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Making Seatwork Work

Patricia M. Cunningham

Seatwork is an activity which has very few supporters but which is a part of every school day in almost every elementary classroom. In elementary classrooms, most of the seatwork is done during the reading/language time and often occupies two-thirds of the allocated time (Allington and McGill-Franzen, 1989; Rosenshine, 1979). Seatwork serves an important management function in that it allows teachers to focus their attention on groups or individual children with varying needs and abilities. Seatwork is also supposed to provide children with some of the practice needed to become better readers and writers.

In order for seatwork activities to provide this needed practice, three criteria must be met. First, the activity must engage the child in doing something which is closely related to what you do when you read or write. Second, the activity must be something the child needs to practice. Finally, the activity must be something the child can complete successfully. Rosenshine and Stevens (1984) conclude that higher success rates are correlated with higher achievement and that a success rate of at least 80% seems necessary for optimal growth in reading. Younger and less able children need even higher success rates.

Activities which meet all three of these criteria are hard to come by. Connecting some dots and coloring a picture is

an activity most children can successfully complete but it is not related to the ability to read and write. Reading a short selection and composing a main idea is more closely related to reading and writing. For those children who can successfully do it, this seatwork activity might help them become better readers — unless they are already so proficient at doing it that they have nothing left to learn. Children who were not highly proficient at composing main ideas would probably be helped by this activity — but only if they could complete it with enough success.

Generally, seatwork activities which are assigned to individual children or groups of children with similar needs have the best chance of meeting the relatedness, need and success criteria. Activities assigned to an entire class are least apt to meet the criteria. Given the range of abilities of most classes of children, any one seatwork assignment is apt to be a waste of time for the most advanced children who already know how to do it very proficiently and also for the least advanced children who need to do it but often cannot complete it with at least an 80 percent success rate.

Elementary teachers face a difficult dilemma in providing some relatively quiet activities for the children they are not working with while they work with small groups or individuals. Though some seatwork assignments can be tailored to the individual and group needs of children, it is not reasonable (nor an optimum use of teacher time) for teachers to individualize all seatwork assignments. In *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, Anderson, Hiebert, Scott and Wilkinson (1985) include as three of their recommendations that: 1) children should spend less time completing workbooks and skills sheets, 2) children should spend more time in independent reading, and 3) children should spend more time writing.

These recommendations are noncontroversial and make sense to almost everyone. What is not clear is how to get these recommendations implemented. Over the past several years, I have worked with elementary teachers to try to find ways to implement these recommendations. In the remainder of the article, I will share with you the most practical and successful solutions I have found.

Voluntary reading as seatwork

This solution is the most obvious one and one of the least utilized. Reading is an activity which is very highly correlated with reading and writing ability. Every child, no matter how advanced, can profit and learn from doing some additional reading. If a range of books is provided and children are allowed to choose what they read, every child can succeed. Reading is also a quiet activity and reading materials are readily available in most classrooms and libraries. Since reading is so obviously the seatwork activity of choice, why is it so seldom used? Ask almost any teacher why reading is not the most commonly assigned seatwork activity and the teacher will tell you, "They won't just sit there and read!" Here is the way one fourth-grade teacher explained it to me.

I know reading is important and I know they need to do more of it but they just won't! Oh, some of them would, of course, and they'd love it but a lot of them wouldn't take it seriously. They'd read a page or two, then they'd get fidgety and start talking or cleaning out their desks. When a few started this, the others would stop reading too. They have to have something to complete and turn in and know that they are accountable for it or they just won't do it!

This explanation was typical of what teachers told me when I asked them why they didn't let the two problems of

“Not enough time to read” and “What to give them for seatwork today?” solve each other. Basically, teachers said “They won’t.” But we have since discovered, “They will.” We have found that elementary children of all ages and ability levels will “just sit and read” if the alternative is a worksheet.

