

Pathway Schools Initiative Developmental Evaluation | Learning Brief 3

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Developmental Evaluation

To support its Pathway Schools Initiative, The McKnight Foundation has engaged initiative leaders in a developmental evaluation (DE) led by SRI International and Child Trends. DE is a collaborative effort that begins with identification of high-priority questions of practical interest. DE then supports continuous improvement by gathering data and offering rapid, relevant feedback to the initiative leaders. The DE team is composed of leaders from each of the initiative's participating schools and districts, as well as staff members from McKnight, the Urban Education Institute at the University of Chicago, SRI International, and Child Trends.

This learning brief describes the third DE cycle of the Pathway Schools Initiative (PSI) conducted in fall 2016. During the second DE cycle, conducted in spring 2016, the research team found that students spent the majority of their independent work time in open-ended tasks such as independent reading. Because teachers were occupied, they had limited opportunities to monitor and assess student learning. This finding raised questions about how teachers monitor students' activities and assess learning during independent work. Therefore, for the third DE cycle, the DE team chose to maintain its focus on independent work and explore how teachers develop learning goals for independent work, monitor student behavior, and assess student progress towards learning goals.

The **study questions** and subquestions were the following:

1. How do teachers provide learning opportunities (e.g., develop learning goals and assign tasks) for students in independent work?
 - a. How do data inform goals?
 - b. What tasks do teachers expect students to complete during independent work?
2. How do teachers monitor and manage independent work to ensure students are on task?
3. How do teachers determine whether students achieved learning goals and provide students with feedback on independent work?

Data Sources and Methodology

At each school, researchers from SRI and Child Trends interviewed one to two teachers per grade level, for a total sample of 39 teachers.¹ Teachers answered questions about how they structured independent work, the types of activities they implemented, and their practices for selecting books, monitoring tasks, assessing learning, and providing feedback. Researchers also asked teachers for artifacts, such as independent work lesson plans, activities, student work, and monitoring tools. They collected 109 artifacts from 19 of the 39 teachers interviewed. In addition, researchers interviewed school-based literacy coaches, principals, Pathway Schools Initiative program managers, and district leaders about the structure and purpose of independent work. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

The research team examined how teachers monitor and assess students' independent work as part of a cycle that teachers complete when planning for and implementing such work (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Independent Work Cycle



This cycle was the basis for a scheme for coding the interview transcripts. The researchers then derived findings based on evidence from the codes. Researchers also analyzed all artifacts for type of activity, purpose, and, if available, type of teacher feedback.

¹ Four schools are participating in the Pathway Schools Initiative developmental evaluation: Wellstone Elementary, Saint Paul Music Academy, Community of Peace Academy, and Earle Brown Elementary School.

Findings

Presented here are the findings from the analysis of interviews and artifacts, along with illustrative examples and best practices from a review of the literature.

Setting Goals

Most teachers had systems and structures in place for independent work (e.g., Daily 5, centers, rotation schedules). The most common structure teachers used was to keep the types of centers/literacy activities the same but to vary the tasks within each center based on classroom learning goals. For instance, a teacher might have students complete word work activities during independent work throughout the entire school year. However, as students progressed academically, the teacher would change the activities she assigned within the word work center. The literature supports this practice, suggesting that preserving systems helps students internalize expectations for independent work, which can increase engagement (Hilberg, Chang, & Epaloose, 2003).

Teachers developed independent work goals for groups of students rather than individual students. Many teachers used independent work as an extension of whole group or small group time by assigning students a task that was directly related to the objective of the day's lesson. In these cases, the goals for students were related to the goals the teacher had developed for the whole class or for a student's small group. Teachers described STEP data as an important resource for developing goals for groups of students.²

Providing Learning Opportunities

Teachers most often reported having students read independently during independent work but also mentioned other common literacy activities. Most interviewed teachers reported having students engage in independent reading (63%), free writing (writing not related to a specific text) (58%), reading response (writing related to specific text) (55%), and word work activities (53%) during independent work time. Teachers mentioned a variety of other activities less frequently, including listening to texts read orally, reading/writing poetry, and dramatic play.

Finally, many teachers had students read and listen to e-books independently on tablets.

Approximately 50% of teachers reported asking students to collaborate during independent work. The literature suggests that collaborative activities increase engagement and support oral language development (Expert Panel on Early Reading in Ontario, 2003; Hilberg et al., 2002; National Reading and Writing Project at Columbia University, 2015). The most common collaborative activity teachers mentioned was buddy reading; they also asked students to work with partners to complete word work or listening activities. In some cases, teachers mentioned teaching students to use protocols to guide questioning when they read with another student.

Across grade levels, teachers reported that engaging nonreaders and beginning readers was challenging. PreK and kindergarten teachers reported that they needed support envisioning what rigorous independent work is like for prereaders. In higher grades, teachers reported having difficulty developing rigorous tasks for beginning readers to complete independently. Relatedly, teachers often described a tension between creating activities that were challenging and engaging but that students could complete independently.

Teachers most often differentiated independent work through the assignment of books. Teachers reported using a variety of book selection techniques, such as assigning books from guided reading lessons, teaching students to choose "just right books," or teaching students to select books at their level from a leveled library. In many cases, teachers said they allowed students free choice of some or all of the books they selected for independent reading. A few teachers said they conferred with students either during independent work or guided reading time to assess whether a student had selected an appropriate book, but most reported not having a system to regularly check selected books.

