

Look Fors

Guiding Principals Early Literacy Learning

Introduction

Have you ever walked into a classroom of young learners to see students engaged in writing, reading, or talking without the appearance of structure? Ever wonder why teachers post student work or why words are displayed on the wall in alphabetical order? Would you be interested to know why a classroom is organized in a certain way? If these questions have crossed your mind, then you may benefit from working with the *Look Fors*, a resource designed to help individuals interested in strengthening their content knowledge around literacy instruction in K–3 classrooms.

Users of the form may vary, but typically include principals, administrative leaders, and curriculum specialists. The forms are designed to guide individuals who would like to develop a greater awareness of literacy learning experiences that teachers provide, as well as look at ways they can support teachers in creating the conditions for effective teaching and learning.

The *Look Fors* is a resource that principals or other administrative personnel may use to guide their learning of early literacy classroom practice in collaboration with teachers. It is not designed or intended to be used as an evaluative tool.

One of the most effective supports a principal can provide is their visible presence as a learner (Lyons & Pinnel, 2001). In addition, collaboration between principals and teachers is one of the best ways to create a climate of trust and collegial discourse for all, as evidenced in the following comment by a principal:

Through conversations with teachers at my school around Look Fors I learned to appreciate the many activities taking place during the language arts time. I was surprised when one of the teachers started inviting me back into their classroom to see new and exciting events unfold in student performance. I was an observer and a learner in this process and that has helped to strengthen our school culture. To share in the learning process is a good experience.

Instruction Sheet

Early Literacy Classroom Look Fors can be used as a resource to help build content knowledge around literacy instruction in early grade classrooms. Users of the form may vary and include principals, curriculum specialists, and reading resource teachers who would like to create a greater awareness of literacy learning experiences that teachers are providing as well as look at ways they can support teachers in creating the conditions for good teaching and learning. The following is a *suggested* process for the use of this form. The “Look Fors” may be modified according to your school’s needs.

Materials

- ❑ One form per person for each classroom observation
- ❑ Pencil and writing surface (e.g., clipboard, folder)

Before the Observation

- ❑ Review the “Look Fors” with teachers and other staff as appropriate. Refer to the glossary as needed.
- ❑ Explain to the teachers and other staff the purpose of the “Look Fors.” The “Look Fors” are meant to assist individuals in building content knowledge about literacy learning in an early elementary classroom. *It is not a tool for evaluative purposes.*
- ❑ Explain to the teachers and other staff that the conversation following the observation with the teacher concerning their literate environment emphasizes the need for all participants to build content knowledge about *what* is important to see happening in an early literacy classroom and more importantly *why* these things are important to literacy learning.
- ❑ Determine whether you want to modify the form to suit your needs. For example, you could only look for parts A, B, or C during the initial observations.

During the Observation

- ❑ It is suggested that observation teams be comprised of the principal, reading and/or language arts specialist, or, when appropriate, a peer teacher who is more knowledgeable in literacy practices.
- ❑ Initially you may want to visit one or two classrooms during the language arts block. Have copies of the “Look Fors” available for each team member during the observation.
- ❑ Make sure not to disrupt the teacher and students as they work; remember you are there to observe and learn, not to help or judge.
- ❑ On occasion, you may notice a behavior, display, or teaching technique that is particularly noteworthy. It would be appropriate to quietly draw the attention of team members to this; however, conversation during the observation should be kept to a minimum.
- ❑ Take notes on the “Look Fors” form. Indicate one or two possible key points that could be used to generate discussion during the debriefing with the teacher.

After the Observation

- ❑ Following each observation, team members should debrief the observations together and discuss what was observed. Conduct a debriefing with the teacher. Keep in mind that this process is not intended to be punitive, but to build content knowledge and support the teacher.
- ❑ Make plans for your next classroom observation.

