

## **Preliminary Learning Stations And Readiness Activities**

### **What the Child Needs to Know at the Beginning**

The first thing the child needs to know, or at least should be in the process of learning, before beginning the Reading Program, is how to act appropriately in this particular learning environment. In this learning situation, appropriate student behavior is given first priority, while academic learning comes second. As the routine of the learning stations is being established, the initial learning focuses on ensuring that everyone knows what is expected of him or of her: how to clean up, how to rotate between work stations, how to ask for help, how to help, how to work with and alongside one's neighbors, and so on. Only when these procedures are learned does the focus shift to making sure that each person learns how to read.

Specific, clear instructions need to be provided for each student for each new activity. The teacher models the desired behavior, then has students role-play the appropriate behaviors themselves, and then the behavior itself needs to be reinforced and encouraged by the teacher. This modeling, role-playing, and reinforcing continue until the desired behavior becomes the natural way each child responds to learning situations in the classroom.

When children are learning to cross the street, they initially need an adult to teach them to look both ways. However, we do not expect or want children to always need the company of an adult when crossing the street. The goal is to make looking both ways a natural behavior, even when the child is by himself or herself. Classroom behavior should be taught with the same do it on your own goal in mind.

As the teacher presents each preliminary work station in its turn, no new station is introduced until the behavior at the previous station has been modeled, role-played, and reinforced. It is not fair to either the teacher or the students to expect students to operate independently when they have not been taught exactly what this independence is to mean. The materials developed for this program were designed to allow students to work with only a minimum of supervision from their teacher. For the program to provide the independence and freedom of choice that the teacher needs, the children must be taught how to give their teacher this freedom.

There are two skills each child needs before beginning the work station activities directly associated with learning to read. First, each child should be able to work in close proximity to and in cooperation with other children. Second, each child should be able to work a task through to completion.

The benefits of this Reading Program are greatly enhanced by the ability of the teacher using it to produce students who can work together in cooperation. The method for achieving this is an appropriate balance between the use of the points system of classroom management and individual student counseling. Students who are not yet ready to learn should not be allowed to begin work at the work stations until they are ready. Control comes first, learning comes next.

Students, particularly kindergarten students, can come to school with no past experience in working even the shortest task through to completion. These children and others whose backgrounds have also left them unprepared for the academic life they will face at school cannot begin serious work on learning to read until they have first begun serious work on learning to learn.

The purpose of the preliminary learning stations is to allow the children in class to learn both how to work effectively together and how to work a task through to completion. While all of the preliminary activities at the five stations involve the children in some form of work, the station assigned to the Workjobs activities is the one most specifically directed toward helping children who have not come to school with the appropriate work ethic to make up for this deficiency in their background. Workjobs will be discussed in conjunction with the other preliminary learning stations later on in this chapter.

Techniques for establishing a classroom environment that encourages learning to take place differ from teacher to teacher. The specific suggestions that follow are meant to serve only as a guideline. The suggestions may be used or not as your own situation dictates. Before the suggestions are made, however, I would like to relate to you a personal experience I had in the introduction of materials to my students, and the lesson I learned as a result.

After I had taught in a regular classroom for a few years, I opted to become a special education teacher. My first day as a teacher of the educationally handicapped (E.H.) was nearly a complete disaster. My new students were all seasoned veterans in their special classroom environment. They had all been in the same room the year before. None of them wanted to be there, then or now. They were what I would call "out of control". They threw around and at each other nearly everything I gave them to use: books, papers, pencils, dittos, crayons, and on and on.

I said the first day was nearly a complete disaster, and my students threw nearly everything, because at least one lesson had gone well that day. I had introduced my students to the use of Unifix Cubes as a part of their math lesson. Unifix Cubes are colored pieces of plastic used to represent a variety of mathematical concepts.

Although the cubes are an excellent teaching tool, they are also an excellent throwing tool. While they aren't quite as much fun to throw as a pencil or a sheet of paper made into a plane, they are much easier to throw than a book. Still, my students did not throw a single cube. Instead, they worked dutifully with the cubes in the lesson that accompanied their use.

I was too upset with how my first day was going to pay any attention at the time to the fact that my students were managing to do at least one lesson right. That night, however, as I made my battle plans for the next day's encounter, I gave some serious thought to why the cubes had been used so well. When I thought about it, I knew at once what the reason was. If my reason were correct, then it would be easy to eliminate the throwing problems with everything else the next day, as well.

What I had remembered was that in the first year I had used the cubes, they had been a failure. Shirley, who was a student in my fifth-grade class,

was having an absolutely terrible time in math. I had not, at that point in my teaching career, acquired any of the techniques I was later to learn that would have made Shirley's academic life proceed more smoothly. When I saw a demonstration of the cubes, I knew I must get some for Shirley.

