

LEARNING CENTERS IN THE
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL LIBRARY

by

Kelli R. Meyrand

An Abstract

of a research paper submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science in Library Science and Information Services
in the Department of Educational Leadership and Human Development
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ABSTRACT

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In the 21st century, the needs of students are changing and the library is evolving to better meet those needs. For many libraries, this includes a transformation of the space into a flexible and functional space where students can collaborate and communicate freely and effectively. Classroom teachers have utilized learning centers for a number of years to address the needs of the individual learners in their classrooms, and librarians are taking notice. The benefits that teachers are gaining in the classroom can be translated to the library curriculum and space. This literature review demonstrates how school librarians can incorporate learning centers into the library curriculum to provide students with a variety of activities that can enhance learning, increase motivation, and improve attitudes towards content knowledge, thus helping to transform the library into a learning commons.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
Statement of the Problem.....	1
Purpose of the Study	1
Research Questions	2
Limitations of the Study.....	2
Definition of Terms.....	2
Research Design	3
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	5
Learning Centers in the Classroom.....	5
Learning Centers	5
Learning Centers in Primary Classrooms	7
Learning Centers in Core Content Areas	8
Learning Centers in Special Classrooms	9
Learning Centers in the Library	11
Natural Fit	11
Content.....	13
Developing and Sustaining Centers	15
The Library as a Learning Commons	17
The Learning Commons Space.....	17
Learning Centers Help Make the Library a Learning Commons ..	19

CHAPTER 3: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS22

 Benefits of Learning Centers22

 Learning Centers in the Library23

 Transforming the Library into a Learning Commons.....23

WORKS CITED25

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Libraries are changing. They are transforming from a quiet place to read and study into an active place for learning, collaboration, and interaction with technology. As a part of this transformation, librarians are looking for ways to help meet the diverse needs of the 21st century learner, including placing a greater focus on collaboration and communication and the use of technology. In an elementary school library, this can be challenging to accomplish because of budget and scheduling constraints. Therefore, elementary librarians are coming up with a variety of ways to teach and motivate their students, including the incorporation of learning centers into their library curriculum.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to review the literature on how learning centers can be used to increase student learning and motivation and how the use of learning centers can be applied to an elementary library setting. Literature was reviewed on the effectiveness of centers in regular and special classrooms. The literature shows how the library is a prime location to use the centers to teach concepts and reinforce skills. It also looks at how the library is transforming into a learning commons. The results of this research demonstrate how school librarians can use learning centers in the library to provide students with a variety of activities that can enhance learning, increase motivation, and improve attitudes towards content knowledge, thus transforming the library into a learning commons.

Research Questions

Classroom teachers have used centers as a learning and management tool for a number of years; however, the use of them in the library is emerging. In order to better understand learning centers and their effectiveness as a tool to both enhance learning and increase student motivation in the library, the following questions arise:

1. What are the benefits of using learning centers in the classroom setting?
2. How can library media specialists use centers in the library setting to enhance learning and increase student motivation?
3. How does the use of learning centers aid in the transformation of the library into a learning commons?

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of this study are bound by the timeframe allotted by the course. This study is based solely upon existing literature and research. The scope of data was limited to that of peer-reviewed journals and from the professionals in the field of library science. Many topics are closely related to this research that could not be pursued in more depth at this time.

Definition of Terms

The following terms may be unfamiliar to the reader and are important in understanding this research and the conclusions. The definitions provided are not exact dictionary definitions; rather they are general explanations of each of the terms.

Differentiation: Differentiation is the process of providing a variety of instructional techniques and activities to meet the diverse needs of individual learners.

Essential learning objectives: The essential learning objectives are the objectives that a school building or district has determined to be the key objectives for a subject or grade.

Learning center: A learning center is an area where students can work independently or in small groups to complete a task, practice a skill, or explore a concept with little input from the teacher (Stout 2).

