

Time for Literacy Centers

How to Organize and Differentiate Instruction

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Portsmouth, NH

Heinemann

A division of Reed Elsevier Inc.
361 Hanover Street
Portsmouth, NH 03801-3912
www.heinemann.com

Offices and agents throughout the world

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Cataloging-in-Publication data is on file at the Library of Congress.
0-325-00731-4

Editor: Lois Bridges
Production: Vicki Kasabian
Cover design: Jenny Greenleaf
Typesetter: Publishers' Design and Production Services, Inc.
Manufacturing: Steve Bernier

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper
09 08 07 06 05 EB 1 2 3 4 5

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“How full of creative genius is the air in which these are generated!” Thoreau (1856) was making an observation about snow crystals, but he could easily have been making an observation about children. As we know of *both*, no two are alike.

Snow crystals differ from one another because they form in varying environments and because each is made up of millions of water molecules, some quite unusual. There is simply the slimmest of slim chances, in the whole lifetime of the universe, that any two snow crystals would ever end up the same. In turn, children’s lives take shape in varying environments; each child is made up of millions of experiences, some quite unusual. There is simply no chance, in the whole lifetime of the universe, that any two children would ever end up the same; they would never end up knowing exactly the same things or learning in exactly the same ways.

Children differ. They come from families big and small and active and changing; from families with ideas about politics and schooling and religion and history; from families whose members spend their days growing strawberries, assembling cars, designing computer software, or caring for the elderly. They grow up in pretty, old neighborhoods, in wealthy new subdivisions, on impoverished dairy farms, in tiny barrio apartments. Their families’ interests range from BMX racing and video gaming to reading books and watching television; from hockey and boxing to Guatemalan history and space science.

By the time they come to your classroom, even if they are only five or six years old, your students’ experiences vary greatly, and this means that so, too, do their literacies. The creative genius that their families have used to make their way in the world has shaped very unique little individuals who walk down very different paths of learning. Some see themselves as literate; others

think that reading and writing are for big kids and grown-ups. Some have begun to read a few words; others have begun to read all kinds of text. Some write in varied genres; others write only the words they are sure they can spell correctly. Some may be learning English as a second language. Perhaps one is learning English as a third language. Some boldly leave the classroom during the morning for special education services. Some cling to you and accidentally call you *Mom*.

How do today's teachers meet the literacy needs of a widely diverse set of learners? Effective teachers make use of literacy centers (Pressley, Rankin, and Yokoi 2000). A *literacy center* is an area of the classroom in which a set of literacy-related materials is arranged for collaborative exploration. Children working in centers use general activities and materials organized by the teacher—sometimes differentiated for individuals or groups—to set the direction and pace of their own activity. The teachers individualize and differentiate their instruction both on the spot and through preplanned teaching efforts.

You know that you can engage in center-based instruction, but how can you do it well? How can you do it in such a way that *all* of your students will be able to use centers to expand their literacy knowledge and so that *all* will use centers to deeply explore a wide range of content-related concepts? In this book, you will find ideas for organizing and implementing kindergarten through third-grade literacy centers and ideas for differentiating the instruction and experiences that occur there. Numerous examples from diverse classrooms are included. The information is appropriate for teachers trying out centers for the first time as well as for center veterans wishing to improve or expand on what they are doing already. In the chapters, you will find

- a set of learning principles that will help guide and enhance your center-based instruction
- a set of literacy goals for centers that is appropriate for consideration by kindergarten through third-grade teachers
- ideas for organizing the physical environment of the classroom for centers
- ideas for managing center-based instruction
- ideas for differentiating center-based literacy experiences and instruction
- plans for more than fifty literacy centers (most of which contain several activity ideas)

The content of this book is directly in line with the literacy goals and teaching practices endorsed by the National Association for the Education of Young

Children (NAEYC), the International Reading Association (IRA), and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), which, importantly, inform many state curriculum frameworks. The book also provides information that is useful to schools and districts attempting to work thoughtfully with Reading First initiative guidelines. Specifically, those guidelines recommend that teachers provide instruction in *phonemic awareness*, *phonics*, *fluency*, *vocabulary*, and *comprehension*. The book addresses ways to support student development of these competencies (as well as other competencies, such as writing and book handling) in an integrated way, through developmentally appropriate experiences.