To begin, we use an analogy to explain to the children that there are many ways to become better readers. We compare learning to read with learning to play the piano or tennis or baseball. We explain that to become good at anything, you need three things: 1) instruction, 2) practice on the skills, and 3) practice doing the whole thing. To become a good tennis player, you 1) have tennis lessons, 2) practice the skills (backhand, serve, etc.), and 3) play tennis. To become a good reader you also need instruction, practice on important skills and you need to read.

We then explain to children how the teacher provides instruction, how some of the seatwork activities provide practice on important skills and we point out that we must take time each day just to read. We also point out that sometimes we get so busy, we forget to take that important time each day just to read and so we must schedule it just as we do anything else. Next, we hold up some worksheet activity (preferably one given to the whole class which has the least chance of meeting the three criteria of relatedness, need and success) and explain to the children that we will replace one worksheet activity each day with ten minutes of time just to read. We help children find books and suggest that each child choose two books since there will be no going to get or return books during the ten minutes set aside for just reading. (This rule is necessitated by the tendency we observed of poor readers to spend the entire ten minutes “looking for a book.”)

When all children have their selected books, the teacher explains that the children can spend the first ten minutes of their seatwork time just reading. They will have no work to do, no questions or reports. The only requirement is that they read. The teacher then reminds the children that instruction, worksheets and reading are three ways that children become better readers and tells them that if they are not reading, they will be given the worksheet to complete. (Our experience is that without this emphasis, many children will not read. Even children who do not like to read will sit and read for ten minutes when the alternative is another worksheet.)

The teacher then calls a group of children to work with and sets a timer for ten minutes. When the timer rings, the teacher looks at the class and says something such as,

If you are ready to stop reading, you may. If you are at a great place in your book, you can continue for a minute or two but then you must stop reading and get started on your work. You can read some more when your work is finished.

The message conveyed to the children by words such as these is that "Reading is not work." When the group meeting with the teacher return to their seats, the timer is set again and they get their ten minutes "just to read" before beginning their work.

Children who read like to talk about what they read. In fact, Manning and Manning (1984) found that providing time for children to interact with one another about what they were reading enhanced the effects of sustained silent reading on both reading achievement and attitudes. Finding time for children to interact, however, is not an easy problem in today's crowded curriculum. There is, however,

a part of each day which is not well used in most elementary classrooms — the last fifteen minutes of the day. Many teachers have found that they can successfully schedule weekly reading sharing time if they use the last fifteen minutes. Here is how this sharing time works in a typical fourth-grade classroom.

Every Thursday afternoon, the teacher gets the children completely ready to be dismissed fifteen minutes before the final bell. Notes to go home are distributed. Book bags are packed. Chairs are placed on top of desks. The teacher then uses index cards on which are written each child's name to form groups of five children. The index cards are shuffled and the first five names are called. These children go to a corner of the room which is always the meeting place for the first group. The next five names which come out form the second group and go to whatever place is designated for the second group. The process continues until all five or six groups are formed and the children are in their places. Now, each child has two minutes to read, tell, show, act out or otherwise share something from what they have been reading this week. The children share in the order in which their names were called and the first person called for each group is the leader. Each person has exactly two minutes which is timed by a timer. When the timer sounds, the next person gets two minutes. If a few minutes remain after all children have had the allotted two minutes, the leader in each group selects something from that group to share with the whole class.

Teachers who have used a procedure such as this to insure that children have a chance to talk with others about what they read on a regular basis find that the children are more enthusiastic about reading. Comments such as "I'm going to stump them with these riddles when I get my two

minutes,” and “Wait till I read everyone the scary part and then leave them hanging,” are proof that sharing helps motivate the reading. The popularity of the books shared with the other children is further proof. Sharing on a specified afternoon each week puts it on the schedule and ensures that it will get done. Using the cards to form the groups is quick and easy and helps ensure that the children will interact with many different children across the year.