Learning commons: A learning commons is an area that is flexible and easily adaptable to meet the needs of the user. The space is used for a variety of functions, is often equipped with technology, and encourages collaboration and communication. In many schools, the library is now considered the learning commons.

Makerspaces: Makerspaces are areas that allow students to create through technology.

Manipulatives: Items that can be touched, moved, and manipulated in order to help students visualize and connect with a concept.

Student-centered learning: Learning where the focus is on the student. In this type of learning activity, the student is the one guiding the learning rather than the teacher. The learning process is centered on the student's needs and abilities.

Research Design

This was a descriptive study done entirely from previously published information relating to the use of learning centers in the regular classroom and the library. It looked at how school libraries are transforming into learning commons. No attempt was made to conduct any independent research on the topic.

Articles were retrieved from the following databases, *Education Research Complete*; *Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts with Full Text*; *ProQuest*; *ERIC*; and *Academic Search Elite*. Search terms included “learning centers,” “literacy centers,” “elementary library,” “learning commons,” and “elementary learning commons.”

The study includes three chapters related to how learning centers can be effectively used in the elementary library setting to enhance learning, increase student motivation, and improve

attitudes toward content knowledge, thus helping the elementary library transform into a learning commons. The following chapter is a review of the literature. Chapter three consists of the answers to the questions posed in this chapter and a discussion that includes the conclusions and recommendations derived from the research.

CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This research explores how school librarians can use learning centers in the library to provide students with a variety of activities that enhance learning, increase motivation, and improve attitudes towards content knowledge, thus transforming the library into a learning commons. It will first demonstrate how and why teachers utilize learning centers in the classroom setting. Next, it will describe how this knowledge can be applied to the library. Finally, the research will show how learning centers help a library become a learning commons.

Learning Centers in the Classroom

Learning centers are a teaching strategy that allows small groups to practice skills and concepts away from the teacher and whole-group learning experience. They are generally used in classrooms as a way to support classroom instruction. Early childhood and primary classrooms often use learning centers to allow students to learn through hands-on experiences and play. In upper grades, centers are used primarily to build on classroom instruction and to provide extra practice, remediation, and enrichment. Centers are also used in special (fine arts and physical education) classrooms to integrate reading and writing and other classroom objectives into their curriculum.

Learning Centers

Learning centers are designed to be both a physical and social space where students interact with materials and knowledge as well as other students (Maurer 354). Although the use of learning centers has been around since the early 1900s, they did not begin to be widely integrated into classroom instruction until the 1970s. Even more support and widespread use has occurred since the early 2000s (Maurer 353-354). The International Reading Association and

the National Association for the Education of Young Children both view learning centers as beneficial and applicable for classroom use (Arquette 3).

Centers are created as areas where students can work independently or in small groups to complete a task, practice a skill, or explore a concept with little input from the teacher (Stout 2). When using learning centers, students are actively engaged in the learning process, and the teacher becomes a facilitator (Sloane 82). Centers can be set up at a table or as an activity that students take to their desk. Centers offer a tiered approach to learning. A variety of activities are set out, and individuals select the activities and materials that best meet their needs and ability level. Teachers also assign activities based on need. This will ensure that all learners are actively engaged, despite their skill level (Southall 9). While some centers are created for practicing a specific skill, others are more learner-centered and are geared towards learning through hands-on experiences, which are by far more effective (Reyes 94). These hands-on types of learning centers increase student willingness and motivation for participation in the activities (McCarthy 293; Stout 2). Students are given choices of activities, empowering and motivating them (Arquette 4; Sloane 80).

Centers often place emphasis on literacy. The three main focuses of literacy based centers are reading comprehension, fluency, and word study (Southall 10). By allowing students to discuss what they are reading and working on, they are not only improving their comprehension skills, but also increasing their vocabulary and verbal literacy skills (Maurer 358-359). Incorporating centers into a classroom routine also gives time for students to get caught up on literacy skills that are not yet mastered, reinforce skills, and provide students an opportunity to expand their existing knowledge (McCarthy 293). Center activities also give students authentic opportunities to read, write, and communicate with their peers (Stone 241).