Early Literacy (K-3) Classroom “Look Fors”

Observer: _____

Teacher/Grade: _____

Date: _____

Duration of Observation: _____

Language Policy: _____

Language Use: _____

A. Reading/Writing Instruction

Teacher provides a variety of opportunities for:

1. Student oral literacy development (e.g., recitation, oral storytelling, songs, chants, memorization, etc.)
 - Speaking
 - Listening
2. Reading (*check classroom schedule, mark all that apply*)
 - To children (teacher reads to students)
 - With children (teacher and students read together)
 - By children (students read independently)
3. One-on-one or small group explicit instruction in reading with students
4. Read alouds (*by an adult or student*)
5. Whole group reading (*can be observed in classroom schedule, a big book propped up in a corner, chart showing evidence of group book discussion, etc.*)
6. Writing (*check classroom schedule, mark all that apply*)
 - To children (teacher demonstrates writing to students)
 - With children (teacher and students write together)
 - By children (students write independently)
7. Student engagement in conversation related to students' personal experiences around any of the observed activities (*mark all that apply*)
 - Reading activities
 - Writing activities

B. Print Rich Environment

Teacher guides students in the ongoing use of:

1. Systematically organized print
 - Word walls
 - Word cards
 - Theme walls (e.g., alphabet, numbers, months, days of week, planets, fish)
 - Content vocabulary charts (words specific to subject area study)
 - Student/class name charts and/or cards
2. Reading labels of objects and areas in the classroom
3. Songs, chants, poems, rhymes, etc. that are displayed in the classroom

4. Daily schedule/routines accessible and visible within the classroom
5. Alphabet chart displayed in the classroom at children's eye level when possible (*mark all that apply*)
 - Local language
 - English

Sources of writing displayed in the classroom:

6. Teacher writing reflecting multiple uses
7. Student writing copied from a single source
8. Student writing (*mark all that apply*)

Created with children: (student writing created with teacher)

- Interactive writing/shared pen
- Shared writing

Created by children: (students write independently)

- Prompted (students are given a topic and asked to write about it)
- Freewriting

9. Student writing using a variety of text
 - Narrative
 - Descriptive
 - Informational

C. Reading in the Classroom

1. Area set aside for reading
2. Newspapers, magazines, or other locally developed texts are easily available to children
3. The classroom library (*mark all that apply*)
 - Orderly and inviting to children
 - Available for children to use
 - Currently being used by children
4. Reading books in local language easily available to children
 - 0–10
 - 11–25
 - 26 or more
5. Reading books in English easily available to children
 - 0–10
 - 11–25
 - 26 or more

D. Use this space to record other literacy activities observed but not noted previously.

Glossary for Early Literacy (K–3) Classroom “Look Fors”

A. Reading/Writing Instruction

Teacher provides a variety of opportunities for:

1. Student oral literacy development (e.g., recitation, oral storytelling, songs, chants, memorization)

Oral language is the foundation of the primary school experience and children come to school with multiple ways to learn language. Through using language, children learn how to form ideas, test their ideas, search for more information, revise ideas, and connect sets of ideas together. In order to do this, children interact with adults and others to make sense of language and how it works.

- Speaking** It is important that throughout the day children explore ideas and construct meaning by talking among themselves and with the teacher (e.g., making statements, asking questions, responding, elaborating, explaining, expanding on the ideas of others). Students may be involved in the creation or recitation of songs, chants, and personal oral histories.
- Listening** As children listen to explanations, stories, songs, chants, etc., they hear the rhythm of language and learn language structure and how to concentrate, and follow the patterns and ideas thoughtfully.

2. Reading

A variety of different text types are available for use on a daily basis, which include, but are not limited to, picture books, poems, fantasy stories, nursery rhymes, traditional tales, recipes, songs, finger plays, literature stories, factual books, happy stories, sad stories, and scary stories.

- To children** (teacher reads to students) Adults who read to children and provide explicit instruction in reading help children develop an understanding of how books work, book structure, book language, characterization, and new vocabulary. Fluent adult readers model good reading habits.
- With children** (teacher and students read together) Adults who read with children provide immediate support during the reading experience. Teachers who join students in reading aloud (in unison) from enlarged text (e.g., big book, poem, enlarged message or story) help model appropriate pacing and fluency for young readers.
- By children** (students reading) Opportunities for children to apply reading strategies while reading materials at their independent reading level allow for ongoing growth and further strengthen their ability to problem solve independently. During instruction, students may read by themselves, be called upon to read out loud, or read with a partner or in a small group. Independent reading, when monitored by the teacher, provides a vital opportunity for teachers who wish to pinpoint or assess an individual’s reading capabilities.

