

# SECTION 1

## Designing a Literate Environment

*The classroom environment you create has a profound effect on the social, emotional, physical and intellectual development of the children you teach. To gain a positive attitude towards school and learning, children must have visual stimulation, organisation, space and a feeling of warmth and security.*

—Mindy Pollishuke

**T**he learner-centred classroom is alive with activity. In it, students' learning capacity is nurtured and developed as they safely risk exploring and discovering. Teachers and students in the learner-centred classroom are co-learners, immersed in the explorations of language and literature.

Visiting a learner-centred classroom may be daunting at first. Imagine a place where everyone is busily pursuing different activities – some in pairs, some individually, some in small groups. This scene may initially appear chaotic, but everyone in this learner-centred classroom is engaged in authentic tasks, purposefully pursuing ideas, information and learning goals. Some students may be involved in listening activities, perhaps at listening stations with tape recorders or CDs; some students may be at the “publishing centre” developing their written work using computers; some may be working with the teacher, one on one or in a small group; some may be developing a project, possibly a play or a poster; and some students may be working individually, reading, writing or reflecting. The theme of the students' work is usually seen in their artwork, classroom displays and writing, which surrounds the classroom.

The most important part of creating a literate environment is establishing a well-organised, stimulating, comfortable and inviting classroom. A classroom library is the focal point of this print-rich environment. Most of the print in the classroom should be at the children's eye level. Specific teaching areas, preferably on a rug where all can gather, should be well defined and apparent for both small and large groups. The environment is designed to allow children to move about freely, indicating their internalisation of routines and expectations.

# Buddy Studies

## Learning in Pairs

### BACKGROUND

During their formative years, children develop speech patterns and usage conventions based on exposure to the language around them. Language and language use are determined by social situations. Language development involves collaboration in the negotiation of meaning. By participating in conversation, children further develop their understanding of language. Children use the linguistic resources available to them to make meaning of their experiences and build the semantic and syntactic forms through which that meaning is expressed. Reading, writing and sharing with others become tools for making discoveries about the world.

Children require partners to become proficient at listening and speaking. Establishing a learning environment where children consider each other as resources and recognise that we are smarter together than anyone is alone encourages the social information processing necessary for language learning.

Harvey and Goudvis (2007) suggest that the number one thing that enhances comprehension is to talk about what one is learning. Simple, interactive configurations can be structured to provide opportunities for students to share and discuss information without major changes in instructional methods. These opportunities provide welcome breaks in the routine. They also allow students to construct personal meaning from new concepts. By structuring opportunities for students to turn and talk, teachers enhance information processing and conceptual understanding. Partnered interactions balance participation and reduce the potential for the most vocal students to dominate the learning environment.

The National Reading Panel (2000) points out that cooperative or collaborative learning has been used effectively to teach comprehension strategies in content-area subjects. As students work as partners, applying strategies to understand content-area text materials, they support each other's learning.

## 45 Word Splash

The National Reading Panel Report (2000) confirmed that teaching specific words before reading helps both vocabulary learning and reading comprehension. *Word splash* is a powerful prereading strategy that exercises prediction-making skills, provides a contextual definition for vocabulary students encounter in reading, and increases students' motivation to read.

Word splash is adapted from a strategy called *key word*, originally developed by reading researcher Dorsey Hammond of Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan.

A word splash is a collection of key terms or concepts selected from a reading selection, chapter in a textbook, or audiovisual materials students are about to read, see or hear. The selected terms are written at odd angles splashed on a chart or overhead transparency. Another option is to give groups or individuals copies of the splash on which to record their statements. Working in pairs or small groups, students generate complete statements – not just words or phrases – that predict how the words might be used or what the selection might be about. Roles can be assigned to students, for example, recorder, reader, checker.

Once the ideas are generated, students are given the reading selection or other information. They read it together and pause at appropriate spots to check their predictions against the text presented. Students should modify their statements as needed and place a question mark next to any unclear statements.

### MATERIALS YOU WILL NEED

- Overhead projector or easel with blank paper
- Texts
- Photocopies of word splash sheets
- Writing materials

## 46 Say Something

Fluent readers integrate semantic, syntactic and experiential knowledge in order to predict, confirm, and interpret text. Students need to feel comfortable reading unfamiliar words and integrating the complex ideas and information they are reading. Harste, Short and Burke (1988) originated this interactive strategy for developing students' confidence and ability to focus on meaning rather than on print when reading. This strategy helps students develop a relationship between what they are reading and what they already know.

Students work as partners, each with a copy of a reading selection. Before reading, students decide how they will read (silently or orally, in unison or alternately) and how far they will read before stopping to react. Students then read, stopping at the predetermined point – a paragraph, a page or a chapter – to *say something*. The *something* can be a question they might have, a reaction, a description, information from either their own experiences or other sources that is confirming or contradictory. You may want to assign specific reactions or provide pairs with a list of possible *somethings*.