Managing Center-Based Instruction

In many classrooms, the professional skill that goes into a well-organized center time seems to hide itself after the first month or two of school. When I visit a classroom after the middle of October or so, I often notice how smoothly the centers are running—without much help from the teacher. Usually, children are working actively and industriously. They are reading, writing, talking, listening, drawing, playing, and thinking. They look like they are having fun, and when I listen to their language, I can tell that they are learning. If it is a first-through third-grade classroom, the teacher is often working in a corner with a small reading or writing group. She spends some of her time there, but she also spends time providing and differentiating instruction as she moves from center to center. In kindergarten classrooms, the teacher spends a bit more time working with the children at the centers, but she still pulls away to work with small groups.

Curious about the construction of a well-organized center-based classroom, I have spent time talking and working with numerous exemplary teachers and observing their classrooms. I have formally studied several of these teachers' classrooms, spending anywhere from one week to eight months in them. On the following pages, we will examine the organizational techniques that these teachers—and many others—have found helpful in implementing centers. Specifically, we will look at

- models for organizing children to rotate through centers
- tips for getting center routines and activities to run smoothly
- tips for working with transitions

Deciding on a Model for Rotation

A number of models are available for organizing children to rotate through centers. Deciding on the best model for you requires considering a number of variables. For example, how long will your students be working in centers each day? How many centers per day should they attend? Does it matter? Should some centers be required and some optional? Should students be placed in groups to work in centers? If so, how many times per day (if any) should the groups rotate? Or should individual students have complete freedom to move independently from center to center?

Deciding between planned rotation of groups and individual freedom to wander can be tricky. On one hand, spending only twenty or thirty minutes in a center and then being expected to rotate is going to present difficulties for some children. When working on something interesting, it is hard to just drop everything and switch focus—and if a child is focused on learning, it may not be the best practice to force an abrupt switch. On the other hand, children who work independently through completely open centers sometimes choose the same centers day after day, gaining little experience with new activities or working with different children.

This section contains some rotation models for you to consider. They vary in terms of how children are scheduled to rotate and how many activities children have to choose from per session. Selecting the best model for you and your students will likely take some mixing, experimentation, and adaptation, and you will probably continue to adapt year after year as *you* change and as you work with different groups of children. As you design your own model, keep in mind that two to six children could work together in a center at any given time. If you want your students to work in groups of two, then two or three pairs could work together at a center at the same time.

Who Works Together?

A review of research and theory suggests that centers work to their best advantage when children with varying capabilities work together in them (Kopacz 2003; Slavin 1987). If during centers you decide to work with small reading groups, and if these groups have been formed based on the difficulty of text the children are reading, then these groups should *not* move through centers together. Heterogeneous (mixed-ability) groups lead to higher-quality experiences for all children. “Heterogeneity creates variability and differences that lead to intellectual tension and socio-cognitive conflict. This conflict or

tension is resolved through verbal interaction, which in turn leads to the development of thinking” (Ben-Ari 2004, 9).

Tip for Differentiation

Plan for center activities to include *varied topics* and *varied ways to demonstrate knowledge* so that different children—all children—can step forward at different times to take on the responsibility of initiating discussions, explaining, modeling, and problem solving. Trust that children’s *different* kinds of knowledge and *different* ways of knowing will prompt them into meaningful collaboration and new ways of thinking.

What Does the Teacher Do?

You have some choices regarding your own activity during center time. You may wish to keep your time completely open to oversee centers and to work with individual students. If you choose this role, you may find that less structure is needed in terms of the rotation model you select and the activities you assign.

If you meet with small groups of readers or writers during center time, then building in more structure (especially at first) will help center workers to proceed independently. If you plan for a ninety-minute center time, depending on the grade you teach, you could probably work with three or four small groups each day. One option is to have children in centers rotate every thirty minutes and to call groups to come and work with you at the beginning of each rotation; another is to simply call children away from activities as you are ready to work with them.

