Chaos in the Classroom: Center Learning in a 1st Grade Setting

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Abstract

How can centers be utilized in a classroom so students have full control of what they are learning and when? Can centers be used effectively post-kindergarten? During student teaching in a first grade classroom in southeast Louisiana, two student teachers, their classroom mentor teacher, and the 1ˢᵗ grade students experienced center learning that integrated all areas of the curriculum and was utilized for 45 minutes each day. Students were expected to determine which center they needed to attend each day, which activity to complete, who to complete it with, where to put completed work, and how to successfully tidy up the center. The classroom teacher used this independent exploratory learning time to pull students in small groups to target their reading and comprehension skills. The purpose of this research was to determine which factors played an integral part of the success of center learning in a first grade classroom. The student teachers observed the 16 centers, interviewed the students and the teacher, took photos, and videoed center time. After analyzing the research, centers appeared to be organized in an effective manner, student learning was the primary goal, which enhanced students' ability to enjoy learning in centers and also gain social skills through collaboration.

What happens in a first grade classroom that uses a complex set of learning centers to enhance student learning and free up teachers to work with individual students in a more focused way? How do student teachers learn about centers when working with an experienced classroom teacher who uses learning centers? And, how, along with the support of research faculty in a Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program, can student teachers look to describe and disseminate the findings of this research? Authors one (Courtney) and two (Kristen) were student teachers in a year-long MAT program in elementary education. Author three (Kenny) is the lead faculty member for the MAT program and facilitator of the student teacher action research project. As student teachers coming into a new classroom setting, Courtney and Kristen were anxious and excited to gain insight on effective teaching practices and be able to take these gains into their own classrooms in the future. As a faculty member, Kenny was eager to see how Courtney and Kristen would work through their research, and how the program can support their work as emerging educators. This article reports the findings of a study in a first grade classroom in South Louisiana examining the role of center learning.

As partners in the student teaching experience, Courtney and Kristen were hopeful to understand what might be the most beneficial types of classroom instruction in which their student teaching was conducted. Observing on the 'sidelines' of the classroom in the first few weeks of

a new school year, Courtney and Kristen were both captivated and mesmerized with the production of center learning in the classroom teacher's (Ms. Johnson) 1st grade classroom. 'Center time' in this first grade classroom is a time for student independency, exploratory learning, as well as a time for the teacher to focus on the students' reading ability in small groups.

With center learning, evidence of structure and organization implemented and enforced by the teacher was exhibited. With centers, socialization through student communication was exhibited. Most importantly, evidence of pride in the students as they completed one activity independently after another was demonstrated by the students in the classroom. Centers soon became the students' favorite time of the day and became an exciting platform to learn about Ms. Johnson's intent, organization of centers, and how exactly students were able to use this time effectively to better their skills in all academic areas.

It seemed surreal that centers could work so beautifully in a classroom full of young children beyond ideal descriptions in a textbook. How could Ms. Johnson possibly allow twenty-five first grade students loose in a classroom for an hour every day to learn on their own? How could she have sixteen centers and rely on her students to be independent enough to find where they needed to be and what they needed to be doing? How could she expect her students to learn when she was not in the front of the classroom teaching them directly? Seeking answers to all of these questions is where this research began and ultimately led to the research question: How do centers become a learning tool beyond imaginative play? Ms. Johnson, an experienced and accomplished teacher, provided insight regarding her organization and incorporation of centers in her classroom. This research also aims to highlight the veteran teacher's voice and focuses on her intended goals of center learning.

On Learning Centers

Learning centers have been described in many ways, most often associated with literacy learning (Clay, 1991; Fountas & Pinnell, 1991; Ford & Opitz, 2002; Click; 2004; Morrow, 1997; Isbell,

1995; Opitz, 1994; Curtain & Dahlberg, 2004; Wong, Groth, & O'Flahavan, 1994, 1995; Routman, 1991). While there is a great variation in the organization and approach to delivering center instruction, the literature tends to describe centers as being small organized activities and learning opportunities focused on the needs and strength of a limited number of students. While engaged in these centers, teachers become free to focus instruction deeply on a small group of students through conferencing, guided reading and writing, and other teaching using instructional strategies focused on students' needs and strengths. Much focus has been placed on learning centers for early literacy (Clay, 1991; Fountas and Pinnell, 1996), though Fountas and Pinnell (2001) have also suggested that learning centers are appropriate for older elementary students as well.