3. One-on-one or small group explicit instruction in reading with students

Meeting the needs of individual students and providing individualized instruction is critical. This form of support is seen through tutor type, one-to-one teaching, where the teacher gives clear and explicit feedback and scaffolds learning experiences for individual students, and where the teacher meets with a small group of students to address a specific instructional need shared by all students. In this way, the teacher begins to meet the diverse instructional needs of primary age students.

4. Read Alouds

Read Alouds can serve a number of purposes. The teacher reads aloud to the class or to a small group for enjoyment and meaning. Favorite stories/texts, rich in language and meaning, can be read aloud many times. The teacher provides a high level of support while the children are the listeners. Students may at one time or another read aloud in class, serving a different purpose. Students may read aloud to each other, in small groups, or to a whole group at the request of a teacher.

5. Whole group reading

Examples of whole group reading include reading from big books or charts and/or engaging in a discussion about the text read. Whole group reading provides multiple opportunities for the teacher to scaffold the learning experiences of students through conversation. These experiences support young readers in constructing meaning from text while making explicit the necessary strategies used in developing comprehension.

6. Writing

Opportunities for a wide variety of writing experiences and audiences are provided for students. Students need to be exposed to an ever-increasing supply and variety of writing samples. Samples should not be stagnant displays but used or referred to during the course of instruction.

- To children** (teacher demonstrates writing to students) The teacher demonstrates the various aspects of beginning writing followed by discussion and practice by the students. Demonstrations may include recognizing letters and words as representations of sounds, as well as composing simple sentences. The demonstration can be done in a whole group using chart paper, the chalkboard, or an overhead projector; in small groups; or one-on-one.
- With children** (teacher and students write together) Teacher and students compose messages and stories that may become reading resources in the classroom. Student contributions to the print resources displayed in the classroom environment stimulate personal interest and expression as part of the overall writing process to be developed.
- By children** (students write independently) Children write on their own, producing stories, informational pieces, retelling, labeling, lists, etc. Independent writing will increase the writing ability of students.

7. Student engagement in conversation related to students' personal experiences around any of the observed activities

The teacher engages students in conversations using students' personal experiences and prior knowledge in learning to read and write.

- Reading activities** The teacher introduces text in a way that helps students make connections between the text and their personal experiences, as well as their knowledge of the world.
- Writing activities** The teacher engages students in conversations that lead to negotiating the types of texts they will write, the print layout, words, phrases, and sentences relative to the purpose of the writing.

B. Print Rich Environment

An environment rich in print (co-created with students or work that serves as models) becomes meaningful to children when the teacher uses the print as an instructional tool. The teacher uses print within the classroom as a scaffold to extend learning experiences and engage students in the interactive process of learning to read and write. For example, a word wall can be a tool used by teachers and students to learn more about how words work—the beginning sounds, ending sounds, spelling patterns, etc.

Teacher guides students in the ongoing use of:

1. Systematically organized print

Learning new words and imprinting them into long-term memory is very important for children to be able to read successfully. Displaying systematically organized print in the children's environment supports success in reading.

- Word walls—Organized set of words used as a reference for writing and reading by teacher and children.
- Word cards—A set of high frequency words used as a reference by teacher and children (not flash cards).
- Theme walls (e.g., alphabet, numbers, months, days of week, planets, fish)
- Content vocabulary charts (words specific to subject area study)
- Student/class name charts and/or cards

2. Reading labels of objects and areas in the classroom

Children need to understand that print has meaning before they can apply understanding to the printed word. Thus, labeling objects and areas in the classroom will help students gain experience with print. For example, the teacher introduces the familiar concept of a door followed with posting the word card “door” on the door. This helps students make connections between the oral and printed use of language and that the series of letters, d-o-o-r, represents the object.

3. Songs, chants, poems, rhymes, etc. that are displayed in the classroom

Reading and rereading familiar text can help young children become independent readers. Posting favorite songs, chants, poems, and rhymes on the classroom walls provides opportunities for children to read and reread favorite and familiar text.