Tip for Differentiation

Consider spending the first thirty minutes of center time providing individualized support for students working in centers. Then move to small-group instruction.

What Do the Rotation Models Look Like?

Three models for children to rotate through centers are common in early childhood classrooms:

- *Individual Pace*: All centers are open for students to self-select activities for the day.
- *Group-in-One-Center*: Each child is assigned to a group that attends one center together during the center period. Group members stay together.
- *Group with Choice*: Each child is assigned to a group whose individuals may choose from more than one center. Group members may split up.

Whatever type of model they choose, teachers typically arrange for ten to fifteen minutes of whole-class sharing after centers are complete. Ideas for implementing each model follow.

Individual pace model

In an *individual pace model*, rather than rotate through centers as part of a group, individual students self-select centers, rotating from one to the next as they choose to do so. To help children work in this type of model, teachers list center choices on the chalkboard or a piece of chart paper, as in Figures 4-1 and 4-2. To support younger children, or children who are unable to read the chart, teachers often use pictures or icons to facilitate independent reading of the choices.

A brief planning period before center time begins helps children think about their personal preferences and supports their knowing what to do without your guidance. Children may use the planning period to talk about their choices or to record them in writing.

Tip for Differentiation

Use the planning period to set daily goals with children who have difficulty managing their time or self-regulating their behaviors during center time. (A goal sheet appears later in this chapter in Figure 4-12.) Or use this time to touch base about any academic accommodations you have made for particular students. For example, you might let a group of children know that during the last twenty minutes, you will be providing a minilesson for them. Or you could let individuals know about accommodations you have prepared such as having an adult volunteer take dictation for an activity, using a simplified graphic organizer, or choosing a book from a particular bin rather than from all of the choices at the center.

Center Choices	
1.	Classroom Library
2.	Big Books
3.	Drama
4.	Listening
5.	Play
6.	Word Play
7.	Writing
8.	Content Reading Activity

Figure 4-1 *Center Choices: Brief List*

Center Choices	
1. <i>Classroom Library</i>	Read any book and draw a picture about it.
2. <i>Big Books</i>	Mrs. B. (kindergarten teacher) needs us! She needs a set of puppets for each big book at this center. Choose one book and work with a partner to make a set of characters.
3. <i>Drama</i>	Choose one of the scripts and read it aloud with others.
4. <i>Listening</i>	Make a tape for one of the books. Practice reading it aloud before taping.
5. <i>Play</i>	Use the blocks, miniature animals, note cards, and markers in any way you wish.
6. <i>Word Play</i>	Use one of the blank forms to make a word search.
7. <i>Writing</i>	Write a story and make it into a book. <i>or</i> Write about something you know lots about and make a book.
8. <i>Content Reading Activity</i>	Read one of the books and use a blank transparency sheet to write down three new things you have learned. Share with the class after center time.

Figure 4-2 *Center Choices: Detailed Description*

Figures 4–3 and 4–4 provide examples of forms that children may use to create written plans. If center periods begin with all children writing plans, you can see one by one that each child gets a good start on the first activity. On both of the planning forms, children may record what they would like to do for the day, place a check next to the centers they actually attend, and afterward, write or draw about something that they learned.

Tip for Differentiation

Arrange a small-group minilesson for children who need additional discussion about or modeling of how to create and carry out a plan.

If you prefer to have a little more influence over what children do in an individual pace model, an alternative to an open list (as in Figure 4–1 or 4–2) is to designate some centers as must-do activities. On the chart that children refer to, list the set of must-do requirements along with a set of may-do choices (as in Figure 4–5). Children could do one must-do per day for a week, and if they have time at the end of each day, they could opt for a may-do. Or they could complete must-dos during the week before completing the may-dos toward the end of the week.

Tip for Differentiation

If you have children who may not be able to complete an activity because they will be out of the room for special services, consider reducing the number of must-dos, or ask the special education teacher to complete the must-do activity with the child.

