

Listen to What We Hear

Developing Community Responsive Listening Centers

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Jasmine's eyes light up as she hears her mother's voice read a book in Arabic through the class tablet. Her teacher, Ms. Bloom, holds open the matching book as Jasmine and three of her classmates crowd around to see the pictures in *Al-Alwan, Al-Ashkaal, Al-Arqam: Learning My Arabic Colors, Shapes, & Numbers*, by Asma Wahab. "That's Jasmine's mommy reading to us," squeaks Grace, one of the children crowded around the book.

"It is! We can listen to your grandma read next, Grace," says Ms. Bloom.

Jasmine's class is one of seven at the Rainbow Center in east-central Indiana that is taking advantage of new listening centers. Thanks to a 14-week partnership with Ball State University's Early Childhood, Youth, and Family Studies Department, children at the Rainbow Center can now hear recordings of books read by members of their families and the community who share their cultural heritage.

The goal of this partnership was twofold: to offer a unique learning experience to future and current educators and to support the center's efforts to enhance its literacy and language resources to be responsive to the children and families it serves. Together, we created listening centers that aimed to achieve responsiveness through practices and materials supported by emergent literacy theories and current research.

Books and other texts have the potential to reflect identities, experiences, and communities (Sims Bishop 1990). When they do, they can appeal to readers of all ages and prompt literacy enjoyment and growth. However, inequities exist in who is represented in these books and how they are portrayed. This disparity extends to the materials and learning centers found in early childhood classrooms.

Community Responsive Early Literacy: The Value of Listening Centers

When children have access to culturally relevant literature, academic achievement significantly increases (Clark 2017). However, the landscape of children's literature remains remarkably resistant to change. While Latino/a, Black, Indigenous, and Asian American children surpass the number of White children in America's public schools (NCES, n.d.), children's literature remains overwhelmingly White (SLJ, n.d.).

Early childhood educators can offer inclusive language and materials that actively represent all children and families while simultaneously fostering the critical thinking and early literacy skills connected to academic success in kindergarten and beyond. These practices need to encompass all foundational early literacy skills, including oral language development (Dickinson, Nesbitt, & Hofer 2019; NAEYC 2020; Paris 2005).

The field has consistently recognized that enacting engaging, well-conceived listening centers is an effective way to promote these early literacy skills with young children (Fisher & Frey 2019; Schickedanz & Collins 2013). Listening centers are physical areas (or stations) in classrooms. They are designed to help children work collaboratively (in large or small groups) as they listen to oral stories, songs, rhymes, or books through technological means and then engage with what they listened to through exploring, discussing, or creating with others. Sometimes, children look at a written text that matches what they are hearing. Sometimes, they engage solely through listening, talking, and moving.

Planning and Implementing Community Responsive Listening Centers: One Program’s Journey

The children at Rainbow Center have a variety of interests, strengths, needs, and characteristics. Because of this and the number of languages spoken, each listening center had to be unique. We wanted to create centers based on the specific children at this center rather than on the generic, monolithic, identity-based assumptions or stereotypes that can occur in early education settings (Gilliam et al. 2016). An example of such an assumption might be creating a learning center around camping because you consider the rural community in which your students live “outdoorsy” instead of intentionally exploring whether families are interested in outdoor activities.

Each team interviewed families, explaining the idea behind building listening centers in the classrooms. Families excitedly shared about their children, what they (the adults) would like to see in a new listening center, and how they would best like to be involved. Besides interviewing families at drop-off and pickup times, informational fliers and questionnaires were sent home with children to encourage families to offer additional ideas.

Designing the Listening Centers

Each team first assessed the strengths and gaps in their current classroom materials, then began planning the design and content of their listening centers. As the overseers of this partnership, we (the authors) asked the teams to consider several factors, including

- › Children’s progression in early literacy and language development
- › Current classroom resources
- › Family interview results
- › Children’s interests
- › Effective literacy practices
- › Effective community responsive practices

We wanted the centers to be inviting spaces for children. We also requested that teachers offer a wealth of materials, including oral stories, songs, rhymes, and both digital and print books. The latter needed to include board books, interactive books, and wordless books, all from a variety of genres.