One example of a center is a word study center for lower elementary students. In this center, teachers set out a variety of materials, such as letter tiles, sight word cards, prefix and suffix cards, and picture cards. Dry erase boards and markers or pencils and paper may also be included, depending on the lesson. While in the center, students perform different activities based on their skill level. Younger or lower level students practice letters, alphabetical order, and sight words, while older more advanced students practice writing words or adding prefixes and suffixes to words. The available materials and activities would vary depending on the desired outcome of the teacher (Southall 174-221). As in this example, manipulatives, such as letter tiles, are frequently incorporated into centers to reach more tactile learners (Falk-Ross 239).

Learning Centers in Primary Classrooms

For many years, primary classrooms have been the most prominent in effectively using learning centers. According to a survey by Pressley, Rankin, and Yokoi, a majority of teachers who were considered effective stated they used learning centers in their classrooms (Maurer 354). In these early childhood and primary classrooms, centers are hands-on experiences where students learn both by exploring and communicating with peers. To the untrained eye, centers can look like play, but the learning benefits that come out of play are far greater than just having fun. Students learn to interact and collaborate with one another. They learn to work together to solve problems and build on each other's knowledge (Crow and Robins 37). Centers that foster this type of learning through play include dramatic play, storytelling, and even puzzles and games (Bentheim 38; Crow and Robins 40). Activities such as reader's theater not only promote play through storytelling, but also give students the opportunity to practice fluency and comprehension skills (Bentheim 38).

One benefit of using centers in the primary grades is that it results in fewer behavior problems. Students who feel they have a choice in what they are doing and learning tend to stay on task more and are less likely to be reprimanded for off task behaviors (Bottini and Grossman 276). The physical movement involved in moving around the room to learning centers also helps students who are more restless and easily distracted to be more focused on their tasks (Bottini and Grossman 275; McCarthy 293).

Learning Centers in Core Content Areas

Learning centers are one way to incorporate literacy and math skills into other content areas such as science and social studies. Standards-based testing focuses primarily on language arts and math, and much time is devoted to teaching these subjects. By incorporating centers, teachers include all subject areas, allowing students additional time to work with the concepts that are being taught. Teachers reclaim instructional time to focus on other content standards that need more reinforcement (Sloane 74-75).

For example, the concept of learning centers is one which promotes student-centered learning and inquiry, fitting naturally with a science curriculum. Developing inquiry and questioning skills not only are beneficial in science, but they also aid in improving reading and literacy. Primary grade teacher Beth Dykstra Van Meeteren describes the correlation between learning centers and science curriculum. She states, “Science inquiry and reading comprehension strategies share the same cognitive functions. Both facilitate activating prior knowledge, establishing purpose/goals, making/reviewing predictions, drawing inferences and conclusions and making connections/recognizing relationships” (Van Meeteren and Escalada 77).

Van Meeteren has incorporated a learning center focusing on simple machines, such as inclined planes, into her classroom. During this center, students manipulate objects and ramps to discover how and when items roll. Not only are her students learning the science concepts, but they are also formulating questions, looking for answers, measuring, problem-solving, and interacting with their peers (Van Meeteren and Escalada 74). After the exploring phase at the center, the students write about what they have discovered and then discuss their findings with their peers (77). While the time at learning centers is not always lengthy enough to learn an entire concept, it can be used to begin questioning and noticing patterns, thus stimulating curiosity and creativity about the content objectives, which can be additional goals of using the learning centers (Jarrett 59).

When students practice content skills in centers, they are also using many oral language skills, learning vocabulary, and practicing skills that will transfer to other subject areas (Van Meeteren and Escalada 74, 76). A study by Caroline Maurer shows that while using the learning centers, students used 47 of the 79 Ohio, first-grade standards for literacy (356). This is especially important for English language learners (ELL), who learn language through interaction with their peers. By becoming stronger in their English, they are not only understanding more, but also building confidence that will transfer to other subject areas (Martin and Green 40). The student-centered focus of learning centers empowers students to take ownership and provide direction for their learning and make connections in other subject areas as well (Van Meeteren and Escalada 77-78).