Group-in-one-center model

Instead of organizing for children to rotate individually, you may prefer to place children in groups to rotate through centers. In a *group-in-one-center model*, each child is assigned to a heterogeneous group for the day, for a whole week, or even longer. Each group is assigned to a center. The group members may do just one activity, such as writing a story or reading aloud, or each center area may offer several activities, allowing the children to choose which they

Figure 4-3 *Written or Drawn Plans for the Day*

<h3>Write or Draw Plans for the Day</h3>	
Name: _____	Date: _____
My plans:	
Something I learned today:	

Figure 4-4 *Written Plans for the Week*

Write Plans for the Week				
Name: _____				
Monday Plans	Tuesday Plans	Wednesday Plans	Thursday Plans	Friday Plans
___ 1. _____	___ 1. _____	___ 1. _____	___ 1. _____	___ 1. _____
___ 2. _____	___ 2. _____	___ 2. _____	___ 2. _____	___ 2. _____
___ 3. _____	___ 3. _____	___ 3. _____	___ 3. _____	___ 3. _____
Something I learned today:	Something I learned today:	Something I learned today:	Something I learned today:	Something I learned today:

Center Choices	
Must Do	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. <i>Partner Corner:</i> Read your Friday take-home book to a partner. Listen to a partner read.2. <i>Writing Center:</i> Draw and illustrate one thing you have learned so far about ants.3. <i>Word Play:</i> Use letter tiles to plan a word search using ten words from the word wall. Write the letters on a word search sheet. Trade with a friend.4. <i>Class Library:</i> Choose any book you like from the top shelf and read it.5. <i>Observation:</i> Observe the ant farm and write down at least one question about ants.
May Do	<ol style="list-style-type: none">6. Listening Center7. Write or draw at your table.8. Read at your table.9. Play Area10. Big-Book Center

Figure 4-5 *Must-Do and May-Do Center Choices*

would like to do within the center that day (or week). For example, a *reading center* might offer all of the following:

- big books (varied levels and topics) to be read with pointers
- a pocket chart for sentence-strip sequencing and reading
- small books (varied levels and topics) for partners to read together

- materials with which to write and draw a retelling of a book the class has read and discussed
- a set of puppets or felt pieces with which to retell a familiar story

In a forty-five- to sixty-minute period, students might accomplish anywhere from one to five activities within the center. Figure 4–6 provides an example of a teacher plan for a group-in-one-center model, and Figure 4–7 provides a blank form that may be used for your planning.

Group with choice models

In a *group with choice model*, students are assigned to a group whose individual members may choose from *more than one center*. Unlike the group-in-one-center model, children may split up and work in different centers depending on the activities they choose. Figures 4–8, 4–9, 4–10, and 4–11 show some possibilities and examples for organizing a group with choice model.

Getting Routines and Activities to Run Smoothly

In order for students to work confidently and independently in centers, they need a clear sense of the routines that will be followed in your classroom and a clear sense of your expectations for specific activities. Making time in the early days to establish clear routines and expectations will free you up later to work with small groups or with individual students.

Establish Clear Routines and Expectations

Do the following on the first days of centers:

- Show children how to use the schedule board to get to the appropriate center.
- As students work, begin to help them know what is expected in terms of quality of work. Don't wait until the end of the center period or the end of the day to have discussions about quality. Support children *as they are working* so that they don't become frustrated or lose their momentum.
- Model how to tidy up centers and prepare them for the next group.
- Walk students through any rotations that are required.

Group-in-One-Center Model

<i>Names</i>	<i>Center</i>	<i>Choices for the Day</i>
1. 2. 3. 4. 5.	Reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read poetry from the books at the center. • Choose a poem and practice reading it aloud to a friend. If you wish, share it with the class. • Read a poem into the tape recorder. Listen and then read again, trying to improve how you sound.
1. 2. 3. 4. 5.	Writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write a poem in free verse. • Write an acrostic poem. • Copy a poem that you like.
1. 2. 3. 4. 5.	Vocabulary and Words	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choose a color. Work collaboratively to think of all the words you can to describe that color. • Choose a state. Work collaboratively to think of all the words you can to describe that state. • Browse through one of the textbooks on this table and find two words whose meaning you do not know. Find the meanings and be ready to tell the class how and where you found them.
1. 2. 3. 4. 5.	Social Studies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draw a map of the route you take to school. • Use the U.S. map to choose a state that you would like to visit. Write down one reason that you would like to visit that state. Look up that state in one of the reference books and add two more reasons. • Draw a map of our school. • Make a list of the places in our classroom where you can find a map.
1. 2. 3. 4. 5.	Play	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use the play dough to construct a model of a perfect classroom. • Use the play dough to construct a model of a perfect bedroom. • Draw a map of a perfect classroom. • Draw a map of a perfect bedroom.

