What Are the Rest of the Students Doing? Literacy Work Stations in Two First-Grade Classrooms

Jo Worthy, Beth Maloch, Becky Pursley, Holly Hungerford-Kresser, Angela Hampton, Michelle Jordan, and Peggy Semingson

It’s 9:00 a.m. and the first graders in Pamela’s classroom are settling into their seats having just enjoyed a read-aloud on the carpet. Pamela quickly reminds students of their literacy work stations for the day as she pulls her first guided reading group to the kidney-shaped table in the corner of the room. With a silent tapping of her finger on the desk in front of them, the students all begin their re-reading of the text from the day before.

Charlie and Shana sit down at the writing table where they write about the science experiment they did in class the day before. Robert and Marta sit on the floor next to the file cabinet rearranging letters again and again, making new words and writing them carefully into their word study notebooks. Chelsea and Tamaya choose books from their book boxes to read independently. Not including the small group meeting with Pamela, there are no less than eight different work stations going on at once with two students at each station.

In the reading group, Pamela’s eyes quickly scan the room while she maintains her hand on the word a student is trying to sound out. She notices a flurry of movement in the corner of the room. Dillon and Keith have drifted over to the computer station from the word work station. After she finishes listening to one of the students in the group, Pamela redirects the students from the computers back to their own stations. Meanwhile in the reading group, the students have reached the end of their “easy” books and are awaiting instructions. As Pamela moves into her third group, she notices Sam, Will, and Luanne playing around at the word study station, and a look of frustration flashes across her face. Every day it’s the same students.

This vignette, drawn from our study of two first-grade teachers and likely familiar to many early-grade teachers, highlights the complexity of literacy centers or work stations. In it, one can see the promise and the challenge of this way of engaging students in activity while teachers work with small groups of students.

Since the early 1900s, teachers have used reading groups to provide instruction to students with varying levels of reading achievement. When teachers are working with small groups, however, the rest of the class must have something to do. Until recently, that something was usually “seatwork”—consisting mostly of worksheets—designed to keep students quiet and occupied as much as to provide practice with reading skills. Although teachers might assume independent time is productive when students are quiet and seem to be “on task,” appearances can be deceiving: observable behaviors, and even completed work, do not help teachers assess strategy use or thinking processes. Indeed, research on seatwork conducted in the 1980s found that it was a mostly unproductive time (i.e., “busywork”), especially for students identified as lower achievers (Anderson, Brubaker, Alleman-Brooks, & Duffy, 1985; Gambrell, Wilson, & Gantt, 1981). For example, Anderson et al. (1985) studied high-achieving and low-achieving (the authors’ terms) readers’ attention to and performance on seatwork in six first-grade classrooms, finding that the lack of teacher support during
seatwork activities affected students differently. The high achievers were most likely to be attentive and successful in completing work and were better able to independently solve difficulties. Lower-achieving readers, on the other hand, frequently found directions confusing and were often unable to work through such challenges. Instead of persevering to understand the work, they focused mainly on finishing. This was true even though students were doing work that corresponded to their reading level in the basal reader.

Seatwork is largely a thing of the past, at least in research on reading instruction. More recently, as an alternative to seatwork, many modern-day classrooms now pair small-group instruction with literacy centers or stations, with the goal of making time away from the teacher more engaging and purposeful for students (Berne & Degener, 2012; Diller, 2003; Guastello & Lenz, 2005; Maurer, 2010). A national survey of more than 1500 primary (K–2) teachers (Ford & Opitz, 2008) showed just how prevalent centers are. More than 70 percent of the teachers surveyed responded that students worked in centers while the teacher worked with guided reading groups. Thus, in the majority of classrooms represented in the study, students spent significantly more time working in centers or doing other independent activities than they did working with the teacher. Despite their pervasiveness, however, the use of centers has been virtually unexamined in literacy research. Ford and Opitz argue that such a widespread practice deserves scrutiny, and we agree.

Several books and articles offer descriptions of center activities and suggestions for how to set up

---

FOR INQUISITIVE MINDS

Resources for Reading Instruction

We provide here a selected list of resources focused on providing purposeful, engaging reading instruction. We stress that it is important for educators to critically evaluate recommended practices, both for their general instructional value and for how they meet the particular needs of teachers’ own local contexts and constraints.