Tomlinson (1999) has suggested that learning centers are ideal to focus in on important learning goals that may not be possible when teaching using whole group approaches. Similarly, Click (2004) highlights the ways in which learning centers are ideally suited to primary and emergent language and literacy development. Learning centers allow for educators to incorporate differentiated tasks tailored to students based on assessment data that further promote the development of students' language and literacy skills (Curtain and Dahlberg, 2004).

Background of Study

The research reported here was conducted in a first grade classroom at a public school in Southeast Louisiana. The school is located in a neighborhood school where more than 90% of the student population lives within the boundaries of a large neighborhood. The school serves 562 students from pre-kindergarten to fifth grade. There are four sections of first grade, each ranging from 21-25 students.

The classroom where the research was conducted consisted of 25 students. It is important to understand the demographics of the classroom, particularly the range of diversity in this classroom. The racial demographic break down included 14 Caucasian students, six African-American students,

four Asian students, and 1 student classified by the district as Arab. Four of the students are bilingual, three are classified as gifted and talented, three have an Individual Education Plan, and three students receive language accommodations. There were 11 girls and 12 boys in the class and students ranged from five to six years of age.

Courtney and Kristen were placed in this classroom for the duration of four months. They began the last few days of summer before the school year started to the very beginning of December, and were able to see the students' transition into a new school year and learn the routine of a new classroom setting along with the students. More importantly, they were there to learn about the organization of centers as presented to the students. Ms. Johnson placed high expectations for student achievement, consistent with a culturally relevant approach (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Fasching-Varner & Dodo-Seriki, 2012). Specifically, Ms. Johnson outlined expectations for the routines and rituals of her students during center learning time, clearly defining that centers are not a time to play, but a time to learn. Being in the classroom from the beginning of the year facilitated seeing how all centers would unfold before the eyes of the students in a first grade setting and to see their progression of independency, socialization, and growth through center learning.

Organization of Centers

Organization is key to success (Isbell, 1995; Opitz, 1994; Click, 2004; Ford and Opitz, 2002) and Ms. Johnson did not cut corners when organizing the look, the flow, and the expectations of center learning in her classroom. There were 16 centers total: Fluency, Phonics, Poetry, Word Work, Spelling, Writing, Listening, Language, Social Studies, Science, Math, Vocabulary, Art, Reading, Computer, and Drama. The first question to answer when creating the center organization was: How will students know where to go? Because of the abundance of centers, the teacher was able to limit the number of students at one center at a time as well as create a variety of activities that have been carefully adapted to fit the learning needs of her students (Opitz, 1994; Fountas and Pinnell, 1996; Click, 2004). There are three main learning styles:

visual, auditory, and kinesthetic which are all present in Ms. Johnson's center's activities.

The center direction chart was the guiding factor to the flow of organization in terms of center learning in this classroom. The center direction chart was simply arranged in four groups, with four centers in each column. Above each column, there was a distinct animal picture, which represented a particular group of students. All students knew which animal group to which they belonged based on conversations with the teacher. When center time came, students independently walked to the center direction chart, located their animal, and chose a center from the four under their animal to visit for the day. The navigation chart proposed by Ms. Johnson was very direct; however, if students could not make a quick decision on which center to attend for the day, Ms. Johnson would intervene and assign a center to that student so their center time is not wasted at the chart. For example, a student named Channing, who wandered to the center direction chart, walked around the room to see which centers his/her friends were in and then wandered back to the chart. When Ms. Johnson noticed Channing aimlessly walking about the room, she quickly glanced at the center direction chart and directed Channing to an appropriate center under her corresponding animal group to eliminate any more wasted time. The purpose of having the student's center direction chart was to eliminate confusion on which center to attend, thus maximizing students' time for exploratory learning at centers. After each week, Ms. Johnson rotated the Velcro center titles about the center direction chart so every student attends all 16 centers in a full rotation.

