

WORKING LEVELS FOR PRIMARY

By Kathy McGrath

When I was teaching first grade I use the idea of "Working levels" with my students. A few weeks after school started each year, when my students had had enough experiences to be able to be reflective about math, I would introduce them to my working levels. I used the idea of working levels to help raise my students awareness of their behavior during our math time and to make the expectations more explicit and to give focus to discussions about what it meant to work hard.

If you decide to use the working levels in your classroom, you will find that the discussions generated are more important than the levels themselves as your students learn what it means to work hard.

The levels are not to be used to label the students but to give them a way of thinking about how that particular day went and to help them become more aware of their behavior.

Level 0: bothers others

Level 1: not working

Level 2: works when reminded

Level 3: responsible and respectful

Level 4: responsible, respectful, challenges self

WORKING LEVELS FOR INTERMEDIATE GRADES

By Cathy Young

Level 4: fully focused on the task, produced quality work, challenged self

Level 3: focused most of the time, able to redirect off-task behavior, some quality work completed

Level 2: little or no learning, difficulty maintaining focus, reminders needed, some work completed

Level 1: Little or no focus, interrupted work of others, little or no work completed, little or no learning

SELF-DIRECTED EXPLORATION by Kathy Richardson

1. Decide what materials you're going to introduce.
You may want to include books, chalkboards, paper, and markers at first and gradually replace them with math materials.
2. Emphasize to the children that this is a work time.
Discuss what hard work looks like.
Make your expectations clear:
 - Share the materials. No throwing.
 - Don't mess up other peoples work. Clean up your work.
3. Support the growth of independence & self-direction by reminding children not to come and get you.
Reassure them that you will see everyone's work as you walk around.
4. Observed the children at work.
Redirect any children that need reminding of appropriate behavior.
5. Have something for the children to do as they finish cleaning up.
6. At the end of the period, gather together and briefly discuss how it went.
7. Expect the children to become more involved over time.

A PLAN FOR WORKING WITH SMALL GROUPS by Kathy Richardson

1. Gather the class together.

As usual, begin the period by gathering the whole class together on the rug. Remind the class what they will be working on at the independent stations, and that you will be working with a small group and should not be interrupted.

2. Ask the group of children you want to work with to stay on the rug.

Give them a task to do while they are waiting for the lesson to begin. I often just let them work with the chalkboards writing or drawing whatever they want. Other times, I might give them a particular job, such as "Count and write the numbers starting with 25," "Choose a number you need to practice writing," or "How many ways can you write equations that add up to seven?"

3. Excuse the rest of the children a few at a time to choose where they are going to work.

Watch the class for a few minutes to make sure they have the materials they need, know what they are supposed to do, and are settled in.

4. Work with the small group for 15 minutes or so.

5. Dismiss the Small Group.

Have the children choose an independent station for the rest of the period, or have them stay where they are and practice a task you just taught.

6. Go around the room and interact with the children who have been working independently.

Make a note of any need you will have to handle either with the whole class, in small group time, or individually.

7. Work time is over, ask the children to clean up and gather back on the rug.

8. Review how Math Time went.

Spend a minute or two reviewing how Math Time went, pointing out what went well that allowed you to work with the small group, or discussing any problems that arose.

WHAT TO DO WHEN PROBLEMS ARISE by Kathy Richardson

Treat the problems that arise as learning opportunities rather than as interruptions. (They really are!)

Be honest and direct with the children. Remind them of your expectations. Don't assume that solutions or alternative behaviors are obvious to them. Discuss ways they might handle particular problems that may come up.

For example,

What can you do if someone else takes the place you wanted to work?

What can you do if you run out of the materials you need?

What can you do if someone knocks over your work?

Don't adapt the rules for the whole class just to accommodate one or two children who aren't able to work independently. Provide more guidelines for particular individuals if necessary.

Instead of expecting everything to be perfect before you try it, just have an escape plan in mind. For example, if everything falls apart because you introduced an activity too fast and no one knows what to do, or you don't have enough materials after all, or the game doesn't work the way you thought it would and everyone is confused, don't panic. Just have a children clean up the math materials and then read a story or sing a song. You can reintroduce the task or choose another one tomorrow.

THE TEACHER'S ROLE by Kathy Richardson

The teachers job is to help children develop a full and complete understanding (internalization) of the concept by providing many different but related activities. He or she supports individual children's growth by immersing them in (or surrounding them with) appropriate experiences.