Teachers also differentiated independent work by scaffolding and altering the quantity and type of work they assigned to some students. For example, some teachers developed bookmarks to remind students of particular comprehension or word attack strategies they could use while reading. A few teachers created question prompts to support

² STEP (Strategic Teaching and Evaluation of Progress) is a formative assessment tool developed by the Urban Education Institute that tracks how students are developing as readers along a 13-step trajectory from PreK through third grade.

collaborative reading among students at varying reading levels.

In addition, teachers varied the quantity of work they assigned; for example, teachers reported asking a higher level reader to complete five reading responses in a week and a lower level reader to complete three. In some cases, students at different STEP levels completed different tasks; students at higher levels might write a story while students at lower levels might listen to a story at a listening station. Most teachers reported relying on specialists to differentiate instruction for students with special needs and dual language learners.

Teachers felt their greatest challenge was finding the time and materials to develop meaningful and differentiated independent work activities.

Teachers reported that creating new independent work activities and teaching students how to use them was time intensive. The teachers expressed a desire for explicit examples and models of how to implement meaningful independent work, including ready-made independent work resources (e.g., lessons, activities, centers, rubrics) they could use with students at various STEP levels. Many teachers indicated a desire for professional development on successful independent work routines, including opportunities to learn about what other teachers do for independent work through peer observations and discussions during professional learning communities.

Monitoring Task Completion and Engagement

Teachers monitored both work completion and on-task behavior during independent work. Most frequently, teachers mentioned monitoring work completion by asking students to turn in assignments, reading logs, and/or activity trackers. To monitor whether students were on task, most teachers reported informally scanning the classroom. Some teachers received support from other adults in the classroom who were able to help monitor on-task behavior.

A few teachers used computer applications to monitor students' independent work activities. For example, they used data from reading apps to monitor how many books a student read, whether the book was on level, and how well a student understood the text. However, many teachers were not aware of or comfortable with the features that could be used for assigning tasks and monitoring progress.

Assessing Learning and Providing Feedback

Most teachers reported that they did not have a system for assessing or providing students feedback on written work. Teachers mentioned not knowing how often to collect reading responses or writing journals or what type of feedback to provide. Research suggests that teachers should use rubrics to assess written work and provide developmental feedback (Expert Panel on Early Reading in Ontario, 2003; Fisher & Frey, 2007; National Institute for Literacy, 2011; National Reading and Writing Project at Columbia University, 2015), but none of the teachers mentioned using a rubric to assess written work. A few admitted that they never reviewed written work and that they provided no feedback to students.

Most of the teacher feedback in the artifacts was vague (e.g., "Good job!"). A few teachers wrote feedback that praised specific aspects of a child's work (e.g., "Good text-to-self connection!"). Only in a couple of artifacts was actionable feedback provided to help students improve their work (e.g., "Can you tell me more about why you think that?").

Some teachers reported regularly conferring with students to assess their progress on reading. When conferring, teachers assessed book selection, reading comprehension, decoding ability, or STEP bottom-line skills. In one school, several teachers mentioned that they were planning to reserve one day of the week to confer with students in place of holding guided reading groups. However, most teachers reported not having a system to ensure regular conferring with students. Research suggests that meeting with students regularly to confer about reading is an effective way to monitor and assess comprehension and progress on reading skills (Burkins, 2011; Expert Panel on Early Reading in Ontario, 2003).

DE Team Reflections on Findings and Their Implications

DE team members met as a group to discuss the findings and their implications for the initiative and participating schools. They identified actions that school leaders and teachers could take to improve independent work at scale.

Increase the rigor of independent work by focusing on incremental goals. To help teachers improve the rigor of independent work without becoming overburdened, DE team members

suggested that they identify one small targeted goal at a time to make changes more manageable and sustainable. For example, teachers could concentrate on students' writing one complete sentence before asking them to construct paragraphs or add supporting details to their reading responses.

Balance accountability with student engagement.

DE team members discussed the tension teachers have between holding students accountable for their independent work and promoting their engagement. School leaders agreed that student collaboration is an effective engagement strategy during independent work that encourages students to “dig deeper.” Yet the DE team acknowledged that teachers will need to provide students with clear and developmentally appropriate expectations for effective collaboration and monitor whether they are on task.

Similarly, the DE team considered the trade-offs in allowing students to select their own books during independent reading. Free choice can be powerful for motivating students to read and for fostering a joy of reading. However, teachers who allowed free choice for book selection did not typically have systems to monitor the appropriateness of selected texts. DE team members noted that book selection systems oriented entirely around choice do not typically promote student growth, so systems with limited choice (e.g., students have one free choice book per week) may be most effective.

Provide teachers with ongoing, differentiated supports that help them align independent work with students' specific learning goals.

In 2016, Pathway school leaders began providing teachers with new structures, guidance, and tools to improve the rigor and intentionality of independent work. Although DE team members agreed that teachers need additional supports, they also asserted that no tool or strategy will result in rigorous independent work by itself. Teachers and school leaders will need to consider what learning objectives they are trying to meet and work together to create structures and activities that improve student growth. The DE team felt that to make meaningful change, teachers would benefit from a combination of coaching, resources, peer observations, and opportunities to collaborate and share ideas on how to provide rigorous, differentiated learning opportunities during independent work.

Next Steps

The DE team members wish to continue their focus on independent work during a fourth DE cycle in winter/spring 2017. SRI and Child Trends researchers plan to examine changes over time in independent work practices and take a more in-depth look at specific strategies for engaging students through collaboration and monitoring and assessing student learning through reading responses during independent work.

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