The next question considered was, how will students know what to do when they arrive at each center? Ms. Johnson expected students to complete all work independently at centers. The centers were arranged all about the room, evenly spaced from other centers so students had the space to move freely. Signs clearly label each center. The center's materials were found in a basket with the correct center label. Before a new center rotation, the teacher clearly explained the directions at each center, expected student behavior at the centers, and

demonstrates to students how to clean up the center afterwards. For the majority of the centers, students completed a tangible product in order to receive credit for that particular center. Some centers were completed independently such as computer, word work, or art; whereas, other centers fostered student collaboration through various games, theatrical performances, and small literacy-based science experiments. Ms. Johnson's pedagogy created an enjoyable and comfortable learning atmosphere through hands-on activities that are present in her centers.

'Center time' officially began in the classroom when students successfully completed all of their 'seat work'. Seatwork was comprised of two to four workbook pages that reinforced Language Arts skills previously taught that morning. As soon as a student completed their assigned workbook pages, they were able to go to centers. "Centers are a privilege," Ms. Johnson often reminded the students.

To clearly define the end of 'center time', the teacher played a song, entitled "Tidy Up" (Feldman, 2006, 2007, track 15). As soon as the beat started, students hurried around the classroom to 'tidy-up' the workspace from the center and return to their desks before the song ended. It was quite a sight to see. While the song was playing, students remained highly focused on the act of cleaning up and eliminated distractions from other students. Students were often observed singing or even dancing as they tidied up their work area. It was like magic; as soon as the song came on, students knew exactly what was expected of them and got right to work. The end of the song marked the end of center time; it was undoubtedly a happy note for both the students and the teacher to end on.

"Every decoration or placement of furniture is intentional and reinforces classroom routines or key first-grade concepts. It's all meant to foster independence" (Truby, 2007, p. 26). Ms. Johnson's classroom is organized to perfection. Her strategic placement of desks, book shelves, tables, and centers enrich students' growth by emphasizing learning as the primary goal of the work environment.

Methodology

Research on center learning began with a series of classroom observations, interviews, and surveys. The action research was designed to not only help Courtney and Kristen utilize centers correctly and productively in their future classrooms, but to help other teachers bring this non-traditional form of exploratory learning through student independency into their very own classroom environment.

Structured observations were a key component to collecting valuable data within the research. Observation of students' movement about the classroom, their independency during this time, how they interacted with other students, their approach to centers, how they completed each activity, and how they turned in completed center assignments formed the basis of the research. Various students were shadowed during center time to see where they were going and how they knew where to go in the classroom. One student showed the classroom researchers the center direction chart, which she explained. "You have to find your animal…" Victoria said, "…and then you can choose a center from the list of 4 underneath." Students had no problem understanding the center direction chart. How the teacher explained center time to students, stating it was a privilege and students were not allowed to visit centers until all of their 'seatwork' (independent work) was completed, also factored into part of the analysis. Classroom observations were filmed for the benefit of the research to be able to probe and analyze the students' movement, interaction, and communication during centers.

The interview protocol was organized so as to interact with both students and the veteran teacher inside and outside of the classroom. Informal questioning occurred during center time as students congregated to centers, completed activities, and turned in completed assignments to their respective cubbies. Interviews outside of the classroom were planned with all questions outlined beforehand. The questions involved in these interviews can be found in the table below. One of the researchers conducted all of the interviews. Students' answers were generally candid and frank. The interview was very natural and continuous questions were

prompted by each student's personal response. An interview was conducted with Ms. Johnson, the classroom teacher via email. A list of questions were formulated and then sent to her via email and she responded using the same medium. All interviews, both informal and formal, were transcribed, along with all video data. All student interviews were videotaped. The video was then transcribed into data and the data was exported into categories according to our findings. The research was all approved by the Institutional Review Board at Louisiana State University as well as by the local school district where the research was conducted.

Findings & Analysis

Three interrelated findings emerged from the study of centers in a 1st grade classroom. Findings suggest:

1) Teacher's thorough planning and organization contributed to success in center learning.
2) Students enjoy learning in the exploratory fashion with center time.
3) Through interaction and communication, students have developed social skills while in centers.

Together, these three findings are indicative of the variety of success that was achieved through center learning in the first grade classroom.

Ms. Johnson's Proactive Planning

Ms. Johnson's organization, setup, and planning created a space for students to experience engagement and independence. Student learning was pushed to the forefront, which can be attributed to Ms. Johnson's thorough organization and structure established even before the school year began. Ms. Johnson's proactive planning eliminated confusion for students going to and from centers *and* while they were at the centers. Students knew exactly where each center was located and were able to maneuver about the classroom freely because the teacher carefully planned for adequate space for each center. Students were even allowed to take a center's basket and bring it to his or her desk for added space and comfort.