Learning Centers in Special Classrooms

Recently, special classrooms, such as music, art, and physical education have begun incorporating literacy centers into their routines as well. These specials teachers are seeing the

benefits from the classroom setting and applying them to their content and classroom routines. By using learning centers, teachers in the specials subjects are able to teach their curriculum in addition to incorporating grade level reading and math objectives.

Elementary music teacher Amy Casey has found that using learning centers in her classroom gives her opportunities to incorporate technology into her lessons. Since she does not have enough computers in her classroom for each student, having centers helps her keep the students not on a computer busy, while a few students are able to use the computers that she does have available. Casey has set up one center incorporating music software, reinforcing music concepts to be used, while other students are working in centers focusing on reading and writing skills related to her music curriculum. In another center, students read and learn about composers. In another, students have an opportunity to write in their music journals or practice on instruments (50). Melinda Devany, also a music teacher, states, “I don’t know of many music teachers who have implemented them [centers], but many seem to have an interest.... Students have so many different learning styles, and learning centers are able to serve the diverse needs of students quite well” (46). Brenda Hunt, music teacher, agrees that by using centers her students can have more time to practice with course outcomes. She sets up her centers so that one objective, such as rhythm, can be assessed in a variety of ways through the use of different centers. These centers can include using a computer program to practice rhythm, performing with instruments, or practicing playing rhythms within a group (51).

Elementary art teacher, Laurie Werth, uses centers in her art classroom as activities for those who finish their art assignments early, usually for no more than fifteen minutes. This allows her students to explore other areas and mediums that she may not normally use in her lessons (22). She incorporates activities such as blocks, sand table, play-dough, and computer

graphics programs into her centers to give students a chance to learn, create, and explore, depending on their age and personal interests (23). The goal of these less structured art centers is to provide students with different art experiences rather than completion of a project (22).

Learning Centers in the Library

Using learning centers in the library can make the library a more effective place for learning. The library is a natural fit for integrating centers as both a management tool and curriculum enhancement tool. One of the main goals of a library is to promote reading and literacy, which can be done effectively through centers. Librarians can use centers to give students opportunities to practice and put to use library curriculum, as well as giving them a place to learn and explore other topics. Having a plan for developing and sustaining centers is a major consideration to take into effect when deciding to incorporate them into the library curriculum.

Natural Fit

The library is the prime location for promoting and engaging students in reading and literacy. During classroom instruction time, students are seldom given choices in their reading, but in the library, they generally have free choice, which often leads to reading more and being more engaged during reading time (Arquette 6). By giving students a variety of types and genres of books, it is more likely that they will find books and topics that will pique their interest. Through observations of students and their interests, librarians can build center activities around these books and topics (Green, Britt, and Parker 107). Giving students a choice of activities that are matched to their abilities and interests is an important step in creating effective learning centers (Tobin and McInnes 3).

In centers students can be given many opportunities to interact with a variety of books, magazines, and newspapers; and they are using different literacy skills, such as vocabulary and oral language, in context (Maurer 360). They will have authentic opportunities to practice these reading and literacy skills in library centers (Stone 241). Due to the nature of centers, students are encouraged to interact with one another, which allows them to assist and support each other through answering each other's questions and collaborating together on projects. They are also able to gain differing viewpoints and see that there is generally more than one way to solve a problem, taking them to a deeper level of understanding in what they are reading (Maurer 357).

Cari Young, author of *The Centered School Library: Engaging Every Learner with Library Skills Centers*, utilizes centers for a variety of reasons. She states, "Yes, my school library is a classroom—the largest, best-equipped classroom on campus! It is not simply a book storage facility, or the place where we have faculty meetings and baby showers — it is a working, teaching classroom" (5). With that thought in mind, she created learning centers to effectively manage and teach within the walls of her library. Some students take an entire class period to locate and check out books, while others do it in a couple of minutes, leaving them the ability to cause distractions and have off-task behaviors for the remaining time. By incorporating centers, she has the children actively engaged in learning activities rather than being a distraction to others (5).