- 4. Daily schedule/routines accessible and visible within the classroom**
Print-based classroom management tools should be clear and easily seen, but small enough that children can point to and touch the items. These tools map out the day-to-day activities and special events as needed and provide students and teacher a guide for the instructional day.
- 5. Alphabet chart displayed in the classroom at children's eye level when possible**
Print should be at the children's eye level so they can use the charts for independent problem solving, symbol/sound links during independent writing, and during "read around the room."
- 6. Sources of writing displayed in the classroom**
Writing that reflects multiple uses comes in different formats: prepared charts; handwritten directions; printed handouts; commercial posters; bulletin boards; word walls; overhead materials; or using an easel, chalkboard, or whiteboard.
- 7. Teacher writing reflecting multiple uses**
The teacher may provide teacher-made examples of authentic or contrived writing as models for instructional use.
- 8. Student writing copied from a single source**
Students write on prepared worksheets or copy from the chalkboard.
- 9. Student writing**
The teacher helps students develop strategies for learning to write.

Created with children (student writing created with teacher)

- Interactive writing/shared pen** The teacher guides students in the creation of authentic writing on a chart. Examples include lists, recipes, thank you letters, and invitations. Most importantly, the teacher provides explicit teaching direction to the students as they participate and contribute to the process of writing. Children write words or parts of words (that which is known or phonemes that can be heard and recorded) for the agreed upon text, and the teacher fills in what is new or unknown to the children.
- Shared writing** The teacher guides the students in composing a message. The teacher acts as the scribe, recording the students' message or sharing the task of creating the message with the students.

Created by children (students write independently)

- Prompted** Students are given a topic and asked to write about it. The teacher guides the students in composing a message.
- Freewriting** Students independently write their own message or story, and sometimes offer to help other students construct and write their thoughts.

10. Student writing using a variety of text

- **Narrative** Stories that entertain and/or teach a lesson/moral. They have a setting and characters, and a sequence of events with a complication and resolution. Various kinds of narrative writing include personal realistic fiction, historical fiction, mystery, fantasy, science fiction, traditional tales, legends, and myths.
- **Descriptive** Writing that explains something in a vivid way with a focus on word choice. The description can be either realistic and factual or imaginative.
- **Informational** Writing that provides facts, ideas, and principles that are non-fiction. Examples include summaries of information, interpretations of data, reports, autobiographies, and biographies.

C. Reading in the Classroom

1. Area set aside for reading

Like adults, children enjoy a comfortable area to read leisure material. If the teacher is not able to provide a classroom library, he or she can establish an area that is inviting to students, a place out of the flow of traffic where students can relax and enjoy reading books, magazines, poems, posters, letters, words, etc.

2. Newspapers, magazines, or other locally developed texts are easily available to children

Local newspapers, bulletins, and related printed material in the local language may be available and evident in the classroom. However, it is more likely to see handmade books by teachers and students reflecting traditional stories, stories based on recent events, and reports of interesting happenings in the school or community. This is important and meaningful for it allows students to see aspects of themselves and their lives in printed material. Over time, some teachers may build up special class collections.

3. The classroom library

A classroom library is considered to be the most important area in a classroom. The classroom library needs to be an organized and inviting area that children will feel encouraged to use regularly and independently. Baskets or tubs can be used for storage of books with clear labels arranged by author, genre, theme, topic, magazines, reference books, student made books, etc. Teachers need to create an easy system of organization, shared with the children, so that students will know how to return books properly. It is important that teachers teach (model) how to care for printed material so that the library is a place that is both inviting and stimulating.

4. Reading books in local language easily available to children

Children who are on their way to reading independently need as many books as possible at their level. The teacher will want to have a wide variety of books and levels and/or printed material available to all students in the local language. Children benefit from having aspects of their life and culture depicted in print. Having books and other printed material available to students who can practice reading and rereading these familiar local language books encourages confidence and fluency, provides practice in problem solving on print, and allows for the discovery of new understandings about print to emerge that may have been previously overlooked by the reader.

5. Reading books in English easily available to children

Children who are on their way to reading independently need as many books as possible at their level. Therefore, the teacher will want to have a wide variety of books and levels available to all students. Having books available to students who can practice reading and rereading familiar books encourages confidence and fluency, provides practice in problem solving on print, and allows for the discovery of new understandings about print to emerge that may have been previously overlooked by the reader.

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