When a new set of centers was introduced, Ms. Johnson spent time with the students introducing each center and clearly explaining the directions and expectations of the activity. Under each center's basket was a manila folder with a matching label that had the worksheet for the students to complete. This worksheet had directions that were no more than one-sentence long and was easy for the students to read. When an activity in a center had the possibility to confuse students such as listening to a book on tape or CD, Ms. Johnson created a numbered set of instructions using stickers for the students to easily understand. For example, at the Listening Center, there are three colored stickers on the buttons that the students needed to press in order to listen to the story on tape. There is a yellow sticker labeled "1" on the off/on switch, a yellow sticker labeled "2" on the tape switch, and a yellow sticker labeled "3" on the play button. When students listened to a book on CD, a similar organization method was established to eliminate confusion; Ms. Johnson used stickers again to reinforce the steps of the buttons to press on the stereo system. This was another great example of organization and proactive planning that eliminated questions and confusions when students were at this particular center, but also allowed students to get the most out of the one-hour center-learning block.

If students were not able to understand how to set up the center, they lost valuable learning time. Because of the student independent factor with center learning, careful organization freed valuable time for the teacher in the classroom. Ms. Johnson used this to her advantage as she pulled a small reading group of 5-6 students out of centers for roughly 20 minutes at a time to read a book along with her using a guided reading approach (Fountas and Pinnell, 1996). The focus of learning then revolved around developing the ability to read. During just this short period, the teacher could help her students one by one learn to read, comprehend, and summarize passages-all while keeping the other students engaged with their center activities.

Small-group instruction appears to enhance the vocabulary knowledge and expository retellings of students identified with low

Table 1: Ms. Johnson responses to questions

What made you decide on using so many centers in your classroom? Why 16?	*I needed to engage students in every aspect of literacy: phonics, fluency, spelling, writing, listening, etc. I also wanted to integrate literacy across the curriculum, which is why I include other content areas such as math, social studies, science, and art centers. I wanted to make sure I had enough centers for students to have a guided choice (for motivation) and so that centers do not get over-crowded (for space-management) (E. Johnson, personal communication, February 29, 2011).*
Did you ever have any doubt that your students would not be able to handle the independency of center time?	*The first two weeks of school I did not teach reading groups. I spent that time teaching the students what to do while I taught groups. They had to learn the routine. At first it is hectic and there are lots of questions. After about a week most of the students grasp the routine and can experience success independently (E. Johnson, personal communication, February 29, 2011).*
What inspired you to incorporate center learning in your classroom?	*Learning centers meet the increasingly diverse needs of learners. So while group instruction is an essential element in helping students learn to read and write, I wanted to keep students at various levels engaged while working with smaller groups on activities specific to each student's level. Well -implemented literacy centers help me balance my time and vary activities throughout the school day, week and year, providing meaningful, confidence-building activities geared to help students at all literacy levels (E. Johnson, personal communication, February 29, 2011).*
Centers, in your classroom, are a time for students to explore and learn on their own. How does this allow you, as a teacher, to focus on your students in small groups?	*Having students engaged in meaningful, independent activities around the classroom, provides me with time to meet with individual students or small groups to provide reinforcement or enrichment if needed (E. Johnson, personal communication, February 29, 2011).*

vocabulary and language skills. In other words, the small-group intervention effect on increased vocabulary and expository retells was an added value above and beyond the benefit of the whole-class instruction alone" (Fien et al., 2011, p. 315).

With allotted time for small-group instruction, Ms. Johnson was able to deepen students' knowledge one-on-one using their prior knowledge.

Students partook in individual and cooperative learning experiences in centers, which is Ms. Johnson's main objective. Ms. Johnson's organization and preparation allows center learning to not only run successfully and smoothly, but achieved this objective as well. We emailed Ms. Johnson questions regarding center learning in her first grade classroom. Her responses in the reply email have been recorded in the chart above.

Student Enjoyment

It became very evident that students enjoyed learning while in centers. Students were always eager and excited for center time each and every day that they were quick to complete their seat work and get busy at their favorite centers. Ms. Johnson became aware of students' enjoyment during centers and was able to present centers as an incentive for good behavior and completion of work. "Centers are a privilege…if you don't finish your work, you can't go to centers," Ms. Johnson would always say (personal communication, September 29, 2011). To Ms. Johnson, it was important for her students to have fun because this in turn affected the value of enrichment through center learning.