Classrooms are becoming more and more student-centered, and the role of the teacher is becoming more of that of a facilitator. Incorporating centers gives students options and variety in their choice of activities with the teacher being a guide (Sloane 76). In the library this means the librarian is selecting activities that reflect students' interests, reinforces classroom objectives, and gives students choices on what specific activities to complete, or even for them to create

their own learning experiences. Students have the ability to make choices that appeal to their interests and learning styles, thus empowering and motivating them to learn (Young, *The Centered School Library* 5).

Assessing learning in the library is often difficult. By using centers, librarians can assess what the students are learning in a more meaningful context. Data can be collected through formal and informal observations to see if students are mastering the library learning objectives. This is done more effectively because the librarian is facilitating the learning process, rather than being tied to the circulation desk (Young, *The Centered School Library* 5). In centers, students build portfolios of what they have learned and demonstrate their process of learning (Casey 50). By sharing what they have done and learned, it holds them accountable and keeps them on-task (Stout 4; Young, *The Centered School Library* 7).

Content

The content of learning centers can vary greatly in the library. Librarians can use the centers to practice library skills. Classroom skills and objectives can also be reinforced and practiced. Centers provide the librarian with an opportunity to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of all students.

Centers that focus on library objectives and skills are one way a librarian can incorporate small group instruction into the library setting. For example, the librarian can build a center around a mini-lesson focused on a library skill such as the arranging books on the shelf by their call number. After presenting the mini-lesson, students can practice by arranging actual books in order or using manipulatives, such as a pocket chart labeled with Dewey classification and cards with call numbers on them, to rearrange and put in order (Young, *The Centered School Library* 6).

Other centers can be built around specific skills or topics which are being covered in the classroom, or ones that are identified within a building as essential learning objectives. By offering these types of centers, the librarian is doing his or her part in preparing students for standardized testing. The objectives and goals of learning centers have to be based on the students' knowledge and abilities in order for them to be successful (Ford and Opitz 712). Olga Jarrett prefers tying her centers to science or social studies objectives. She gives the example of having a learning center covering inventions, where the students make inferences about what the different inventions are used for, identify simple machines in tools, or research the inventions or inventors. She supplies her centers with a variety of manipulatives and physical examples, as well as library books that cover and expand on the topic. This allows students who are interested in the topic to learn and explore more deeply on their own (57).

Librarians also provide centers that focus around a topic, simply for students to explore and learn more about. Librarian Cari Young uses a variety of science centers in her library. By placing a fish tank with tadpoles, spiders, or worms on a table, she creates a learning center that incorporates many different skills, objectives, and ability levels. She also sets out a variety of resources, both fiction and non-fiction, related to the topic. She may also put out materials such as a large sheet of paper so the students can formulate questions and make observations about the animals in the tank ("Library Centers Tour").

Centers provide students with a variety of activities that students choose from to practice a skill or learn content knowledge. This variety allows for students to select activities that interest them, making them more productive, engaged, and motivated (Cox 52). Many learning objectives can be covered in one learning center and one learning center can provide differentiation for a variety of ability ranges (King-Sears 138). Teacher-librarian Christina

Bentheim splits her class time in two, allowing for both circulation and instruction. She incorporates a guided reading center during the instruction time, so she can support all of her readers, and give extra support to those who are reading below grade level (37). Her other centers provide students with opportunities to play games, use media, practice fluency, explore words, and practice authentic writing (38-39)

Developing and Sustaining Centers

There are many factors to consider when setting up centers in the library. One main factor is the abilities and interests of the students that will be using them. Having clear expectations and procedures for the students is also vital. A variety of activities keeps the learning centers effective as well, allowing students to learn through play and exploration. Students also need to be held accountable for their learning, if the learning centers are going to be an effective teaching strategy.