Although Fountas and Pinnell (1996) stress that students should read from a variety of text types and genres, many teachers rely heavily or exclusively on “leveled” texts. In *Beyond Leveled Books*, Szmusiak, Sibberson, and Koch assert that using only leveled texts limits students’ learning and engagement, as well as their ability to direct their own learning. The authors stress the importance of supporting students in making their own book choices, so that what they read is interesting and informative, as well as appropriate in difficulty level. They provide a wealth of text lists, ranging from series books to information books and magazines to electronic texts. They also provide mini-lessons, strategies for assessment and small-group work, and articles by well-known literacy experts (e.g., Kathy Collins, Mary Lee Hahn).


Gay Ivey and Peter Johnston take us into the classrooms of four middle school English teachers whose primary goal was to help all their students become engaged readers. The teachers allowed their eighth-grade students to choose from among a wide range of personally meaningful books and gave them time during each class session to read and discuss their reading with their peers. This independent reading time was part of a more comprehensive literacy instruction model that included read-alouds and discussion, as well as time devoted to student writing. The result was academically, socially, and emotionally healthier students (including better test scores).


---

*Language Arts*, Volume 92 Number 3, January 2015
and manage them (Berne & Degener, 2012; Diller, 2003; Ford & Opitz, 2002; Guastello & Lenz, 2005; Maurer, 2010). Common suggestions call for activities that are engaging and interesting, challenging but not frustrating. It is also frequently suggested that teachers model and demonstrate the activities for students. These suggestions make intuitive and theoretical sense based on learning theory and research, and they address some of the problematic issues found in research on seatwork. However, even though literacy centers are as common in today’s classrooms as dit-tos and workbooks were in classrooms of the past, our comprehensive review of literature yielded only two recent articles addressing their effectiveness, and neither appear in mainstream literacy journals.

The two articles we did find focus specifically on “Literacy Work Stations” (Diller, 2003), the model used in the district in our study. Kracl (2012) examined four teachers’ perceptions about their implementation of literacy work stations after they participated in professional development focused on Diller’s model. Stout (2009) studied her own implementation of literacy work stations, which she used in place of scripted instruction in her Reading First classroom. Teachers in both studies believed that, in contrast to seatwork and scripted instruction, implementing work stations led to improvement in their instruction and fewer interruptions and distractions while they worked with small groups. They identified aspects of Diller’s model that contributed to the improvement they observed; these included mini-lessons, clearly defined expectations, and choice in activities.

The teachers and researchers in both studies also identified challenges resulting from misinterpreted
directions, students who did not work well together, activities that were too challenging or not challenging enough, and interruptions in flow as a result of students being pulled out for special instruction. Although Stout (2009) reported overall improvement in her students’ reading achievement, she also noted that students with the “lowest reading scores” (p. 4) were less engaged with the activities and were often off-task. To address these challenges, teachers in Kracl’s study suggested that they would benefit from continued professional development and support from paraprofessionals in implementing work stations. Stout emphasized the importance of close supervision of students’ work, a wide range of activities to accommodate choice and varying skill levels, and continuous reflection and refinement of centers.

In this article, we present an examination of literacy centers (more specifically, “literacy work stations” [Diller, 2003]) in two first-grade classrooms after the teachers participated in professional development focused on guided reading and work stations. Our goal was to closely examine the use of literacy centers over the course of a school year. We wondered if centers were living up to their promise of improved student productivity and engagement. Through classroom observations, video of reading instruction, and teacher and student interviews over the course of a school year, we examined how literacy work stations functioned in two different classrooms. The data for this study were collected during the 2006–2007 school year, and thus some classroom materials are now outdated (e.g., books on tape and overhead projectors). However, because of the continued prevalence of centers and work stations and the limited research on their effectiveness, the findings are still relevant to today’s classrooms.

It is important to note that we struggled with how to talk about students’ proficiency and achievement in reading. The language and labels used to describe students with challenges in reading, including “struggling” and “low,” are especially problematic because, we think, they imply a fixed “problem” or deficit within the child. In reviewing the literature, we used the language of the author(s). In the rest of this article, we opted instead to describe how students are positioned (e.g., “students in the lowest reading group” rather than “lower-achieving students”).

