putting more stress on reading and the manipulation of materials rather than fill in the blank or multiple choice questions provided in packets or worksheets.

While the amount of paperwork has become a concern for teachers, many other concerns surfaced throughout this study. Student accountability was one of the main concerns raised by teachers. Teachers explained how once they begin to meet with a small group of students, it becomes difficult to keep and eye on the rest of the class making sure they are working hard and accomplishing what they need to. Oftentimes students become chatty with their friends and before you know it, the classroom is buzzing with noise. Teacher H offered the suggestion of having more adults in the classroom, whether they are teaching assistants, Literacy Specialists, or parent volunteers. The problem with this suggestion is that oftentimes, teaching assistants and Literacy Specialists are only allotted certain times in each classroom. Parent volunteers might alleviate off task behaviors however teachers would need to be sure the volunteers are efficiently trained to foster better learning rather than hinder it.

The above findings indicate that teachers seem to be a bit more concerned about the amount of paperwork and student accountability instead of how interesting the activities are for the students. I, like many teachers, believe some paperwork is required in order to hold students accountable, however paperwork required at each center or activity can cause students to shut down and become disengaged with their work. A recording sheet of some kind attached to an engaging activity which requires students to manipulate materials or become a problem solver can both hold students accountable yet keep them interested and eager to learn. While no teacher explicitly stated that she sees
centers as a structure to keep students busy and working quietly, the findings suggest otherwise. Teachers have continually reiterated throughout this study the importance of keeping children away from the small-group Guided Reading lesson taking place with the teacher and only switching out centers every week or every other week to alleviate the stress of coming up with new activities or center ideas. Also, teachers explained the importance of keeping the independently working children in the room quiet as to not disrupt the Guided Reading lesson. In a way, this information implies that teachers do want their students to remain busy during this time period so more stress can be placed on each Guided Reading lesson being taught. Altogether, regardless if students are not completing their work or if it is not completed in the best quality, teachers seem most concerned about what their students are learning at the Guided Reading table that day.

One suggestion discussed in the literature review to keep children interested, engaged, and accountable for their work was to use centers that require students to perform or share what they have worked on. For example, Routman (2000) suggested that teachers use Reader's Theater as a center; students practice reading a script (which helps build fluency and expression) and then later perform the skit in front of the class. When engaging activities such as this one are used as a center, students work hard because they know of the performance aspect. In this study, no teachers reported using Reader's Theater or any other performance-based activity during independent working time. Perhaps activities such as this one would help hold students more accountable.

Ford and Opitz (2002) suggested using a built-in accountability system to be used with literacy centers where students rotate freely and complete the activities in an order of their choice. They explained how a center card could be used where each student is in charge of coloring in or marking off the activities completed during independent work.
time. Teachers A and B use this method as their students were expected to color in a picture that corresponded with a particular center. Each day, both teachers could glance at the check-off list and take note of which students had completed each center activity. Fountas and Pinnell (1996) also suggested having students complete activities using a free rotation. Allowing them to rotate at their own pace can alleviate the pressure of having to work at a rapid pace to complete an activity before being cued to move to the next one. Also, having students move to new centers on a timed rotation might teach them not to get too involved in the task at hand. This situation may cause students to put forth minimal effort and create instances where interruptions occur, accountability is low, and the practice of skills is nonexistent.

Going along with accountability, one question I asked teacher participants throughout the course of the interview was what their students do if a center or activity is not completed. The main response was that if a child had the opportunity to complete activities but didn’t, he or she would have to complete it later in the day or the following day. Several teachers explained that if students who receive extra reading help (for example push-in or pull-out literacy services during centers) do not finish all of the activities, it is okay due to it not being their fault for being away from the activity.

Other concerns raised by teachers in this study included the effort students put forth when completing the activities, the amount of time it takes to look over their finished products, whether activities were challenging or not challenging enough, and the tracking of how many and what books students read independently. I found it intriguing that Teachers A and F were very satisfied with how they have structured their classrooms. Teacher A likes the fact that her students have the freedom and choice to complete the centers in any desirable order. There is not an overabundant amount of
paperwork for students to complete in her centers and she tries to make everything as hands-on as possible. If students finish their centers early, they are rewarded with time to play fun, educational games on the computer. Not only are students held accountable to get their work done in order to have computer time, but they are also responsible for completing a check-off list explained above. When asked if there were any aspects she would change to her method of centers, she replied “Not at this time.” Teacher A seemed overall content with the work her students turn in and the productiveness occurring in her classroom.

Similarly, Teacher F stated that she was more satisfied this year than any years in the past and that she wouldn’t change anything about the centers she provides her students. She explained that she knows her students love the centers because when she calls them back to her Guided Reading table, they sound bummed about having to leave their centers. She added that her students seem accountable for their work; they play educational computer games, play comprehension board games with their team, read independently, and participate in activities such as Versa Tiles, Hot Dots, and SRA Kits (all which happen to be self-check activities). There is very little to no paper work and she said the trick to productivity is making the activities fun and engaging.