In order for centers to be successful, they must meet the needs of students. Students need to feel that they are likely to be successful and that what they are doing is important and valued (Ford and Optiz 712). If the centers have meaningful learning activities, the students take them seriously, are engaged, and learn from them (713). Centers including differentiation, enrichment, and remediation opportunities provide for all learners (King-Sears 140; Martin and Green 42; Stout 2-3). One type of center that enhances the library curriculum would be an author study center. This center would include works by a specific author as well as other materials such as biographies and articles about the author. While at the center, students read stories by the author, compare and contrast two or more works, and learn about the author (Bentheim 38). By giving students their choice of activities, they are more likely to stay on task and show progress on learning objectives. By including centers into their curriculum, librarians

open up their time to work with kids on specific information literacy skills and goals, while others have the chance to explore other topics of interest and collaborate with classmates (Bentheim 37).

Learning centers are structured to have independent activities; therefore, informing students of clear procedures and expectations is vital to their effectiveness. Preparing each center with written objectives, rules, and step-by-step directions will help them be more independent and will answer and clarify any questions that arise while the students are working, freeing up the librarian to assist other students as needed (Arquette 5; McCarthy 294; Stout 3; Young, *The Centered School Library* 7). It also keeps students more on-task and less distracting to others because the students are aware of the teacher's expectations beforehand (Stout 5).

Providing students with a variety of center activities and changing them frequently helps keep their excitement and motivation high (Arquette 4; Stout 5). By rotating and changing centers, students will be less bored, and this will result in fewer behavior problems, because the activities are seen as new and fresh. This also gives students the opportunity to practice a greater variety of skills. Giving students choices of activities and allowing for a variety of products within each center also allows for differentiation and meeting the needs of individual learners and learning styles (King-Sears 138; Ontario School Library Association 12).

Allowing students to create their own learning experiences is another key to developing successful learning centers. One way to do this is by giving students the opportunity to play. Play is a vital piece of learning that often stops once formal schooling begins. By allowing students to participate in activities that allow for play, they are more likely to be motivated and openly investigate the world around them. Play is not limited to unstructured imaginative play, but also includes board and electronic games that follow a given set of rules and expectations

(Crow and Robins 36-37). Puzzles are one type of center that enhance critical thinking and problem solving (Bentheim 38). Many students learn more effectively from experiencing new information rather than being taught it (Bottini and Grossman 277).

Finally, in order for learning centers to be an effective teaching strategy, students must be held accountable for their learning. The teacher-librarian must give clear expectations and learning goals, and hold the students to them. Students need to be held accountable for their learning goals, staying on task, and making appropriate decisions on which centers and activities to complete (McCarthy 295). If the student does not feel that the activity is valuable, he is more likely to not learn from it. Data must be collected from the activities, both formally and informally, and be used to guide future learning center instruction and activities (Southall 15).

The Library as a Learning Commons

With focus being placed on student-centered learning and 21st century technology skills, the library is evolving. In order to meet the needs of today's learner, the library space itself is changing, as well as the types of activities that take place inside of it. Greater focus is placed on students' ability to collaborate and communicate across a variety of media, rather than just retain information. By using learning centers in the library, a shift is made to transform it into a learning commons. In this section, the physical space of a learning commons is defined, followed by a discussion on the role of learning centers in a learning commons.

The Learning Commons Space

The transition from a library to a learning commons is partially defined by the use of the library's physical space. The physical space of a learning commons is flexible and functional. Spaces exist within the learning commons to support different learning activities and opportunities for individual, small group, and whole-class instruction (Wernick).