### Setting the Stage

This research arose from an earlier study of the grouping practices in these two first-grade classrooms within a district that had recently revised their language arts curriculum with the goal of making literacy instruction more consistent and more aligned with what they considered best practices in literacy. Starting four years before our study, teachers in the district participated in a three-part, multi-year intensive professional development initiative as part of the district’s effort to assist teachers in learning and implementing the district’s literacy instruction model (Maloch et al., 2013). The district provided the kinds of components and procedures considered important by researchers and educators in the area of professional development (Desimone, 2009; Morrow & Casey, 2004; Walpole & McKenna, 2013), including several initial sessions, monthly workshops featuring active-learning components, a summer institute, and campus-level coaching. A considerable portion of the professional development was devoted to guided reading and literacy centers, which were based on Diller’s model of “literacy work stations” (Diller, 2003). In addition to reading her book, *Literacy Work Stations*, many teachers (including the teachers in our study) attended a workshop offered by Diller.

In her book, Diller describes an academically focused, integrated approach to learning centers, based on the guided release of responsibility model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). Teachers first introduce a reading or writing strategy with modeling, followed by guided practice, and then gradually turn responsibility over to students for independent practice. In work stations, students engage in a variety of literacy-related activities (e.g., reading with a partner, listening to books on tape, working on the computer, reading with a partner) with the purpose of expanding and exploring literacy and developing independence. Following the guided reading time, the teacher is encouraged to regroup the students for reflection on their work station time.
With the help of the district’s literacy coordinator, we selected two teachers—Pamela and Ellen (pseudonyms)—in two different schools to represent a range of student diversity and teacher experience. In order to select our focal teachers, we asked the principals of the two schools to recommend teachers who they felt implemented engaging and effective literacy instruction. Their recommendations were based on their own observations, students’ progress/achievement, and the teachers’ reputations among parents and colleagues as “good teachers.”

Of these teachers, we asked for volunteers and eventually selected Pamela and Ellen based on our desire to have teachers with a range of experience. Although we do not have information regarding the other teachers at these two schools, our understanding of the district-level and school-level focus on guided reading and work stations suggests to us that Pamela’s and Ellen’s classroom practices (with regard to language arts) were at least somewhat in line with their colleagues. And, in the principals’ views, Pamela and Ellen were two of the most effective teachers of literacy in their schools.

Pamela taught at Canyon Elementary (school names are pseudonyms), a large, recently built campus serving an upper middle class area of the district. She had five years of experience teaching first grade, all at Canyon. There were 22 students in Pamela’s class. Ellen, a K–2 teacher for 27 years, taught at Rockland Elementary, a small, older building close to the older part of the small city in the center of the school district. Rockland served a more mixed community, with some students living in public housing projects, some in middle class neighborhoods, and some in wealthy areas. There were 22 students in Ellen’s classroom.

**Gathering Data**

Data for the entire study included classroom observations, video of guided reading lessons, and teacher interviews. In the Fall observations (12 in Pamela’s class; 13 in Ellen’s), we focused on teacher–student interactions in reading groups and during work stations. Our preliminary analysis of these data indicated interesting patterns of work and engagement within the work stations that we wanted to examine more systematically (e.g., particular groups of students who appeared to be off-task, teacher attention to students in work stations, etc.). As a result, we decided to focus more intensively on work stations during Spring data collection. Thus, for the Spring observations (6 in Pamela’s; 5 in Ellen’s), we left the video camera focused on the reading group table while observing and taking detailed field notes of students in literacy work stations.

Each teacher was interviewed formally twice, focusing on instruction, materials, activities, grouping, and student achievement and progress. During our observational visits, we also talked informally with the teacher and students. Detailed notes from these conversations were recorded in our field notes.

Although we analyzed data continuously during data collection, writing analytical memos and sharing ideas during research meetings, analysis was more focused and intensive after data collection ended. During Phase One of data analysis, all researchers independently read and open-coded transcripts and field notes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995; Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). From interviews and field notes, we separated all instances in the data related to literacy stations for further analysis. This analysis resulted in an early and strong theme related to the challenges that emerged with work stations, primarily related to students’ engagement and productivity during their work station time.
by the teachers. We used cross-case analysis (Merriam, 2002) to identify similarities and differences across cases. Finally, we constructed narratives describing the use of work stations in each classroom, addressing each of the themes above.