When I gave the cubes to Shirley, she simply pushed them aside, saying, "That's baby stuff. I won't do it." Nothing I could do would induce Shirley to use the cubes, no matter how much I thought their use might help her. Shirley was too wrapped up in trying to avoid appearing dumb to her classmates. Her classmates didn't need little cubes to play with, so she would not use them either.

The following year, I introduced the cubes again. This time, however, since I was a whole year older and at least a half year wiser, I presented the cubes in a different manner. To begin with, the cubes were to be a whole-class activity. Everyone would learn to use them. Some students would end up working on basic concepts, while others might advance as high as long division, but all would be using the cubes.

In advance of issuing the cubes, I explained to my whole class that I was going to give them a material that would be particularly good for their learning. With this special material they would be able to learn about things that fifth-grade students didn't usually get to learn about in their math textbooks. Algebra, for example, and arithmetic in different bases. The things they were supposed to learn about as fifth-graders, like multiplication of fractions, would be even easier to understand with this material. Anybody who was really ready to learn and who wanted to learn better and faster than they could if we only used the math textbook would be allowed to use the special cubes. If someone wasn't ready to learn, that was okay. The people who weren't yet ready could still use the textbook for their learning. However, they wouldn't be allowed to hold back the people who were ready to learn better and faster.

After a discussion about being ready to learn, I defined for my class what being ready meant. To be ready meant using the materials responsibly (translated: no throwing); allowing one's neighbors to learn as well (translated: no teasing or fighting); and taking responsibility for the people around you (translated: helping other people to learn). I then told my class that before each student was given his or her set of cubes, he or she would have to tell me personally that he or she was, in fact, ready to learn. As I handed a set of cubes to each child, I asked that child, "Are you ready to learn?" When the child said "yes", the materials were issued.

Once, in a later year, a child said "No", just to get a laugh from his classmates. I did not respond verbally. No materials were issued to that child. I simply walked on to the next child and repeated the question. When all the children in class but one had been issued their materials, we began the lesson. The child who had said "No" was taken at his word. Since he was not yet ready to learn, he was given nothing to do. About five minutes into the lesson I asked him, "Are you ready to learn now?" His answer was, "Yes."

In my E.H. class, I had automatically presented the Unifix Cubes in the same manner as I had presented them in every other year past the first year

with Shirley. My E.H. students had not thrown the cubes.

The next day, I was careful to make sure that my E.H. students knew the importance to their learning of each of the materials with which they were provided. No child was given a material until he or she publicly and individually announced that he or she was ready to learn.

Not every child is ready to learn on each and every day. Children who misuse a material on any given day have shown that they are not ready to learn with that material. When a misuse occurs, the material is simply taken away from that child, and the child is told, "You are not yet ready to learn with this material. After you have decided you are ready to learn, you may come and tell me." The child is then withdrawn from the learning environment and allowed to sit quietly in some isolated part of the room.

When the child feels he or she is ready to learn again, that child may come to the teacher and ask permission to rejoin the group. If the child misuses the material again, the material is taken away again, and the child is told, "You are not yet ready to learn. Since you told me you were ready to come back to the group, and you weren't really ready, you will have to wait until I decide you are ready to learn again." This time, the child is removed from the group, and he or she no longer has the option of deciding when it is time to rejoin the learning process. Now, the teacher must make that decision, and it will not be made hastily.

It can be seen from the above discussion of being ready to learn that children who are not behaving appropriately are not told they are bad. Everything is phrased in terms of being ready or not being ready to learn. Telling children they have been bad teaches them something we don't want them to learn. It teaches them they are bad, and as bad children, they learn to do what bad children do.

### **The Five Preliminary Learning Stations**

Almost all of the activities that comprise the Reading Program are meant to be utilized by students working at five learning stations. As the children in class are in the process of learning the sounds, they also begin to learn how to work at a station. The purpose of the preliminary stations is to teach the procedures for working at the regular stations.

The preliminary learning stations have as an additional purpose allowing the teacher to become comfortable with the various logistical arrangements necessary to run the stations smoothly. These arrangements include such things as: assigning children to appropriate working groups, teaching students how to know which group is theirs, where their group is supposed to be and when, practicing how the groups are to be rotated, helping children learn to work with each other and turn to each other for assistance, and handling discipline problems that might arise within and between the groups.