Figure 4-6 *Group-in-One-Center Model Example*

Figure 4-7 *Group-in-One-Center Model Planning Form*

Group-in-One-Center Model		
<i>Names</i>	<i>Center</i>	<i>Choices for the Day</i>
1. 2. 3. 4. 5.		
1. 2. 3. 4. 5.		
1. 2. 3. 4. 5.		
1. 2. 3. 4. 5.		
1. 2. 3. 4. 5.		
1. 2. 3. 4. 5.		
<p>Group-in-One-Center Model <i>Number of sessions:</i> One per day (45–60 minutes) <i>Activity choices per session:</i> One to five <i>Number of sessions to complete a full rotation:</i> Five <i>Using the board:</i> Rotate names at the beginning of each day. Groups do not rotate during the center period.</p>		

Figure 4-8 *Group with Choice Model 1 Planning Form*

Group with Choice Model 1		
<i>Names</i>	<i>Choices for 30 Minutes (or 45 Minutes)</i>	
1. 2. 3. 4. 5.		
1. 2. 3. 4. 5.		
1. 2. 3. 4. 5.		
1. 2. 3. 4. 5.		
1. 2. 3. 4. 5.		
1. 2. 3. 4. 5.		
1. 2. 3. 4. 5.		
<p>Group with Choice Model 1 <i>Number of sessions:</i> One or two per day <i>Activity choices per session:</i> Two <i>Number of sessions to complete a full rotation:</i> Six <i>Using the board:</i> Rotate names after 30 or 45 minutes.</p>		

Group with Choice Model 1		
<i>Names</i>	<i>Choices for 30 Minutes (or 45 Minutes)</i>	
1. 2. 3. 4. 5.	Big Books at Easel	Paired Reading
1. 2. 3. 4. 5.	Drama Center	Storytelling Center
1. 2. 3. 4. 5.	Science Observation	Science Reading
1. 2. 3. 4. 5.	Play Dough	Home Living Area
1. 2. 3. 4. 5.	Word Center	Book Writing
1. 2. 3. 4. 5.	Independent Reading	Clipboard Activity

Figure 4-9 *Group with Choice Model 1 Example*

Figure 4–10 *Group with Choice Model 2 Planning Form*

Group with Choice Model 2			
<i>Names</i>	<i>Choices for Two Days</i>		
1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7.			
1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7.			
1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7.			
1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7.			

Group with Choice Model 2
Number of sessions: One per day or one session that lasts for two days
Activity choices per session: Three
Number of sessions to complete a full rotation: Four
Using the board: Rotate names after one day or two days.

Figure 4–11 *Group with Choice Model 3 Planning Form*

Group with Choice Model 3			
<i>Names</i>	<i>Choices for One Day</i>		
1. 2. 3. 4. 5.	Center 1	Center 2	Center 3
1. 2. 3. 4. 5.	Center 4	Center 5	Center 6
1. 2. 3. 4. 5.	Center 7		Center 8
1. 2. 3. 4. 5.	Center 9 REQUIRED		
1. 2. 3. 4. 5.	Center 10 REQUIRED		
<p>Group with Choice Model 3 <i>Number of sessions:</i> One or two per day <i>Activity choices per session:</i> One to three <i>Number of sessions to complete a full rotation:</i> Five <i>Using the board:</i> Rotate names after 3–60 minutes.</p>			

- Discuss how and when to take restroom breaks.
- Let students know how to request your attention when you are working with a small group.