**Two Teachers’ Approaches to Work Stations**

Both Pamela and Ellen organized their reading instruction within 90-minute to 2-hour literacy blocks. For approximately 60 minutes of the literacy block, teachers met with homogeneous guided reading groups, while the rest of their students engaged in independent activities, such as literacy work stations. Both teachers referred to their professional development on Debbie Diller’s (2003) approach to stations. In Pamela’s interview, for example, she explained that literacy stations differed from “centers” in that stations involve more academic work and accountability. Ellen made a similar distinction in her explanation, “Centers are when the kids are finished up and they may or may not go there. Stations are things that they have to do.”

Although Pamela and Ellen attended similar professional development workshops and had read similar material, Pamela and Ellen carried out work stations in different ways in their classrooms. We showcase their enactments of work stations in the two cases below, including details about how they structured work stations and how these work stations functioned in their classrooms. As will be presented, while Pamela and Ellen enacted work stations in different ways, they encountered similar sorts of problems in terms of students’ productivity and engagement.

**Work Stations in Pamela’s classroom**

According to Pamela, her stations had evolved over the years in response to her growing knowledge and experience in the classroom, her work with other teachers, and the professional development she received through the district, including

---

**NOW ACT!**

**Pushing Back against District Policies**

Becky Pursley, the teacher featured in the literacy workshop video described in “Inquisitive Minds” and a coauthor of this article, is one of a handful of teachers in our neighboring school district who has chosen to break with district policies and teach reading workshop instead of the required guided reading and literacy centers model. To do this, Becky had to prove to her principal that her students were making progress by pointing to the consistently positive test results she has attained with literacy workshop in her teaching of first, second, and fifth grades across both high-needs and high-achieving schools. Becky says she chose the workshop approach because she valued student choice, extended work time, a focus on purposeful reading and writing, and an environment in which all students feel respected and do the same kinds of work, regardless of their skill level.

**Combining Individual and Small-Group Instruction to Meet All Students’ Needs**

Becky’s first mini-lessons are a mix of reading strategies (e.g., book selection, decoding, comprehension, and responding) and behavior expectations. She explains:

> We create a chart detailing specifically what reading workshop looks like and sounds like: readers quietly talking about books, reading together or alone, and making choices of texts during the workshop. This document is reviewed daily at the beginning of our workshop to set the tone and again at the end to see how we met those guidelines and to set goals for our next one. This gives students the tools to maintain their reading for up to 40 minutes.

For most of the workshop, Becky confers with and assesses students while they are reading individually or in self-selected pairs. At times, Becky gathers a group of students who need to work on a particular skill, such as fluency.
the workshop given by Diller. Pamela’s stations included many of the stations recommended in Diller’s book, but she also ventured into other content areas in her stations. Her eleven stations included the following: alphabet work, reading big books, handwriting work, science concepts, spelling and math content using an overhead projector, painting, computer (usually typing a story or using the program “Kid Pix”), math (usually addition or subtraction flash cards), poetry, library center (reading), and listening to books on tape. Pamela told us that she was careful to coordinate station work with class work so that one was reinforcing the other, and she provided differentiated options at each station.

Pamela required students to visit each station every week. Each student had station folders in which they kept “agendas” (or checklists) and collections of products from the stations (field notes, September 15, 2006). In addition, each Monday, Pamela assigned literacy-related “contracts” that included activities like writing in response to the read-aloud book, more alphabet work, and additional poetry work. Students were required to have their contracts completed by Friday, and Pamela checked their work. If they completed work to her satisfaction, they participated in “Fun Friday” play centers. If not, they had to complete their work during the play centers.

Similar to her reading groups and other literacy activities we observed in her classroom, controlled scheduling and business-like efficiency marked Pamela’s implementation of literacy stations. For example, our field notes from the Fall semester included the following note:

Pamela is business-like, efficient, and “no-nonsense,” keeps it moving, but she addresses the children as “sweetheart” and other such terms. This seems important that she does this to maintain rapport even though it’s pretty fast-paced. (Field notes, November 2, 2006)

Although Pamela’s work stations, like the rest of her classroom, were well organized and managed, her control could extend only so far during...
work station time, since she was busy with reading groups. Pamela was aware of issues in her work stations. As she pointed out in an interview, because students were expected to work without teacher direction, she had encountered challenges with the need to monitor students as they worked at the stations: “Because a lot of the questions will come to you, and . . . you can’t do that, you’re in a group right then, and trying to solve little problems that you’re seeing going on around the room.”