The procedure just described, however, worries some teachers (and me too) because it sounds regimented. What if children don't want to share on Thursday? What if what you want to share takes ten minutes rather than two minutes? What if you don't want to share with the people who end up in your group? These and other questions are valid concerns and must be considered — but we must also consider the alternative. In the best of all possible worlds, reading and sharing would take place daily in a less formal, regimented way. In the real world of many classrooms, however, reading and sharing get pushed aside for the more formal, scheduled activities. It should be the goal of every elementary teacher to be able to say at the end of each week, “All my children took time to read just for the pleasure of it this week and they all had a chance to talk with others about what they were reading and hear what their classmates were reading.” This goal can be achieved in informal, less structured ways and it can be achieved with a structure such as that described here. What matters is that reading and talking about what you read play a larger role in all children's reading experience.

Daily writing as seatwork

Elementary children are writing much more today than they were a decade ago and it is clear that writing helps children become both better writers and better readers.

Writing, like reading, tennis and piano, can be improved by instruction, by practicing specific writing strategies and by just writing. It is the "just writing" practice that we have found can become a part of the seatwork time. In classrooms where the ten minutes of just reading is established, teachers find it easy to help the children understand the parallels between how reading helps you become a better reader and how just writing helps you become both a better writer and a better reader. In classrooms which do not do the daily ten minutes of voluntary reading, you would want to use a piano, tennis or another "real-world" analogy to help children understand the role of instruction, specific practice and just doing it in becoming proficient and fluent at anything.

There are many similarities and some differences between how we structure the classroom for the daily writing and the daily reading. For both, we help the children to understand that just doing it is what counts. We don't grade what they write but we do check to see that something is written. (In some classrooms, teachers give students a point each day for writing. These points are then added as bonus points to the final language grade. This should only be used if the teacher believes "they won't do it if it doesn't count for the grade.") Children like to share what they have written so we set aside the last fifteen minutes of a designated afternoon and use the index cards to put them in groups and let them each share something they have written each week.

The daily writing is done in a spiral-bound notebook which is used exclusively for this purpose. Many teachers find that this notebook, if kept in the children's desks, is a too convenient source of paper. A sixty-sheet notebook which should last half the year is quickly used up if paper is torn out and used for other purposes. So teachers often store

the notebooks on a shelf and children pick theirs up each morning and replace them when finished. Instead of designating a time limit of ten minutes, we specify an amount. Most teachers tell the children to write "about a page." (This is not as much as it sounds because we have the children write on every other line so that if they choose to revise some of these first drafts, there is space to write in additional information or make corrections.) This "about a page" limit should not be too strictly enforced. Children should understand that they might write a little less today and a little more tomorrow but that across the week, they should average about a page each day.

The biggest problem we have encountered with the daily writing is the "what to write about" problem. Just as we let them read about whatever they choose, we want them to write about whatever they choose to write. In some classrooms, however, many children were out of things to write about after the first month of school. Some teachers found that it helped to offer a possible topic for children who "couldn't think of anything." Soon these teachers discovered that they were out of topics. To ensure variety in writing topics, we came up with a different writing stimulus for each day. This is the scheme used by one fifth-grade teacher:

Monday: newspaper day. This teacher always brought in his Sunday paper and read something that he knew would be of interest to the students each Monday morning. After some discussion, the class had two minutes to brainstorm a list of words related to the newspaper article which were written on a sheet of chart paper. Students were told that they shouldn't worry about spelling when they wrote but that this was their chance to get the teacher to spell any word they could think of that they might want to

use in their writing. Using the newspaper as a springboard to writing each Monday morning had the added benefit of bringing real world reading materials into the classroom and giving the class a weekly reminder that their teacher read.

Tuesday: literature connection. This teacher always had a book that he was reading to the class — after lunch each day and to fill little snatches of time throughout the day. On Tuesday, he would use the book currently being read as a springboard to writing. Again, students had two minutes to brainstorm any words they might need.