The five preliminary learning stations might be:

- 1) Library books
- 2) Puzzles
- 3) Legos/Tinker Toys

- 4) Coloring with crayons
- 5) Workjobs (or Clay/Play Dough if Workjobs are not needed)

The activities selected for use at the preliminary stations should be chosen because they are readily available, they require a minimum of instruction and supervision in use, and they are easily cleaned up and made ready for use by the next group. Any activities available in class that meet these prerequisites are perfectly acceptable for inclusion as a preliminary learning station activity.

In advance of introducing the first station, the teacher needs to have already determined which students are to be assigned to each of the five learning groups. The teacher will, of course, be arranging and rearranging these groupings as he or she has an opportunity to judge how well the members of the groups actually work together. Who goes in which group is very important. Some students need a buffer. Some students are a buffer. Some groups may need to be a bit smaller to minimize contact. The only way to know for sure which groupings will work is to try them and see. Once the teacher has determined who should be in each group, the group members are assigned a different colored yarn necklace for each group that each student is to wear during station time.

On the first day, a preliminary station is to be introduced; it is important that everyone in class has something to do during the time they are not at a learning station. Even though coloring with crayons is to be a preliminary station activity, it can also be used as an activity in which the whole class engages while waiting to come to a station.

There are two separate plans for introducing the children to the stations. The first is to tell the whole class about all of the stations at once and then let the groups go to the stations. The second plan is to teach only one station a day and closely supervise each new group as it takes its turn at that station. The first method works only in classrooms in which the children have already had a great deal of practice both in working at stations and in remembering extensive sets of instructions. The discussion here centers around the one station a day approach.

Reminding Note: The materials selected for these stations are arbitrary.

### **Library Books**

As the children in class are busily coloring with their crayons, the teacher asks the first group to come to the library book station. When they are all gathered, they are told that on each subsequent day their group will be coming to this station for about ten minutes or so to read a library book. The members of the group are also told:

- 1) How to make a book selection.
- 2) How to take care to turn the pages without tearing them.
- 3) How to share if more than one person wants to read the same book.
- 4) How to put the book back and make another choice when done.

- 5) How to clean up the station and get it ready for the next group when their group's time is up.

As the procedures are presented and discussed, the teacher models what is meant by what is said. The teacher shows the children how to take out the books, turn the pages, put the books back, and so on. After the teacher demonstration, the children role-play how they are to act at this station. When the role-playing is over, the group spends a brief period of time reading books or looking at pictures before cleaning up the station in preparation for the next group's turn to learn the procedures.

Once the first group has had its turn, its members return to their seats to continue their coloring, and the next group is called to the learning station. Each of the groups, in turn, meets with the teacher to learn and practice the procedures for the library book station. Ideally, all of the groups can be instructed in a single day. If it takes more time, though, then it simply takes more time, there is no rush. It is better to get it right than to finish quickly.

### **Puzzles**

On the second day the puzzle station is presented. It is not presented in isolation, however. The library station is also now to be used by the children each day. The first group called yesterday starts at the library station today. After about ten minutes, they are rotated to the puzzle station, and the second group goes to the library station. The teacher makes sure that each group leaving the library station to come to the puzzle station has remembered the appropriate cleanup procedures before leaving the first station.

On the first day, each group came to the library station because the teacher called them. On this second day, the teacher places a cone of construction paper colored to match the yarn necklace for the appropriate group at the station and then tells the students to come to the station if their necklace color matches the cone color. When it is time for the group at the library station to come to the puzzle station and a new group to go to the library station, the colored cone for the group presently at the library station is moved to the puzzle station, and the next group's colored cone is placed at the library station.

Each group at the puzzle station is taught the procedure for working with the puzzles. How to select a puzzle. How to dump out the pieces so they don't mix together with anyone else's pieces. How to work on a puzzle if two or three people want to work together. How to put a completed puzzle back and make another selection. What to do if you haven't finished a puzzle and it's time to clean up. How to clean up the station and leave it ready for the next group.

After the procedures have been discussed, the same modeling, role playing, and doing that was used at the library station is used with puzzles. Each group begins at the library station and rotates through the puzzle station. Children not engaged in either activity spend their time coloring.

### **Legos/Tinker Toys**

On the third day, Lego Blocks and/or Tinker Toys are presented as a station. The teacher sets the colored cone for group one at the Lego station, for group two at the puzzle station, and for group three at the library station. Groups four and five continue using crayons and drawing paper at their desks. After group one has had its Lego lesson, its members go back to their desks to color, group two comes to the teacher at the Legos, group three moves to puzzles and group four begins the cycle at the library table. When group two is done with the teacher, its members begin coloring, and group five begins at the library station. At the next rotation, members of group one move to the library station. This sounds much more confusing in words than it is in action.