Pamela reported to us that she made concerted efforts over the years to make stations run more smoothly. She began each school year having students practice going to centers before she started reading groups so she could establish the routine, monitor students’ work, and answer questions. Consistent with Diller’s (2003) suggestion, only two students were allowed to be in a station at one time. She designated a student as the class helper so that others would go to him or her for help with logistics (e.g., rewinding audiotapes) and not have to interrupt Pamela’s work with reading groups. She met with the whole class for 5 to 10 minutes on Mondays to explain new stations and answer questions about contract work and stations. She also held a debriefing time at the end of stations every day to help students reflect on what they learned, how they monitored their own behavior, and how they helped others during station time.

What follows is an excerpt from a debriefing held after a day in which there were more interruptions than usual. Pamela asked students, “When should you interrupt me during guided reading time?” Students responded with humorous hyperbole:

“Don’t interrupt me otherwise,” Pamela affirmed with a grin, and she added reminders that there should only be two people in a station, and that students should not waste time during station time. (Field notes, November 1, 2006)

During the debriefing time, students also recommended ideas for new stations, which Pamela implemented if appropriate. A change she noted making to stations from previous years was to give students a choice of stations, rather than to assign them. When a student was ready to move to a different station, he or she would go to a chart where the station names were displayed and move her or his photo to a free slot (i.e., one in which only one person was working).

It would be hard to imagine a more thoughtful, conscientious teacher than Pamela, or one who more carefully attended to details in her attempt to make work stations effective. Nevertheless, in our classroom visits, we observed that the challenges Pamela pointed out in her interview, along with some others, were evident from the first visit in September to the last visit in May. During every 60-minute observation, there were between four and eight interruptions to the reading groups from students in stations. Often students interrupted groups to ask Pamela questions or stood next to her waiting to ask a question, and she vacillated between waving the student away, answering the question, or stopping her group instruction to remind students how stations worked. If necessary, she redirected students who were playing, misbehaving, or not doing their work in stations.

Some stations seemed to invite play and the breaking of station rules. For example, there were comments in every set of field notes about students playing with the overhead projector and more than the allowable two students gathering and talking around the computer. At other stations, including the classroom library and the big book station, students appeared more productively engaged; that is, they were completing the work according to the station directions. Generally, students’ attention and productivity in stations were inconsistent. What follows are remarks by different observers from field notes and reflective notes that explore the on-again/
off-again nature of students’ productiveness during stations:

The “on-taskness” of students at stations seems to fluctuate. Mostly they are on task, but there usually are several students wandering or staring around. . .” (September 15, 2006).

About half of the class is off-task, e.g., socializing, shouting someone’s name across the room, walking around. Five students at computer (September 15, 2006).

The volume is up in the room, but students seem to be staying on-task (October 19, 2006).

We found that students who were placed in the lower reading groups were more consistently unproductive during this time. Field notes and video revealed that Keith, Sam, and Will, all in the group being instructed at the lowest guided reading level, were by far most often noted by observers and reprimanded by the teacher for being off-task and/or misbehaving. There were, respectively, 13, 12, and 14 references to Keith’s, Sam’s, and Will’s inattentive behavior across the corpus of field notes; the next highest were Luanne (6) and Jared (4), with all other students named two or fewer times.

In sum, despite Pamela’s efforts at structuring work station time effectively and providing meaningful tasks for her students, she still struggled with keeping students engaged and productive during work station time. Similar issues were apparent in Ellen’s version of work stations.

**Work Stations in Ellen’s Classroom**

Like Pamela, Ellen’s work stations occurred during a language arts block in the morning as she worked with reading groups. In content, Ellen’s work stations shared some commonalities with Pamela’s, but there were also some differences. Both teachers had a listening station with taped books and both used some worksheet activities at stations. While Pamela had easier options for students placed in lower reading groups, Ellen did not. Ellen’s stations also included more activities that would be associated with traditional centers, such as jigsaw puzzles.