Wednesday: science/social studies connection. “What are we learning about and what could we write about that?” was the question this teacher asked himself while driving to school on Wednesday mornings. Students described and defended which kind of storm they thought would be the most devastating while studying weather, recorded their thoughts and feelings as a pioneer child crossing the Colorado mountains and tried their hands at verses for a “space ballad.”

Thursday: the real thing. Writing is usually much more vivid when there are real objects available to see, hear, touch, smell or even taste available to the writer. On Thursday, this teacher stimulated the writing with real objects. The objects were sometimes common (a tennis racket, a bar of soap, a guitar, a rabbit, three dozen doughnuts) and sometimes exotic (a boomerang, a 1940's radio, an odd-shaped implement the purpose of which is unknown to the students). Children in this class couldn't wait to get to school on Thursday to see “what he brought today.” (The object was always hidden under a blanket on the front table and unveiled with flourish and fanfare.)

Friday: surprise me day. On Friday, this teacher never gave the students a topic. But all during the week, when students shared news with him or when particular events happened, he would say, "that would make a great Friday topic!" As the year went on, students were often overheard to say, "I've got a great Friday topic!"

As with the reading, there are elements of structure here which are worrisome. There are some days when children are just not in the mood to write. Should they have to write even when they don't want to? Should everyone write about a page each day? Once a week for fifteen minutes is not really enough sharing time. Moreover, real writers find their own topics and children should find their own topics. Giving students varied springboards to writing and recording a two-minute brainstormed list of words, however, has definitely stimulated children to write who would not write otherwise. The best compromise we have come up with is only to suggest topics if many children run out of topics, to allow students to write about their own topics if they have them and to have at least one "Surprise Me" day each week.

Worksheet partners

There are some worksheet activities which do help children become better readers. The best candidates for good worksheet activities are those that meet the three criteria suggested at the beginning of the article. The strategies or skills practiced are clearly related to reading; the children need practice on those strategies or skills; the children can complete the activities with success. While no one worksheet activity will be appropriate for all children in a class, worksheets can be assigned to small groups based on their needs and abilities.

Cooperative learning research (Johnson and Johnson, 1985) suggests that children will learn more from these activities if they work cooperatively with someone else. Worksheet partners is a cooperative learning structure in which two students of similar ability are assigned to work together. One partner is assigned to be "the thinker," and the other partner is "the writer." The thinker reads each question aloud and gives an answer. The writer writes the answer if he or she agrees. If the writer disagrees, both partners must work together to agree on an answer. If they cannot reach agreement, they write down both answers with their initials next to each.

At a designated time, all students who have completed this worksheet meet with the teacher. Together, they go over the assignment and reach consensus on the best answers. Students who have incorrect answers do not mark anything or assign grades. Rather, upon returning to their seats, they fix any incorrect answers and turn the seatwork back in. The next time partners do a seatwork activity, they switch the writing and thinking roles.

Children like working together. (Usually, they would rather be the thinker than the writer because they think that the writer is doing all the work. We don't tell them that the thinking is the real work.) We make working with your partner a privilege and withdraw that privilege if they don't follow our three rules: 1) use whisper voices, 2) complete work with a good effort which shows that "two heads are better than one," and 3) treat others as you want to be treated. Children who lose their partner privilege do all worksheet pages alone for the rest of the week. On Monday, however, we begin a new week with a clean slate and everyone has a chance to prove that they can work with a partner.

Relatedness, need and success

Voluntary reading, daily writing and seatwork partners are ways of organizing which help meet the three criteria for useful seatwork. Voluntary reading and daily writing clearly meet the relatedness and need criteria. For voluntary reading, the success criterion is accomplished by allowing children to select what they read from a wide variety of materials. For daily writing, the success criterion is met when teachers are accepting of whatever writing the child is able to produce. Having the children complete worksheets with a partner does nothing to solve the relatedness and need criteria. Teachers must determine which worksheet activities meet these criteria for which children. The worksheet partner cooperative learning structure does, however, help children achieve success. Changing the classroom seatwork routine to include one or more of these activities results in seatwork working better for children and teachers.

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