Observation data revealed that one student, Ben, appeared bored through center learning. We were quick to learn that Ben's reading level was beyond that of a first grader as he started talking about books that most 4th and 5th graders read. At the poetry center, Ben appeared to be unengaged in the activity of stamping rhymes onto a piece of paper. He was engaged in the reading center, however, because this particular center offered choice in the books that he could read. He also liked the art center because it gave him an opportunity to express his creativity. Ben was challenged at the computer center through levels-games such as Fast Math and Star Reading. Teachers who conduct centers should offer a level of activities that cater to all intellectual needs of students so that they are always challenged. Students enter first grade at a multitude of levels and it is the goal of the teacher to challenge each and every student at their own level and assess their progress individually, which can successfully be implemented through independent centers.

Center learning may be considered a fresher, avant-garde method to teaching, but centers help promote independence, responsibility, allow students to learn through self-discovery, and fosters friendship through social interactions among peers. Students enjoyed learning in non-traditional methods and remained engaged in learning because of the center activities. "According to (the theory of multiple intelligences), it is important for education to address other human abilities and talents besides the linguistic and logical mathematical intelligence, which have long been the primary focus of most schools" (Blythe, T. & Gardner, H, 1990, p. 33). Not only did students show signs of excitement and enjoyment, they displayed a sense of pride as they completed various activities at the centers. In observing centers, we would hear the students exclaim, "Look! I did it," and as we both turned around, we were faced with bright-eyed students, grinning from ear-to-ear, proudly showing off their completed work. Not only did 'they do it', they did 'it' on their own. Students are more willing to learn more new and challenging things when the curriculum is presented in a fun and exciting way. For example, one student, Chase, was asked to read a book on his level and he immediately put his head down and a look of anxiety overwhelmed his face. However, when asked to play and participate in a sight word memory activity (with words on the same level as contained in the book), he immediately saw it as a game and not a daunting task and was more willing to try before giving up. When students are having fun, they sometimes can forget that they are learning, which is ultimately the goal.

Social Relationships and Cooperation

Student interaction in centers created an opportunity for students to collaborate in a constructive environment centered around learning. At the very beginning of the school year, Ms. Johnson defined the outlook of her classroom, stating "We all are friends" and that our friends are like our family. She compared the classroom setting to a home or family setting, explaining that sometimes we disagree as family members, but we still always love each other and help one another, just like our classroom community.

"Social skills help children to develop positive perceptions about themselves and others. Children who lack social skills can have problems of school adaptation and peer acceptance" (Gülay,

H., Akman, B., & Kargi, E., 2011, p. 665). Centers where games were involved incorporated group participation and socialization among peers in the classroom. Even at centers where students worked individually, evidence of students stopping their own activity to help their classmates with an activity at another center was exhibited. The students learned how to give each other a respectful amount of help so that peer students became the teacher and the "guide on the side". Students were often supporting each other for their accomplishments. When a student finished an activity on their own, they would say "look, what I did" and other students would stop their activity and respond with positive words of affirmation such as "cool" or "you got it". There were times where students disagreed with one another; but Ms. Johnson could easily see when this occurred and was able to intervene when necessary. It was all a matter of teaching teamwork among the pupils in the classroom. The students were quick to work together in all forms of educational play during centers. Through observation, it was evident that all students worked well together.

Students work together and listen to each other through learning in centers. When one students' voice was becoming too dominant and was causing friction in the center, Ms. Johnson would step in and remove the student from the center. The students who showed that they were not ready to work in a collaborative setting were redirected to complete center work at their desk, independently. This often frustrated students and was then a motivating factor to improve their behavior and collaborative skills in order to gain the privilege of working in a group setting for future center activities.

Unintentional Benefits

While centers are beneficial for many obvious reasons, this research found a few unintentional benefits from center learning in Ms. Johnson's classroom regarding student interaction of those with disabilities and language barriers. Ms. Johnson's original goal of incorporating centers in her classroom was to create an environment where students became the drivers of their education and could learn independently

through center activities. What she neglected to realize was that her students were offering support and encouragement for one another, and in turn, they learned from one another.