Ellen’s talk about stations and the other aspects of her literacy program gave us the impression that she did not highly value stations as tools for students’ learning. When asked specifically how stations contributed to reading achievement, Ellen spoke in general terms, “Because they’re supposed to be reading. And it’s making the connections. They do some reading, they do writing, they might be talking.” Asked about the advantages of stations, she said, “To put it bluntly, it keeps the rest of the kids occupied while I’m working with reading groups. Because they have to be doing something.”

Ellen’s procedures varied from Pamela’s in some important ways. First, students were grouped by reading levels in their stations and were not allowed to move freely from station to station. Instead, when Ellen changed reading groups, she announced it was time for students to go to their next assigned station. As in Pamela’s classroom, there was work that had to be done, followed by station choices. After finishing required work, Ellen said students could make choices from other stations, then “go to their desks and color or something.” It was common for students who were finished with their work and stations to say, as George did during one observation, “I’ve finished everything. I don’t know what else to do” (Field notes, March 27, 2007).

Also, Ellen did not spend the same kind of time explaining or modeling the work stations. Observers consistently noted that explanations of stations were very brief, which likely contributed to confusion on the part of students. Observers also noted student confusion about directions, students finishing early and not knowing what to do next, and numerous interruptions of reading groups. When students did not understand directions, they either stopped working and started playing, interrupted Ellen to ask for help, or continued doing the work even though they did not understand.

Although Ellen told them many times not to interrupt her during reading group, there were frequent interruptions, as many as 10 during one reading group (Field notes, November 15, 2006) from students who wanted to show her work, ask
questions about a station, or tell her they were finished. Ellen also frequently interrupted her reading groups to solve disputes at the stations, check student work, and reprimand students who were being too loud or not working. The challenges of stations had not escaped Ellen, who echoed the findings of Anderson et al. (1985) about student confusion during seatwork: “When kids don’t understand the activity, then there’s a lot of interruption in the reading group. Or if they go ahead and try it on their own, they’re lost and they’re doing the wrong thing.”

Ellen also addressed a problem we saw frequently in both classes—that students argued often during station time. She attributed this to students being in stations with their reading groups: “Also, because they’re with the same people that they do reading with . . . there is a lot of squabbling.” However, except for “maybe one or two individuals

---

**INTO THE CLASSROOM WITH READWRIETHINK**

**Literacy Centers**

ReadWriteThink.org has resources for teachers who want to implement literacy centers in their classrooms:

This first lesson gives teachers resources and guidance to create literacy centers in their own classrooms. The lesson begins by describing the crucial teacher preparation steps for establishing four different centers: reading, listening, computer, and poetry. Implementation ideas, including suggestions for organizing and managing both centers and students, are included. Over a four-day period, the lesson introduces students to each Literacy Center, providing the foundation for adaptable yearlong literacy learning.

http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/literacy-centers-getting-started-1144.html

Want to create centers around a specific book title? This lesson helps students become proficient in completing activities about the stories they read. Students begin with a shared reading of the selected text. Then, in subsequent lessons, students are introduced to each type of learning center in which they are asked to read, listen, and write about the text, create lists of words that contain the same beginning sound as a word from the story, and assemble sentence strips about the story. Each learning center is modeled in a large-group setting, and students are given the opportunity to role-play or engage in guided practice before being expected to work independently.


Looking for other independent literacy activities? Invite students to work as a class to sort books, first according to their covers and then according to their topics. They explore whether books could be included in multiple categories and whether some groups could be broken down further. Next, students work with a partner to sort 12 books. They orally explain their sorting criteria and then record in writing what categories they used and why. Students may also compare and contrast two books using an online Venn diagram.


Here are a variety of activities related to note writing that can be incorporated into the classroom throughout the year to promote authentic writing among students. Model note writing in context by taking advantage of opportunities that come up in the classroom, both to read actual notes and to think aloud while writing them. Read books featuring notes, discuss why the notes were written, and copy the notes for classroom display. Enlist families in the fun by asking students to collect notes from home to share with the class. Create a classroom message board and add good news to it throughout the day. Have students sort the notes you have gathered based on audience, purpose, and format. Write notes to your students and encourage them to write notes, too. Finally, explain to students when you take notes for assessment purposes, and share those notes with students during conferences.

[moving] from one group to another,” the reading groups—and thus, the station groups—remained the same throughout the year, and so did the problems. In April, the interruptions were even more frequent than in October; according to observer notes, there was “lots of confusion about what students are supposed to be doing.”