Multiple ages and classes access the learning commons simultaneously, so furniture is comfortable and moveable to allow for a variety of seating arrangements depending on the needs of the students and activities in the learning centers (Loertscher “Flip This Library” 48; Sinclair 4). In an elementary setting, spaces are suitable for young children and older children. This includes having areas such as a stage for reader’s theater, seating for storytime, and providing smaller kid-sized furniture (Wernick). For example, librarian Robin Cicchetti incorporated a stage into her learning commons for reader’s theater that could be easily moved out of the way when not in use (54).

In the learning commons students have access to the materials and information they need. Materials are easily accessible for all who utilize the space, and shelving is in reach of all students. Arrangement of the materials supports flow, so that items are easily located with little guidance from the librarian (Waskow 10).

Access to computers and the Internet is a vital component of the learning commons. Students are connected at all times, through cell phones, computers, and e-readers (Ontario School Library Association 4). Giving them wireless access to the Internet, laptops, and other technologies, such as e-readers is necessary to prepare them for the 21st century (Wernick). Docking stations are provided for students’ laptops and other mobile devices (Sinclair 5). Libraries provide all students with the resources and opportunities to practice becoming proficient digital citizens so they can participate in the Internet-driven global community (Sinclair 4). By providing access to technology within centers, students have a variety of ways to communicate and collaborate with their peers. Librarians provide students with access to useful websites, research guides, pathfinders, WebQuests, subscription databases, and the online

catalog (Diggs 47; Pappas 21). Additionally, the learning commons provides spaces where the training and guidance to use these tools effectively and independently occurs.

Learning Centers Help Make the Library a Learning Commons

While a learning commons looks differently at different grade levels, key elements are always the same. Collaboration, discussion, and the exchange of information are encouraged. Technology and resources are used in new and innovative ways that make communication and collaboration easy. By incorporating learning centers, attention is given to the development of specific knowledge and skills. All contribute to transforming the library space into a learning commons.

An example of combining the key elements successfully is Cari Young's example of offering a science center with tadpoles. She gave students a place to write questions and materials to use to seek out answers, both individually and collaboratively ("Library Centers Tour"). With an activity like this, students are given "the opportunity to ask questions, think about answers, and create new meanings" (Diggs 38).

By providing a variety of center activities which involve working collaboratively, librarians are emphasizing the importance of working together and sharing ideas in order to accomplish a goal or solve a problem. By using learning centers in the learning commons, librarians are fostering collaboration with peers and interaction with information at a level that is suitable for individual needs and interest levels (Hunt 51).

Learning centers provide students with opportunities to observe and interact with the world around them. They are encouraged to make observations, draw conclusions, make predictions, and learn through exploration and interactions with other students. Learning how to express themselves and communicate with others around the world while using technology such

as chat, *Skype*, or email is also an essential skill for students (Koechlin, Luhtala, and Loertscher 23). Communication tools and instructions on how to use them are available in the learning commons. By providing support for this student-centered learning, elementary librarians are shifting the focus of the library into one of exploration and collaboration, which typifies a learning commons.

When librarians incorporate center activities related to technology use, they are providing students with the knowledge, skills, and tools that they will need to be successful in the 21st century. Whether using a 3D printer in a ‘makerspace’ center or a video camera to create and edit a video, these experiences with hands-on technologies will enhance students’ learning and motivation (Loertscher “Maker Spaces” 45). Other centers may have students experimenting with a computer program that reinforces curriculum areas, such as using *Music Ace Maestro* to reinforce music skills and concepts (Casey 50; Hunt 51). Allowing students to participate in online book clubs using online tools, such as *Blogger* and *Wikispaces*, is another way to increase their engagement with others while learning within a center environment (Ontario School Library Association 26).

By changing the focus of instruction and activities in the library to one more focused on the students than on the books, the shift to a learning commons is made. In order for students to be prepared for the 21st century, they need to be able to collaborate, think, and express themselves in a variety of ways. Creating activities and opportunities in centers that emphasize these skills in the learning commons provides an environment for empowering learners.