Contrary to Teachers A and F’s beliefs and feelings about center activities, Teacher E stated three times throughout her interview and again in her survey that she doesn’t believe centers are best for all students. She explained how she always has students who can’t seem to function independently and others who always goof around and never accomplish much of anything. Teacher E has a “grandma” helper in her classroom and she discussed how she has noticed the same students navigating to “grandma” during centers, constantly asking for help. Teacher E explained that she
doesn't believe she has put too difficult of tasks in her centers, nor are they too easy for students; she just believes it takes some students a longer amount of time to become self-sufficient and able to work independently. I believe her students are navigating to grandma because she appears to help from day to day and not turn students away. I would be curious to find out how much help or support she is offering the students or whether she merely aids them in reiterating the questions or explaining the directions. As I discussed earlier in this chapter, while some students have questions about the activities they complete, I believe others need reassurance, some lack confidence, some are perfectionists, and others need immediate feedback regarding the work they complete. Teacher E's explanations of what occurs in her classroom suggest that some of her students may navigate to grandma during centers due to any of the above listed reasons.

The literature review discussed two keys that motivate learning: the perception of the possibility of success and the perception that the outcome will be valued (Ford & Opitz, 2002). Also, Gambrell (1996) added that motivation and reading development are promoted when children are “supported by interactions with adults who have high expectations for their success” (p. 17). Perhaps if Teacher E and the grandma in her classroom continually reiterate their high expectations to the students and explain that they will find success if they try their best, fewer students may navigate to grandma for assistance and support. This, in turn, may help students learn to become more independent and put more trust in themselves.

Altogether, various beliefs, benefits, and concerns exist around the ways teachers choose to run their classrooms as Guided Reading Instruction occurs and the rest of the class works independently. Regardless of what centers or activities teachers provide their students a few things must remain constant: activities must be meaningful and allow for
the practice of previously learned skills, students must be held accountable for their work, and the classroom environment must be conducive to rich, literacy learning.

My initial objective for this study was to learn of numerous ideas and activities that promote effective literacy learning through motivation, goal setting, independence, choice, and accountability. After completing numerous interviews, observing in classrooms, and analyzing an abundant amount of data, I have drawn many conclusions and gathered ideas that would best promote literacy learning for students who work independently at centers. Before this study, centers encompassed a great deal of paperwork for my students. My initial objective was to always make my activities hands-on, fun, and engaging; however, every center seemed to require my students to hand in some form of paperwork in order to show they had completed the task (and this was what seemed important to me). Through this study, I have learned that students can be held accountable if they are provided the proper activities, and, accountability is not the only important aspect to be worried about—student interests and engagement are essential.

I decided to completely navigate away from my original method of running centers and requiring students to follow two different center boards every other day. After analyzing all the data presented in this study I quickly began to wonder if my students have been bored the previous two years completing centers in this manner. As I previously described, my students participated in open-ended activities that changed after two weeks lapsed and the activities were very repetitive in nature. My students continuously seemed disengaged and from day to day I would look over their work and question why the bare minimum was completed. Not one student seemed excited for centers to start every day (unless computer center was involved). Due to the previous
mentioned reasons, I decided to adopt the method Teacher F explained throughout the interview process and in her survey. I was able to observe in her classroom and see how students actually enjoyed working together and completing the tasks that were required of them. After collecting data and learning about Versa Tiles, I did a bit of research to learn more about the tiles and how to manipulate them in an educational way. Students are required to answer 12 questions and place the 12 corresponding tiles in the correct slots. The workbooks include activities geared toward initial and final consonants, blends, digraphs, rhymes, and reading comprehension. Whatever you teach that day in Reading/Language Arts, there are corresponding workbook pages that allow students to practice skills and concepts. Although the activity requires the use of a workbook page, there is no writing required. Students manipulate the tiles, put them all in the correct places, close the lid to the plastic case and then flip it over. Once the plastic case is upside down, the student opens the case from the bottom to see the pattern that emerges from the back of the tiles. If the pattern on the tiles matches the pattern shown at the bottom corner of the workbook page, students are notified their answers were correct. If the pattern however does not match, the student made mistakes along the way and must go back to try and fix it. I have since purchased this resource for my own students and have included it as a center choice. To hold students accountable for their work however, I have drawn the pattern on the back of the workbook page and I require students to color in the pattern the way it looks when the case is flipped open. If the colors correspond correctly, I then know he or she completed the activity successfully.

Along with providing my students a new Versa Tile activity each day, I keep two other centers constant. My students participate in DEAR and a prompted Writing center. The fourth center changes every day from activities such as Word Study,
Listening, Computer, Spelling, and Game center. Altogether, this study has greatly affected the center activities I provide for my students. Very little paperwork is required of them and most of my students seem excited about center time and engaged when I look around the classroom. While this method seems to work wonderfully in my classroom at the moment and my students provide me with positive feedback regarding what they are doing, I am still interested in the future to try to provide my students with centers where they can move freely about the room and complete tasks at their own pace.

