

Early Learning Walkthroughs

Oral language provides the foundation for students to read and write—but many of America's students enter kindergarten with language delays or deficits. An increasing number of children enter our schools speaking languages other than English. Additionally, almost 20 percent of kindergarten students across the United States come from families that live below the poverty line. Researchers indicate that children of poverty are exposed to fewer words and a less robust vocabulary than children from more affluent homes. Many researchers believe that the achievement discrepancy in our schools is the result of a language gap largely due to poverty and language differences.



To address the achievement gap, principals need to be aware of the importance of language experiences in early learning classrooms. Teachers of young children should provide child-focused learning environments that build language skills. Use walkthroughs to support teachers as they establish language-rich early learning environments.

What Principals Should Know

A knowledgeable and supportive principal is the keystone to effective classroom practice. Frequent, brief visits to classrooms help principals better understand the dynamics of an effective early learning curriculum. When conducting early learning walkthroughs, principals should reflect on these questions: What are the children doing? What is the teacher doing? How does the classroom environment encourage language and literacy development?

In a language- and literacy-rich classroom, principals should see children engaged in the following:

■ Language (speaking and listening).

Teachers should talk *with* children, not *at* them. Teachers should consciously use rich vocabulary throughout the day; they should not “talk down” to students. The classroom should be alive with conversations that encourage children to use complete sentences and try out new words. Additionally, children need to be taught to listen with intention. Teachers should clearly articulate why it is important to listen and provide opportunities to practice listening skills.

■ Literacy (reading and writing).

Literacy learning for children encompasses a wide range of reading and writing experiences. Teach-

ers should provide opportunities to expose children to the many purposes for reading, the necessary skills for learning to read, and the strategies that good readers use to comprehend text. Teachers should conduct interactive read-alouds every day, using both storybooks and informational texts. When children listen to teachers read aloud and when they engage in discussions about books, they are exposed to vocabulary and conceptual knowledge, which builds knowledge that is crucial to later reading proficiency.

■ Active learning.

Children learn by doing. Teachers should provide a variety of diverse materials and learning activities to tap the divergent interests of children. Opportunities to problem-solve, predict, and solve puzzles enhance children's cognitive abilities, as well as their language and literacy development.

■ Play, the creative arts, and learning.

Children need numerous opportunities to engage in interactive, purposeful play. When young children experience creative activities such as puppetry, painting, games, block building, and pretend play, they construct knowledge, learn about the world around them, and build skills that enhance language, writing, and reading.

■ Classroom environment.

The physical and language environment of a classroom impacts children's language and literacy development. Children who are relaxed, joyful, and confident learners become engaged in learning activities. Positive interactions with teachers and peers enhance social and emotional development, which enhances language development. The teacher is responsible for establishing an emotionally safe classroom where children are willing to express their thoughts, ask questions, and learn new skills.

Conducting Early Learning Walkthroughs

When conducting early learning walkthroughs, consider using the

Literacy Walkthrough Template for Early Learning Classrooms. The guide includes three foci:

- **Focus on Learning.** This targets children's actions. What are the children doing?
- **Focus on Teaching.** This directs attention to instruction. What is the teacher doing?
- **Focus on Classroom Environment.** This provides the *look-fors* when considering the learning environment.

A principal might focus his or her attention on learning during one visit and the classroom environment on another visit. This walkthrough instrument is designed to support and supervise teachers, not to evaluate them. After completing the classroom visit, use the walkthrough tool to guide conversations with teachers about building and refining their instructional skills to enhance children's language and literacy skills.

Young children should be immersed in active learning and surrounded with robust language. Through rich conversations, hands-on activities, and guided play, teachers and other adults in a child's life can provide the foundational skills needed for later reading achievement. During classroom visits, principals who recognize the facets of an interactive, language-rich classroom can help teachers put students on the road to literacy. 

Corinne Eisenhart, a former elementary school principal, is an associate professor of educational leadership at Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania.

Elisabeth Grinder-McLean is an early childhood specialist at the Goodling Institute for Research and Family Literacy at the Pennsylvania State University.

Download the authors' Literacy Walkthrough Template for Early Learning Classrooms at www.naesp.org/NovDec13

Are you **ready** for **COMMON CORE?**



Motivation Benchmark Assessments help identify student readiness and learning gaps.

Mentoring Minds Assessments provide a valuable gauge of student learning as you benchmark progress throughout the year.

Motivation Math and Reading Benchmark Assessments:

- Address each Common Core Standard
- Offer three complete assessments in each booklet to benchmark student mastery of standards



Available in print and online. Call today!

800.585.5258

mentoringminds.com/principal



Critical Thinking for Life!
Mentoring Minds