After each pair of students has completed reading and discussing the selection, they share insights and interpretations with other pairs or individually write a journal entry.

### MATERIALS YOU WILL NEED

- A reading selection for each student
- Journals
- Writing materials

# Building a Community of Learners

*Creating a community of learners is the foundation of effective teaching. You may be passionate about the subject you teach, plan relevant and interesting activities, and deliver fascinating information – but none of this matters if students are afraid to speak up in class, feel that they can't contribute, and don't get the support and encouragement they need to learn.*

—National Science Foundation

## BACKGROUND

Years ago, when I was nursing my daughter, I had a great deal of time to catch up on reading I had never got to. I reread classics and relished contemporary novels, reading new works of familiar authors and discovering new authors who would become lifelong favourites. One of these, John Irving, had just written *The World According to Garp*. After reading it, I recommended it to a good friend with whom I discussed the unfolding story as she progressed through it. I was up with the baby at 2.00 one morning when I heard the phone ring. It was my friend, who felt compelled to call and share her shock over a particular – and emotionally moving – passage. Only love of baby and literature could keep me up at that hour! —L. L.

If students are to become lifelong lovers of literature, they need to have an opportunity to discuss what they are reading; to argue, recommend, commiserate and identify with the characters and their exploits. Students must read a variety of genres and have time to choose their own reading materials. They must also have time to actually read the materials and give and receive feedback on them.

Sharing experiences about reading is vital in developing an appreciation for literature. For young children, literacy development depends on the literacy experiences available to them at home. When schools cultivate partnerships with parents and reach out to the community as a resource, everyone benefits.

Calkins (2001) reminds us that reading is a social activity. The books that matter in our lives are the ones we have discussed with someone else. If we pause and think about the book we are currently reading, we can often find a social connection: either the book was recommended to us by someone we respect, we can't wait to talk with someone about our views on the book, or we have already had such conversations. Students, too, benefit from opportunities to talk with others about what they are reading. These conversations exercise listening and speaking, enrich clarity of thinking, enhance understanding of the text, and build appreciation for multiple perspectives. They also provide motivation to read some more.

## 66 Anecdotal Records

Anecdotal records are brief notes that record observations of actual verbal and nonverbal behaviours. They are descriptive in nature, capturing events with enough detail so the teacher makes evaluations and judgments at a later point. Teachers vary considerably in record content, but most learn to note behaviours that indicate literacy growth (e.g. holding a book right-side-up for the first time, using one's finger as a pointer when reading, using temporary spelling instead of asking the teacher). Useful anecdotal records always involve at least two critical elements: the date and a descriptive comment specific to what the child is doing. Analysed over time, anecdotal records help the teacher see patterns of growth and development, and allow insight into the child's interests, strengths and weaknesses.

To take anecdotal records, you must manage the classroom in such a way that students are self-directed and operate without direct instruction or supervision during part of the day. For instance, set up a writers' or readers' workshop or allow students to cycle through various learning stations. This allows you to closely observe a few students a day. Instead of trying to watch everyone doing everything, identify four or five focus students. Notice the behaviours and attitudes of these particular students throughout the day. By day's end, you will have rich notes about these few students rather than sparse notes about many. In one week, you should be able to obtain valuable information about each member of your class. When combined with professional teacher judgment, anecdotal records are a valid source of assessment.

### MATERIALS YOU WILL NEED

- Record-keeping sheets for each student

## 67 A Nifty Notebook

There are many ways to manage anecdotal records, but organisation is key to the success of this assessment approach. Although individual records do reveal something about the child on a given day, the real power of anecdotal records comes in analysing the child over a longer period. A collection of six weeks' worth of records offers important information regarding a student's literacy development and indicates what the student needs to move to the next level. Many teachers periodically move notes from an observation notebook into a set of file folders for yearlong storage.

To organise your notes, keep a three-ring notebook with a divider for each student. File the dividers in alphabetical order by the students' last names. Carry this binder with you during conferences. When you meet with a child, turn to his or her section of your notebook and record your information on the pages there. You may wish to write on blank notebook paper or design a page with space designated for comments about reading, writing, attitudes and other skills and behaviours. Share your observations – both current and past – with the student from time to time, as well as with his or her parents at conferences. Keep your binder very flexible so you can always add more pages as you fill up space or receive new students in your class. If the book becomes too cumbersome, remove some pages and store them in file folders.

### MATERIALS YOU WILL NEED

- Three-ring notebook with dividers for each student
- Predesigned record-keeping sheets