George was one of the first graders and he emigrated from Japan, knowing very little English when he arrived in Ms. Johnson's classroom. He was quick to learn English words, but often had to ask his neighbors and make gestures to Ms. Johnson to confirm his understanding. For George, centers became a hidden curriculum for learning English because of the social interaction that he experienced with his new peers. Centers became his personal way of exploring the culture and habits of other first graders. George was very persistent on learning through his own mistakes. He was often observed saying to another student, "No! I do! I do!" when they tried to help him. Delaney, a student with cerebral palsy found centers helpful in strengthening fine motor skills especially in the poetry center, where she laced a card with matching rhyming words. In the writing center, she gained a steadier grip of her pencil, which improved her handwriting skills and now she can write more legibly. At the word work center, Delaney was able to build new words by changing the beginning or ending digraph using Twist and Turn Phonics Word Builder, which helped strengthen the muscles in her fingers.

Limitations

As student teachers, Courtney and Kristen remained active in Ms. Johnson's room, taking on the role of not only 'teachers' but 'researchers' as well. With this came many responsibilities. With so much to get done in a first grade classroom, we were forced to set aside time and neglect some teaching responsibilities to conduct this research. As a result, many of our videos were captured on the same day. We were then required to obtain some interviews while students were working on activities instead of having time to pull them aside. In the interviews, many of the students reference activities that they were currently working on, which limited our spectrum of data regarding their opinions about centers through the year. After our student teaching period was over, we were fortunate to be able to go back into Ms. Johnson's classroom and collect data through an

informal interview with Ms. Johnson. We were able to ask her many of the 'why' questions that were still lingering in our minds from the time that we decided on our research topic and having worked through initial analysis during the courses taken in the MAT program. Having research as our primary job would have been helpful, yet this is the struggle many teachers find themselves in when trying to authentically engage in action research. Kristen and Courtney became part of the classroom during the student teaching, with an abundant amount of knowledge as to how Ms. Johnson works her centers, but it also created a bias toward her method. We continue to wonder about other ways that center learning plays an integral part of a classroom atmosphere, students' attitudes, and the overall learning experience for both teacher and student.

Use of the Results

Because center learning proved to be so successful in many aspects, Courtney and Kristen both plan to utilize this exploratory fashion of student learning in their own classrooms one day. Currently, Kristen has implemented this method of learning centers in her own classroom, using the same organization and style as Ms. Johnson. She has noticed that although the classes have very different backgrounds (her own class having more students and a smaller working space than Ms. Johnson's class), the findings of this study are also true for her own group of students. Amongst the chaos during centers in a first grade, the success is highly based off of teacher organization and planning. The outcome is student enjoyment during learning as well as increased social skills for her students.

The student teaching experience in our researched-based classroom was an enlightening and inspiring one for the both of us. We were fortunate to embark our student teaching experience in Ms. Johnson's classroom and soon became an integral part of the positive learning environment that our mentor teacher established among her students from the very start of the school year. Because our research was conducted in the same classroom where we spent our time teaching, we were able to answer so many of the questions that we had

regarding the production of centers from the beginning.

Conclusion

Students not only enjoyed centers, but they were able to develop skills such as independency, socialization, and responsibility through hands-on activities, games, listening activities, and computer-generated programs. Many students had favorite centers, and a second favorite. Students were very knowledgeable on the process of going to centers and how to figure out which center to go to. Students were very vocal about their enjoyment in centers and their knowledge of each center.

Through the findings of this study, success in center learning can be attributed to teacher's organization, proactive planning, and high expectations of students at centers, which are established and mandated from the start of the year with each class. Center learning represents a more exploratory fashion of learning as opposed to whole group direct instruction, where the students become the educational drivers. Center learning fosters improved social interaction as collaboration and group decision-making unfolds between young classmates. During observations, students sorted objects according to their rhyming match. As a group, they agreed on which card matched for a rhyming pair. "Social skills support communication skills, academic success and adaptation to school, strengthen peer relationships and create a positive environment in the education setting" Gülay, H., Akman, B., & Kargi, E., 2011, p. 665). In order to work correctly and smoothly, teachers need to be able to trust their students, knowing that they are working, learning, and completing their assignments on their own. Because the teacher represents a 'guide on the side' during center time, this frees up her schedule, allowing her to pull out a small group of students to reinforce various skills.

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