As mentioned earlier, students worked in literacy stations with their homogeneous reading groups, leading to a number of challenges, especially for those students being instructed at the lowest guided reading levels. For example, although students in all groups had behavioral issues during this time, students in the highest level reading groups completed their work in stations and elsewhere with time to spare; they were rarely reprimanded by Ellen, however, because they found quiet ways to stay under her radar. In contrast, as we saw in Pamela’s room, students in the lowest leveled reading groups, along with one student with special needs, were observed far more often than students in the other groups to engage in unproductive behavior. In both classrooms, students were more easily able to “hide” their unproductiveness in literacy work stations that did not require completion of a product.

Despite these issues, there were few changes to reading groups or station groups throughout the year. Thus, as found in earlier studies of seatwork (Anderson et al., 1985; Gambrell et al., 1981), the more challenged readers in both classes had a full year of station time (30 to 60 minutes per day) in which their work was often unproductive and, at times, counterproductive.

Together, these two cases point out the complexities inherent in implementing literacy work stations and the dimensions along which literacy work stations might vary across classrooms. For example, Pamela spent more time working to explain and model each of the stations and included regular debriefing sessions with the students. Similarly, Pamela worked to establish a routine and orderly structure for the work station time, while also providing choice in terms of which stations students would move to and with whom they would work. Ellen, on the other hand, engaged in minimal explanation, relying on students to make sense of the stations as they moved about the room. Ellen’s students visited stations in their homogeneous (assigned) reading groups in the order prescribed by Ellen.

In our view, Pamela’s structure and approach more closely reflected Diller’s original intentions for work stations, while Ellen’s approach was more “hybridized” (Kersten & Pardo, 2007), in that she held on to many of her own ideas while incorporating some of what she took from the district’s professional development. However, despite these variances across classrooms, both teachers encountered issues, particularly in the area of student engagement and productivity.

Reconsidering Work Stations

In our examination of literacy work stations in these two first-grade classrooms, we observed practices that aligned with Diller’s (2003) suggestions for effective management of work stations, including students interacting together around text, students engaging with self-selected reading, and whole-class debriefings focused on teaching students to self-monitor their work and behavior. The work stations also provided time for teachers to focus on providing instruction to small groups.

However, in our observations, we also found barriers to student learning similar to those found in earlier studies of seatwork and centers—student inattention, off-task behaviors, and confusion about expectations—especially among students placed in the lower-level reading groups (Anderson et al., 1985; Gambrell et al., 1981; Kracl, 2012; Stout, 2009). We also observed additional challenges, including students arguing, frequently interrupting teacher-led reading groups, and evading work.

The behavior we observed during centers was not so surprising in Ellen’s classroom, in which most of the changes from seatwork to stations were cosmetic and did not closely follow Diller’s (2003) recommendations (e.g., many of her “literacy work stations” consisted of worksheets). Pamela’s stations were more closely aligned with Diller’s suggestions (2003); however, despite her impressive attempts to mediate some of the previously identified problems with seatwork by making
her activities more purposeful and meaningful, we observed that the work station time in Pamela’s classroom was also often unproductive. Although we cannot generalize the findings from this study to other classrooms, our results raise questions about the value of a practice in which primary-age students spend at least 40 to 60 minutes per day working without teacher support. The additional finding that the more challenged readers were less productive during stations adds a measure of urgency to the questions raised by our findings. These students need to make accelerated progress just to keep from falling further behind.

In addition to work stations, the teachers in this study used another common practice—“guided reading” groups, which were formed based on assessments of students’ reading at the beginning of the year. Although Fountas and Pinnell (1996) clearly advocate for flexible reading groups that change frequently based on continuous assessment, the guided reading groups in Pamela’s and Ellen’s classrooms stayed virtually unchanged throughout the year (Maloch et al., 2013). The same was true for most of the teachers surveyed by Ford and Opitz (2008).

Although instructing students in groups can be productive, especially if the groups are flexible and dynamic (for example, interest-based groups), guided reading is not limited to the context of teacher-directed small groups; it simply refers to how teachers support students as they read and understand text, and it can be accomplished in a variety of formats (Harris & Hodges, 1995; Hoffman & McCarthey, 2000). Some possibilities include reading workshop and book clubs or literature circles. (See the sidebars on pages 174–175, 178–179 for suggestions.) Various approaches can be refined and combined when structuring the reading block, as appropriate for the context.