Many secondary school libraries have already transformed into learning commons, flexible spaces where students easily collaborate, explore, and produce (Wernick). The space has gone from simply a storage center for print books and materials into a functional space where

students interact with digital media as well (Sinclair 4). The transformation is widely due to the increased emphasis on collaboration in a school setting in order to prepare students for a work force where collaboration is frequent (4). Technology is readily available in the secondary learning commons with access to computers, software, and the Internet. The needs of students, not only of the present, but also in the future, are taken into account (Wernick). Currently, elementary school library spaces are beginning the process of transformation into a learning commons as well (Wernick). One way this is being done, is through the use of more flexible scheduling (Bentheim 37; Diggs 32). By allowing students to use the library when they need it, rather than just when they are scheduled to be there, they are given opportunities for ownership of their learning. Another way that this is being accomplished is through the use of learning centers in the elementary library (Young, *The Centered School Library* 5).

CHAPTER 3 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

School librarians use learning centers in the library to provide students with a variety of activities that increase learning, motivation, and attitudes towards content knowledge, and thus transform the library space to a learning commons. The research provided answers the following questions: What are the benefits to children and teachers in incorporating learning centers into the curriculum? How can learning centers be an effective part of the library curriculum? How do learning centers help transform a library into a learning commons?

Benefits of Learning Centers

The use of learning centers has a variety of benefits for both the students and the teacher. Learning centers give students an opportunity to practice skills that they have not yet mastered or need time to practice. Centers are also used for enrichment for those students who have mastered skills that their classmates have not. Students are given the opportunity to practice inquiry, questioning skills, and collaboration in centers. Students generally stay on task better and learn more because of the hands-on nature of centers, and because of this, generally fewer behavior problems arise.

By incorporating learning centers, the teacher has the ability and flexibility to work one-on-one or in small groups with students who need a little extra time and practice, while other students are working independently and collaboratively in small groups. Because teachers are taking a more student-centered approach, they are better able to adapt their lessons and instruction to meet the needs of individual students.

For specials teachers, music, art, and physical education, centers are a way to tie classroom objectives to their curriculum. This allows students more time to practice with course

objectives. It gives students a chance to explore and experiment with related concepts, such as using a new medium in art or exploring a music composition program in music. This also allows students to be able to interact with materials, technology, and supplies that aren't available or conducive to a whole-class lesson.

Learning Centers in the Library

Using centers in the library has many benefits related to both classroom management and curriculum. The students are involved in different hands-on learning activities, which frees up the school librarian to be available for one-on-one assistance for students who need help locating a book or other information. Centers also provide activities for elementary students to complete once they have made their book selections, keeping them engaged and decreasing off-task behaviors. Because students select activities that reflect their interests and abilities, they are more motivated to explore and learn.

Centers in the library provide older students with a chance to learn and explore a variety of topics of interest that may not be in the students' grade level curriculum. These centers include a variety of materials and manipulatives for the students to work with in a more hands-on manner. The learning centers give students an opportunity to practice skills that are necessary in the library, in the classroom, and beyond school. The librarian is able to assess the students' knowledge of information literacy through formal and informal observation of these skills as they are practiced in learning centers.

Transforming the Library into a Learning Commons

Incorporating learning centers into the library curriculum is one element that transforms the library into a learning commons. Collaboration, exploration, and discussion are encouraged. Learning centers allow students to have the opportunity to collaborate with others, both face to

face and across the world by using technology. They give students the opportunity to explore new concepts and ideas. Centers also help students to discuss and solve problems as a group; much like it is done in the real world.

The physical space is flexible to accommodate a variety of learning experiences, many of which are hands-on. The space is easily adapted, depending on the centers and needs of the students, whether it is a stage for reader's theater or a space with a table and an aquarium for observation and questioning about a specific animal. Students have access to technology, computers, and the Internet as a means to gather and exchange information with others. They also have the ability to use other devices such as digital cameras, editing equipment, and software and programs in learning centers in order to explore, create, and share information with others. By shifting the focus of the library instruction to one of greater inquiry, collaboration, and student-centered learning, the library is transformed into a learning commons.

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