Even with these elements in place, as you begin to pull away to work with small groups during center time, you will likely experience many interruptions. Interruptions are to be *expected*, but right from the start, encourage children to collaborate with and seek help from one another rather than depend on you for support. Make it clear right away that the children are not to call loudly for you or to interrupt your group. Suggest a low-key signal that they may use to capture your attention when necessary, such as writing their name on a sticky note and handing it to you or approaching your table with one finger raised. Encourage children to go back and do what they can until you can come and assist rather than wait by your table until you can break. This will begin to foster their independence.

Tip for Differentiation

Take note of children who seem unable (for whatever reasons) to proceed without your support. Don't give up on children who don't fall into the routine after the first few weeks, and don't assume that this is just the way things have to be. These children often just need some extra support or accommodations (see Chapter 5) to make centers work for them. Consider working with the children through the goal sheet featured later in this chapter (Figure 4–12).

Observe

For the first weeks, try to allow yourself to spend much of center time closely monitoring your students' center activity. This will help you decide on the kinds of literacy activities that will be appropriate for centers, and it is a good time to take note of the kinds of things that students request your help with, for example, "no eraser," "not sharing," "hungry," "forgot to tell me—leaving at noon," "doesn't know what to do," "activity too difficult." Try to categorize these notes in a way that helps you sort out the source of most needs and determine which students will need extra support. When center time is not running smoothly or when individual children are having difficulty, any range of sensations—from hurt feelings to hunger to boredom to frustration—may

make it difficult for them to concentrate and learn. Look for the source of each problem and tackle it head on.

After the first few days of centers, you may wish to draw the class together to discuss or role-play scenarios such as

- what to do if a student isn't sure about which center to go to next
- what to do if a student isn't sure how to do an activity
- what to do if a student doesn't have enough materials
- what to do if another child is preventing a student from participating effectively in center activities

You may also wish to arrange whole-class meetings to discuss what is going well and not well with centers. Record students' ideas and follow up as necessary.

For individual students, you will need to identify the specific areas that will require differentiated support. You may find it helpful to categorize your observations into three categories:

- instruction (for example, needs support reading the center materials)
- materials and activities (for example, needs materials with same content but simpler text)
- logistics (for example, needs a longer time frame to complete an activity)

Chapter 5 contains ideas for differentiating instruction in each of these areas.

As you get your students going with centers, maintain your high expectations. Expect that center time will go smoothly and expect that centers will support active learning for *all* children. Pursue these goals until you achieve them. Even teachers in classrooms with many children categorized as having learning-related difficulties or emotional disturbances are finding that during center time, these difficulties and problems seem to temporarily retreat. There's something special about centers that makes high-quality learning possible for all.

Model and Discuss Activities

Modeling particular activities before implementing them is another way to help foster confidence and independence. Although the specific ways of participating in center activities should emerge from the children's interests and

understandings, for some experiences, it is helpful to model for children the basics of what you expect them to do. For example, if you want them to construct a word search or use a graphic organizer, then working through the whole process with the whole class may help them to work independently later on.

If activities are such that the whole class can practice them first, you may want to take a run through them during a whole-group work time. For example, if you would like for children to use a graphic organizer to retell a story, modeling the procedures for the class and perhaps giving the children an opportunity to experiment with the organizers will help them work independently later on. As you plan for centers, make it a regular practice to consider what might be appropriately modeled before children work at the centers independently.

Tip for Differentiation

Always consider whether your modeling and instruction would be more appropriate for a small group or the whole class. Sometimes it is just a small group who needs that bit of extra support.

Set Individual Conduct Goals with Students as Needed

In addition to differentiating academic support, you may wish to set individual conduct goals with students who need help engaging in appropriate actions or behaviors during center time. In most classrooms, these plans are constructed jointly between teachers and select students. Figure 4–12 provides a form that can be used for such planning.

As a rule of thumb when developing such a plan, choose positive wording that indicates what *to* do rather than what *not* to do. For example, “Clean up materials before moving on to another center” works better than “Don’t leave materials out”; “Use thoughtful words” works better than “Don’t call names or fight.” Really, it is *normal* for children to differ in the ways they approach others and react to center activities, and all goal plans should send the message that *we’re doing this together to help you learn in centers* rather than *I’m doing this to you because you aren’t behaving*.