We understand that while some teachers prefer to use centers or work stations, others must use them because of district or school mandates. In the case of mandated works stations, there are options to help make this time more effective and instructive. In many classrooms we have observed, as well as in the two classrooms in this study, work stations seem to function much as seatwork did in the past—as a way to keep students occupied while the teacher is doing the “real” work of reading instruction (working with reading groups). Our reading of Diller’s (2003) book suggests that keeping students busy is not what she had in mind for literacy work stations. Instead, she asserts that work stations are themselves an important vehicle for instruction, and that teachers should “walk around the classroom and jot down notes about individual children’s literacy behavior” (p. 128) to monitor and assess understanding and productivity, as well as to reflect on and refine instruction and activities (Stout, 2009).

We think the implication here is that the teacher should be directly involved in supporting students’ work in stations rather than focusing entirely on reading groups. Interestingly, Anderson et al. (1985) reached a similar conclusion about seatwork, asserting that “monitoring student understanding requires a teacher’s focused attention and proximity” (p. 136), something that is not possible when the teacher is engaged in instructing small groups.

Although we think independent work is most effective when teachers are directly supporting students, we know there are times when the teacher will be occupied, such as when working with a small group, and students will be working independently. In these cases, we recommend considering alternatives or refinements to the arrangement we observed in Pamela’s and Ellen’s classrooms to make students’ time away from the teacher more effective.

Some of the major challenges we and other authors identified with literacy work stations centered on misinterpreted directions, work that was too challenging or not challenging enough, student disengagement, and limited productivity (Kracl, 2012; Stout, 2009). To help mitigate these issues, we recommend that work station activities be more closely connected to the reading students are doing with the teacher in groups. For example, rather than guided reading being an isolated literacy event, students can work alone, in pairs, or in groups to prepare or reflect on a guided reading text. Students can also read and respond to texts through reader-response journals and double-entry journals (described in Yopp & Yopp, 2013). Activities like
these extend students’ knowledge, understanding, and focus on reading connected text, but require little ongoing instruction once they have been modeled and practiced. Providing students with choices of relevant, interesting, and appropriately challenging texts can address engagement issues.

Work station activities can also be made more engaging through the integration of technology. In the years since we conducted our study, new technologies have become more common in schools, and they have the potential to enhance literacy instruction. For example, Northrup and Killeen (2013) provide suggestions and an instructional framework for using technology, such as iPads, in literacy instruction. Other options might include students using social networking tools for reading and writing, such as Edmodo (https://www.edmodo.com/) or Kidblog (http://kidblog.org/home/). Of course, teachers are limited to the tools available to them, and it is important to use technology judiciously and to provide students with direct teaching, modeling, guided practice, and close supervision, just as with any independent learning activity.

If the goal of literacy instruction is to provide purposeful, meaningful experiences that support academic achievement for all students, the central question is how to accomplish this goal. Our intention in this article is not to discredit practices such as literacy work stations or grouping students for guided reading, but to encourage educators to critically examine their purposes for all instructional practices, to use them flexibly and in ways that are appropriate for their particular contexts and students, to continuously evaluate their effectiveness for all students, and to keep the focus on what research tells us is most effective for literacy engagement and achievement—purposeful reading and writing (Fisher & Frey, 2007; Guthrie, Wigfield, & You, 2012; Kuhn et al., 2006; Samden, 2014).

References


Jo Worthy is a professor at the University of Texas, Austin, and can be reached at worthy@mail.utexas.edu. Beth Maloch is a professor at the University of Texas, Austin, and can be reached at bmaloch@austin.utexas.edu. Becky Pursley is a second-grade teacher at Barton Hills Elementary School in Austin and can be reached at bpursley@austin.rr.com. Holly Hungerford-Kresser is an associate professor at The University of Texas, Arlington, and can be reached at hhkresser@uta.edu. Angela Hampton is an assistant professor at Ball State University and can be reached at ahampton@bsu.edu. Michelle Jordan is an assistant professor at Arizona State University and can be reached at michelle.e.jordan@asu.edu. Peggy Semingson is an associate professor at The University of Texas, Arlington, and can be reached at peggys@exchange.uta.edu.