Recommendations

From conducting this study, I believe I can now be an advocate for teachers who continue to struggle finding meaningful and engaging activities for their students to complete independently. I would first recommend that teachers take a look at their current method they have in place. Questioning oneself as to whether students seem engaged, activities allow for practice of previously learned skills, and that bulky paperwork is at a bare minimum can help determine a starting point for revamping a current system. I would suggest to any teacher or school to look in to teacher resources such as Versa Tiles or Hot Dots. These hands-on, manipulating activities allow students to see a finished product and take ownership of their work. What seemed to work for most teachers concerning student interruptions during Guided Reading instruction was the saying “Ask three before me.” If students are taught this saying early on in the school year and the teacher heavily reinforces it, students will quickly learn to ask any questions they have before centers begin or they will limit their questions to their friends or teammates around them. Most teachers explained that they had learned of various activities through professional development, workshops, colleagues, or educational
teacher resource books. I too, encourage teachers to continue to read about new approaches to center activities and attend professional development that will keep teaching methods up to date and beneficial to all students.

Continually throughout this study, several teachers seemed frustrated with the fact that there were not enough resources for a listening center. As previously suggested by Teacher E, I also recommend that students be able to record their own reading onto cassette tapes, CDs, or digital recorders to later be listened to by themselves or even other classmates. CDs and cassette tapes are not overwhelmingly expensive these days, so this way of conducting a listening center might be more cost effective than continually purchasing new books on tape or CD.

Lastly, I recommend that all teachers take into consideration their students’ opinions and thoughts about the centers or activities provided. If students do not find activities to be fun, engaging, or the activities are too challenging or too easy, students are not going to be productive and stay on-task. Gaining student insight can be a huge factor in creating meaningful activities that allow sufficient practice of skills.

**Future Research**

As I concluded this study, several questions arose that would be great starting points for further research pertaining to this topic. One question that arose during my study concerned student accountability and effort. While I mentioned several ways that teachers held their students accountable during independent work, it would be interesting to research if there are any other ways to hold students accountable while not having to be near them, checking in on their productivity. As far as the effort aspect, I believe it would be interesting to observe and study students more regularly as they
worked independently. This would allow for better data collection regarding how effective certain activities are in promoting engagement.

Future research on listening centers might be beneficial to teachers who lack sufficient resources. Allowing students to record their own reading and play it back as they follow along in the book might allow for a study that measures the growth of expression and fluency in children. Also, a future study on the reasoning behind student interruptions that occur during Guided Reading lessons would be intriguing. Taking note of the numerous reasons students seem to interrupt the teacher would be a fascinating start in determining how to alleviate the negative impact these distractions can have on a group of students engaged in the Guided Reading lesson. Finally, one activity’s effectiveness that I continually questioned during my study was Computer Center. Every teacher that reported using a Computer center explained that they provided educational websites. I believe it would be interesting to question teachers about what websites they believe are educational and which ones are not.


Dear colleague,

Please honestly answer the following questions to the best of your ability. These questions have been designed to help me in completing my thesis study on activities teachers choose for their students to complete during Guided Reading, and how they came to choose this practice. This survey should take you no more than fifteen to twenty minutes to complete. If you need more room to provide a thoughtful response, you may either write on the back of this paper or attach a separate sheet. When finished answering the questions, you may return it to my school mailbox or in person. Thank you in advance for your time and help!

Sincerely,
Natalie Humphrey

Please indicate the grade level you teach and how many years you have been teaching by circling one of the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade:</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
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<tr>
<td>Years Teaching:</td>
<td>0-5 yrs.</td>
<td>6-10 yrs.</td>
<td>11-15 yrs.</td>
<td>16-20 yrs.</td>
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<td>21-25 yrs.</td>
<td>26-30 yrs.</td>
<td>31-35 yrs.</td>
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1) What independent literacy activities do your students do while you meet with Guided Reading groups?
2) Why (what reasons) have you chosen the activities that your students are required to do at that time?

3) How effective do you feel the independent literacy activities are in supporting students' literacy learning?

4) What questions, concerns, or tensions (if any) do you have about the independent literacy activities your students practice?
Appendix B

Interview Questions:

1) How often do you meet with students for Guided Reading instruction?

2) Do your students participate in independent literacy activities while you meet with
students for Guided Reading?

3) What amount of time each day do students spend at these independent literacy
activities?

4) What do the students do who are not meeting with you? How do you run your
classroom during this time?

5) What do students do if they have questions or do not understand what they are
supposed to complete?

6) How did you decide on these activities for your students?

7) Do the activities every change? How often?

8) What are the benefits of the activities you have chosen for your students?

9) What are (if any) your concerns about the independent literacy activities you have
chosen?

10) How satisfied are you with what occurs during these activities? Explain.

11) Are there any aspects to your method that you are not happy with or you wish you
could change? If yes, please explain.

12) Have you ever considered trying something else? If so, what?

13) Have you considered what your students think of the activities?
Appendix C

Observational Notes
Date: __________
Grade Level: ______

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<tr>
<th>Observations</th>
<th>Interpretations</th>
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