Families may be brought into the goal-planning process by discussing and jointly deciding on goals at conferences, by email, or over the phone. You can send the goal sheets home at the end of the day or week. And you can provide families with blank sheets if they wish to use a similar goal-setting format at home.

Figure 4-12 Goal Sheet

Goals	
Name: _____	Date(s): _____
My goals for center time:	
1.	
2.	
3.	
How did I do?	

I recommend that you avoid offering external rewards such as stickers or prizes when children accomplish their goals. Too often, when the rewards stop, so do the desired actions and behaviors. And a wide body of research shows that people who expect to be rewarded for something do not perform as well as those who do not expect to be rewarded (Kohn 1993). Let children learn to experience as a reward the sense of accomplishment and the pleasure that they achieve from successfully completing a day of worthwhile, fun, friendship-filled activities. If you want to give your students treats, do so randomly, saying, “It’s just because I like you.”

Figure 4–13 provides a worksheet that you may use to plan for differentiation and to set goals for children who may need extra support. Figure 5–2 (Chapter 5) shows an example of the worksheet in use.

Working with Transitions

All center models involve one type of transition or another. Some require that children switch after twenty or thirty minutes; some require that children leave everything after a designated time period and finish it the next day. Because some children are by nature slow with transitions, and because some find transitions difficult (and because both of these tendencies often lead to management difficulties), you may wish to have a plan in place to support children during transitions. Figure 4–14 offers some tips for successful transitions.

The Best Time to Learn and Teach

I believe that a well-organized, carefully crafted center time offers *the* best time to learn and teach. In terms of learning, centers allow children to work at their own paces, toward goals that are relevant to them, with accommodations and differentiation built in as they are needed. Children who have difficulty working effectively with others, or working effectively in typical school settings, can be systematically and gently supported in constructing knowledge and in learning to regulate and manage their own behaviors at school. Because you are not leading the group at the moment, you can take the time to facilitate collaboration among children and to provide all kinds of individualized support.

In terms of teaching, centers allow you the time to watch children (yes, watching is teaching; teachers who do *not* take time to watch cannot teach effectively!), to scaffold children’s intellectual pursuits, and to capture their teachable moments. A well-crafted center time allows children to take the lead and set a meaningful course for their own construction of knowledge.

Figure 4-13 *Organizing for Differentiated Instruction Planning Form*

Child's Name	Centers Needing Accommodations	Other Support

Tips for Transitions

- Make it part of your routine to go over the center schedule board before center time begins. Point out the transitions and discuss when they will take place.
- Use a timer with a visible, moving hand to help younger children keep track of the time and anticipate when transitions are about to occur.
- Give a five-minute and a one-minute notice as transitions are about to occur.
- Use a consistent cue to signal a transition (chime, flicker of lights, piano chord, familiar tune on a xylophone).
- Have a clear picture in your mind of what a transition should look like. From day one, communicate your expectations by providing explicit directions and actively orchestrating the children's transition activity.
- Gather the class for a minute or two between rotations at seats or on a carpeted area. Talk them through where they will go next and see if there are questions. (This is usually necessary only until they have learned the routine.)
- Take a snack or a bathroom break between transitions so that children have extra time to finish up their activities if they choose.
- If you work with small groups during center time, consider working with *one* group per rotation. This will minimize the number of switches that children need to make.
- Allow children who have difficulty with transitions to be responsible for helping you watch the clock or the timer and rotate the names on the schedule board when it is time to make a transition.
- If you have just a few children who do not transition easily, do not require all of the children to wait until these children are ready to move on. Make sure that most children are started on the next activity and then support the children who transition slowly or with difficulty.
- Make accommodations for students who might benefit from them. For example, allow a deeply engaged child to continue working rather than make a transition to the next center or talk a child systematically through a few transitions.
- Arrange a cleanup partner for children who make slow or difficult transitions.

Figure 4-14 *Tips for Transitions*