The activities the teacher offers children should:

- Require children to think and to look for relationships
- Have the potential to be experienced at many levels
- Have value in being experienced over and over again

The use of the activities should support the development of confidence and consistency as well as understanding.

Teachers need to challenge children's thinking, helping them:

- Make connections
- See relationships
- Confront their incomplete understanding

Teachers offer opportunities that help children:

- Focus on particular ideas
- Make connections
- See relationships

However, teachers do not tell the children what to think. They structure the classroom so that what children really think and understand is revealed. They work with small groups and individual children:

- Questioning
- Observing
- Focusing the children's attention
- Modeling or presenting information

DEALING WITH COMMON PROBLEMS AND CONCERNS by Kathy Richardson

1. Some children can't make a choice. They wander around and waste a lot of time.

Some children need to check out all of the choices first before they really get involved. If, after a day or two, they're still having difficulty making a choice, offer some help. You may limit the choices by asking, "would you rather do this one or that one?" Just asking the questions may help them decide on one you haven't suggested. If, on the other hand, they're still unable to make a choice in a reasonable amount of time, you may need to let them know that they are responsible for working hard and that you will make a choice for them if they can't do it for themselves. Give them a chance the next day to choose by themselves again.

2. Some children go to the same activity all the time. I don't think they are getting the experiences they need.

Children often know better than we do what they need to do, and they may be getting the experiences they need by repeating a particular activity. However, some children choose one particular activity over and over again because they feel comfortable there and know they can do what is expected. If you think the child needs to be encouraged to try something new, you might invite him or her to pick something that the two of you could try together.

- 3. Because they get to choose the activity, some children think they are responsible for having made a choice, so they don't take the work seriously. They seem to associate choosing with free play and don't feel accountable.**

We sometimes assume that children understand what we expect and are deliberately being uncooperative. It may be that we need to make our expectations more clear to them. Remind the children that their job is to work hard and that you are allowing them to choose so that they can find the job they are ready to work hard on. You need to let them know that you view this time as serious work and not as "free play" time.

- 4. Some children get upset because they don't get their first choice. Some race to get a place or refuse to choose because they didn't get to do what they wanted.**

Often, children simply need reassurance that the choices will be there again tomorrow and that there will be other opportunities to get their first choice. Over time, children will see for themselves that they don't have to fight to get what they want. It helps children choose activities calmly if you dismiss a few children at a time to choose where they want to work. Remind them that they should have an idea about where they want to work before they are dismissed because you do not wait until they have picked a place before calling others to choose. Sometimes it helps to have children "role-play" the process of choosing so they have a clear idea of what is expected.

- 5. I tried to provide a range of choices, but some children choose tasks that are too easy or too hard.**

I have found that if I provide a range of choices, most of the children will choose the appropriate level. That allows me to focus on those few children who need more help or who need a challenge. After observing for a while to see how the child is working, I can determine whether the task is indeed too hard or too easy. I can then provide guidance if necessary.

- 6. I just don't think kids are able to decide for themselves what level to work on. Many of my children will just do what is easiest. Other children will try to do things that are too hard just to keep up with their friends.**

In my experience, children are able to decide for themselves what they need to work on if the classroom environment supports that expectation. However, in a classroom where children feel they are ranked in competition with other children, some may respond by trying to do things that are too hard and others by giving up and doing whatever is easy. However, in an environment that values and supports each child's growth, this doesn't become the motivator. The teacher has an important role, not only in creating this environment, but also in observing children's needs so she can provide a challenge or help when necessary. Using "extendable" tasks makes this job easier than it would be if you had to provide a variety of tasks for a variety of needs.

- 7. There is so much to deal with. I can't keep track of what everybody's doing.**

I have found that if I try to watch too many children at once, I don't really see anything. You will be farther ahead in the long run if you observe a few children closely. What you will find is that what you observe one child doing, you will notice other children also doing. There really aren't 30 children doing 30 different things. There are clusters of children working in pretty much the same way. You won't be able to (nor do you need to) take notes on every child every day. Just make sure you focus in on a few children each day. Doing that will help you guide the class as a whole.

The particular individuals who really need you will make themselves known. This approach works because you are providing a variety of tasks that naturally meets a variety of needs, and these tasks are available for children to experience over and over. The information you get from watching the children lets you know if there is some confusion you need to deal with or a challenge you need to present. Know that you will get better and better at picking up the clues from the children as you work in this way for a while.