The library station introduces children to working in their learning groups. The puzzle station adds the dimension of working on tasks that might not yet be completed when it is time to change stations. The Lego/Tinker Toy station introduces yet another aspect of working at stations. The children are so apt to be so engrossed in their building with either the Lego Blocks or the Tinker Toys that they will not want to stop what they are doing, clean up and rotate to another station. While the program's reading activities may not always be as engrossing as Tinker Toys or Lego Blocks can be, there will be times when children will not want to leave the reading station at which they are working when their time has expired. When it becomes time to rotate, however, they must clean up what they are doing and move on. The Lego station provides the practice they need in learning how to rotate, regardless of how much they might want to stay where they are.

The sequence of modeling, role playing, and actually using the materials that was used to introduce the other two stations is repeated again at the Lego station. Each group, in turn, is taught the Lego Station procedures. How to make the building materials available to everyone in the group. How to build in cooperation with someone else or alone. How to clean up and make the station ready for the next group.

Specific attention is given to the fact that students may not always feel like cleaning up at the end of their turn, because they haven't finished what they are building or have finished but haven't yet had the opportunity to play with their invention. The activity time, which is associated with the points system of managing classroom behavior, has as one of its side purposes alleviating the frustration created when students do not have the time or the opportunity to complete something that they have been working on.

The teacher explains to each group, as they learn about the Lego Station, that they may always choose to come back to these building materials during their activity time later that same day. For now, however, they can only work on the materials for the time allotted to their group. Cleaning up on time means they will have the opportunity to earn activity time, when they will be able to use these same materials again for an even longer period of time.

## **Coloring with Crayons**

The coloring with crayons station is introduced on the fourth day. This is the easiest station to introduce because coloring is the activity in which the children have already been engaged as they learn about the stations. The difference today is that the coloring is to take place in the formal setting of a station and not simply at the children's desks as they await their turns.

On day four, the teacher sets up five learning stations. The coloring with crayons activity is to be both learning station four and learning station five. Even though stations four and five contain identical activities, they are still two separate stations. This is because day four is to be the day the children practice rotating through the full cycle of five stations. The actual fifth station isn't to be introduced until all of the other procedures associated with learning to work at and rotate through the stations have been learned. Coloring is used twice because it requires no instruction on the part of the teacher.

At the beginning of the learning station period, the five colored cones that determine where the students are to work are placed at each of the five stations. The students then report to the correct station and commence work. After about ten minutes, the teacher gives the cleanup command, rotates the cones and instructs the students to move to their new work areas. This cycle is repeated five times, so that each group works at each of the stations in the course of the period.

While the students work, the teacher is free to move from group to group and from station to station, checking on how well the previously learned instructions are being carried out. The object is to provide positive reinforcement for the students and the groups who are conducting themselves well at the stations. The standards of behavior set now will be the standards carried forward for the balance of the year. None of the preliminary stations yet introduced involve the students in any activities essential to their academic learning. The emphasis now, therefore, is on the procedures used to help each group perform well at each station.

The groups continue the five-group rotation through the four activities for as many days as it takes to master the proper procedures. When the groups are in balance and the patterns have been learned, the fifth station is introduced, and the children are now ready to begin academic learning.

## **Workjobs (or Clay/Play Dough if Workjobs aren't needed)**

The two skills each child needs to possess before beginning the independent activities associated with this Reading Program are the skill of knowing how to work with others and the skill of knowing how to work through a task to completion. The previous stations have allowed the children to learn how to work cooperatively with and alongside their group mates. None of these stations, however, required a child to select a task that had been designed to accomplish a specific piece of learning, and then work through that selected task to completion.

While there is a wide variety of activities available that teachers might use to teach children to work through a task to completion, the specific

activities recommended for use with this program are taken from the book *Workjobs* (Addison-Wesley, 1972). Any activities that teach the necessary readiness skills and that actively involve the students in the learning process are appropriate activities to use. Workjobs are recommended because they are ideally suited to teach children how to select a work assignment, work it through to completion, clean it up, and then make another work selection. The specific Workjobs suggested for use at the learning station were selected because they provide children training in perception, auditory discrimination, and predicting from patterns. All of these skills are of help to children who are to learn how to read.

The following Workjobs are recommended:

Sequences	The Same-Difference Game
Go-Together Bottles	Weight Boxes
The Block Patterns	Sound Boxes
The Little Rugs	The Number Cans
The Letter Boxes	The Cylinders
Patterns	

The *Workjobs book* itself contains a brief but excellent guide to the introduction of these activities to the learning station.

Once the preliminary stations have been introduced, the groups formed, the procedures have been learned, and the children are learning to work cooperatively and finish the work tasks they select for themselves, all that remains for the reading cycle to begin is to introduce the reading materials to the stations. The children are now ready to learn about reading.