

Dear Liala,

My days have been so busy and full since we arrived in Alpharetta. Adjusting to our new home, our new neighborhood, new routines, and new responsibilities as a service chair for a local women's club has surely kept me on my toes the past few months. Warm sunlight is streaming through the window of my office, quiet blankets my house as the baby sleeps peacefully in her nursery, and thoughts of kindergarten whirl about in my mind as I begin to type. I've been wearing my mommy hat for a while and it sure does feel good to try my teacher one on!

I was talking to a first grade teacher down here recently and was sharing thoughts on learning center activities and philosophies. She had expressed feelings of joy and frustration with daily centers and I was immediately brought back to center time in my first grade classroom. I distinctly remember creating exciting hands-on center activities for the children to explore, explaining the objectives to the children, and eagerly inviting them to begin only to be left with a feeling of frustration as I was off to meet with Guided Reading Groups. In an effort to meet the rigorous demands of curriculum under limited amounts of "uninterrupted" time in the classroom schedule, I included Guided Reading Groups in my learning center circuit. Certainly fostering a love of reading and meeting with small groups of children for strategy-based reading lessons was an absolute joy but, because these meetings were taking place at the same time

as centers, I always felt like I was missing a great deal of kid-watching and implicit assessment while the children were busy working around the room.

Independent learning centers, after all, allowed the children to apply and extend cross-curricula concepts introduced earlier in whole group meetings. Centers helped them to develop topic awareness and flexibility with ideas and concepts. It's where they expressed their thinking through speaking, drawing, writing, and doing. I had originally asked the children to stay with their Guided Reading Groups as they moved from center to center, spending 20 minutes at each activity station, to ensure that they had ample opportunity to explore each concept. We had a sharing session upon completion of the circuit in an effort to share discoveries, challenges, strategies, and other points of interest. While the center activities were layered and differentiated to meet the unique needs of the students and I did have the support of parent volunteers, I was never truly satisfied with the way they ran, mainly because I felt disconnected on some level.

I spent a great deal of time reflecting upon my practice and I knew that I needed to make some changes in daily classroom routines to be able to provide the children with a comprehensive and developmentally appropriate program. I wanted to be available to the children during center time and I wanted to further differentiate the activities as children began to explore and discover. I also wanted my Guided

Reading Groups to take place, when the children and I were able to truly focus on developing print concepts and ideas without moving on to the next center.

The summer before I began teaching kindergarten I promised myself I would take some more risks and step outside of the box that I had become comfortable teaching in. Inspired by the Investigations math program, I applied a "Choice Time" approach to all center activities. Play Centers, Word Study Centers, and Math Centers all became week long "choice time" opportunities in my classroom. With this new structure in place, the children were able to go freely from center to center, work collaboratively with others using a variety of materials and appropriate technology, and refine their strategies bringing new knowledge to familiar experiences. The choice time centers were designed with the intent that the children revisit the centers over the course of the week to deepen their understanding of the concepts and tasks presented.

The children could visit a center for as long as they needed, leave a center when they needed, and they didn't have to worry about switching gears between centers because all of the centers during each "Choice Time" session were extension activities on a given subject matter. They did not crowd a center because we established a five person limit and they were assured that everyone would have an opportunity to explore and discover each center over the course of the week. I would no longer be a "center". I was

able to closely monitor the children and their progress. The children were encouraged to be self-directed and self-motivated problem solvers and I had the opportunity to support, challenge, and celebrate them every step of the way!

I have always felt that making decisions about activity choice, time management, and responsibility are extremely important aspects in any learning experience. It took me several years, however, to truly understand and trust the power of choice in my classroom. This new approach to independent learning centers made such an incredible difference in our learning community. It was absolutely liberating! We were all finally able to “center”, no pun intended, ourselves and dive into each subject matter. Our sharing sessions upon completion of each choice time center were rich and full of information that could be used in the days, weeks, and months ahead. We were guiding our own course of study and loving every second of it!

I love and miss you!

Always,  
Tracey (Varrone)

*Besides the notion of choice, Tracey was now able to document what the children were doing and learning. Constructivists are reflective, understand and respond to the developmental needs of learners and respect the many ways*

*that children make meaning. Let us hear about your practices and insights.*