Review of "Small Group Teaching in the Literacy Classroom", CD-ROM & Independent Learning Module Student Workbook

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This CD-ROM and accompanying Workbook have been designed as an instructional package for teachers of literacy in Early Childhood Education (K-3). It concentrates on small group teaching as part of a wider strategic approach and clearly demonstrates its place within a detailed teaching framework, all of which is clearly detailed for the user to adopt into their own teaching practice.

THE BACKGROUND

In their research Fellowes and Nelson have identified four approaches to the teaching of early literacy skills and they elaborate on the benefits of each approach and show where each should be adopted to suit different outcomes and situations. They advocate a holistic or balanced approach to teaching and each approach is relevant for specific tasks and specific times. They have called these whole class teaching, small group teaching, focused teaching and share and celebration and they explain each type of teaching approach and its place within the wider framework.

In their estimation whole class teaching should be based on general whole class learning need over a specific period of time. A focused or explicit teaching approach is recommended for introducing specific literacy skills, for example, phonemic awareness and handwriting; in this instance, the teacher directs learning in a very targeted approach. Small group teaching is where a few children work, independently, cooperatively or with the teacher in an instructional context. In the independent small group tasks, students work on tasks or activities specifically selected by the teacher based on students' identified literacy learning needs. All students in the same group work on the same task. Sharing and celebrating provides the opportunity for the students to share their knowledge with their peers, encouraging ownership of their learning. Sharing and celebrating is encouraged after small group time, but can be used to celebrate achievements within all aspects of the literacy learning session.

The aim of the instructional package is to direct the user to be able to comprehend the benefits of small group teaching and the use of literacy centres within a balanced, holistic approach to teaching in the early years of school. The idea of literacy centres is clearly defined for the reader, where the classroom will be divided into clearly elected areas for each literacy centres, these may be the reading centre or writing centre for example. These centres may be fixed areas within the classroom or may be areas set up specifically for a centre, The literacy centre is not just about location, it encompasses the whole conceptual idea. According to Fellowes and Nelson,

"Literacy centres are where learning happens. They revolve around thoughtfully planned and well-resourced independent or collaborative learning experiences. It is these experiences, tasks and activities that define literacy centres – not the size or shape of the location."

THE INSTRUCTIONAL RESOURCE

The CD-ROM opens with basic information and descriptions of what literacy is and goes on to emphasise the importance of the teacher's role in teaching literacy. "The literacy teacher's success is strongly influenced by their ability to critically reflect on the effectiveness of their teaching and adjust their program accordingly."

The CD-ROM is packed with ideas and practical suggestions as to how to organise literacy teaching. It goes into detail, not only about literacy centres and how to set them up, but more importantly, how to set up an effective literacy session. The emphasis is on the teacher's ability to reflect and continually adapt their teaching strategies and mix of literacy centres to suit the students' current ability levels. There is an excellent example of a planned timetable demonstrating a balanced approach and mix of the four approaches.

Fellowes and Nelson highlight the benefits of small group learning as part of a balanced approach to learning, such as offering the teacher the flexibility to adapt and develop tasks that continually reflect the students' current ability levels, empowering the students to become more
independent in their learning activities and become more student-centred with less reliance on the teacher and the student actively seeks the required resources, students are encouraged to set up and adhere to rules and set behaviours that make the literacy centres work for them, the teacher is able to focus time when is it really needed, there is a sharing of resources, children learn at their own level within their groups and can be moved if necessary to a new literacy group that better suits their achievement levels.

Fellowes and Nelson give valuable advice on how to settle children into this new approach and their new environment for example with getting the children involved in setting up rules, using reward systems to assist with engagement and getting different centres to share and celebrate with the whole class on a regular basis.

The Management Board is an excellent tool to assist young children in managing their own time and not having to ask the teacher all the time, again affording them independence in their activities. The children go to the board each day to see their rotation. Names are shown down one side and may be moved around as groups change and colourful cards are used to graphically and textually depict the specific learning centre that the children should be at during each rotation. When displayed appropriately in the classroom, the board becomes a reference point for students as they systematically move between centres. The CD-ROM shows some rich and colourful ideas of cards to be used for this display.

There is a useful section on involving parents and assistants in the teaching process. There are many other excellent and informative sections within the CD-ROM, such as a section on learner profiles, which assists the teacher in assessing where the children are in their learning process and how to adopt a plan that suits their needs. Another section is on how to group and monitor the children and setting up literacy centres and specific tasks for each centre. The CD-ROM is packed with other valuable advice on monitoring and evaluating learning, assessment, observation of students and running and managing records. There are also downloadable documents that can help with planning and implementing small groups teaching and literacy centres, such as weekly planning sheets, classroom checklists, literacy centre checklists and so on. The accompanying workbook is designed to be used alongside the CD-ROM to allow the user to identify the key concepts, to reflect on these and then highlight how they might adapt or use these in their own teaching practice.

By the end of the program the user should be able to understand the main concepts, be confident and able to set up a literacy centre and work plan, observe and monitor small groups and make the necessary adjustments to these and their approaches in a continual cycle of evaluation planning and teaching. Users should be able to adopt this teaching practice within their wider teaching practice to maximise their students' outcomes and achievements in literacy. Small Group Teaching in the Literacy Classroom, CD-ROM and Workbook is an excellent instructional package for any early years teacher that wants to improve their teaching skills and consequently their students' success in achieving their learning outcomes in a fun and enjoyable way!