Acquiring Funding

We (the authors) applied for and obtained a grant through the university to purchase materials and resources for the listening center. This grant allowed each room to buy a 12-inch tablet, \$400 in furniture (tables, rugs, and storage), \$100 in interactive materials (scarves, puppets, felt boards, and balls), \$100 in technology supports (tablet stands, tablet covers), and \$400 in books. While the funding was useful and exciting to all participants, listening centers can be created with fewer resources. All that is really needed is a recording device (cell phone, inexpensive voice recorder), the public library, and community connections.

With their budget in mind, each team developed a plan for their listening center that would best fit the needs of their particular children, including the physical layout, technological needs, and interactive materials. However, the most important item could not be purchased. For the voices that would narrate our books, we turned to the community.



While centers may have varying access to technological devices, using digital technology for a culturally responsive listening center is a great example of responsible and intentional ways to use technology as a learning tool. (See principle 9 of the position statement on developmentally appropriate practice.)

Finding Storytellers

To incorporate effective literacy practices and ensure community responsiveness, listening center content must be inclusive and unique to each classroom. Before purchasing reading material, our teams of teacher candidates and classroom teachers compiled lists of potential books using well-established and respected lists of quality children’s literature. These included the American Library Association Youth

Media Awards, the International Board on Books for Young People Honour List, and the Social Justice Books Booklists.

Books were evaluated using several criteria, including the extent to which the books

- › Reflected the children’s experiences and identities
- › Reflected the families’ interests
- › Offered new windows into the experiences of others
- › Were written in “own voices”

Teams then searched for developmentally appropriate, high-interest, and community-relevant materials for each listening center. For instance, because the barbershop was a central meeting place in this community, teachers intentionally selected *Crown: An Ode to the Fresh Cut*, by Derrick Barnes. Yet as they searched through book and song recordings available online or from commercial vendors, our teams noticed that the majority of items available were read, talked, or sung by people who did not look or sound like the children and families of Rainbow Center. Given what we know about the lack of representation of diverse social identities in children’s books, this discovery was expected. We decided to ask families and community members to record the listening center content on our tablets.

To attract community interest and involvement, Rainbow Center set up an open house at the adjacent elementary school. Teacher candidates and classroom teachers transformed the library into a book display and recording studio.

As people mill about at the open house, one of the teacher candidates approaches an adult she does not know. “Hi! We are creating listening centers for all the classrooms at the Rainbow Center next door. Would you like to read a book or tell a story? I’ll record it on the tablet, and then the children will get to hear it as they look at the book.”

The adult stops and looks at all the books, a small smile on her face. “I can read any of these, and the kids will get to hear my voice reading?” She picks up *I Love My Hair*, by Natasha Tarpley. “You have my favorite book.”

She then turns to her school-age children, who are browsing the tables full of books. “They can read too,” she says, thereby extending Rainbow Center’s outreach to community members of all ages.

Teacher candidates held recording sessions at Rainbow Center, the local community center, and the elementary school. Community members selected books from a diverse collection of high-quality children’s texts to read and record (see “Choosing Books for Listening Centers” on page 125 for a sampling), or they brought a favorite book to read. We encouraged them to read in their home language. Some also generously and spontaneously shared oral histories of the neighborhood and sang songs. Families and community members were thrilled to be involved—treated as partners who can significantly and meaningfully participate in children’s learning. (See “How to Create a Community Responsive Listening Center” on the next page.) The listening centers would now be filled with meaningful content shared through the voices of family and community members rather than people with whom the children had no connection.

If there is not a way to collect recordings in person, educators can ask families to send in videos or audio of them greeting the class or reading their favorite books from home or the classroom library. Alternatively, they might send a tablet home and ask families to make recordings, then return the tablet.



Using the expertise of families and community members in curriculum planning is crucial. These listening centers were special not just because of the materials that were selected but also because they utilized the community’s knowledge, which must have been evident in the way the individuals read, sang, and spoke their recordings.

Launching the Centers

Once the centers became part of the classroom, they were predominately used with an adult to coincide with each classroom’s curriculum themes, schedules, and student requests. At the end of the project, families and community members were invited to browse through the listening centers during an open house, where the teaching teams showcased their centers and offered opportunities for families to use the materials with their children.

How to Create a Community Responsive Listening Center

Action Steps	Supporting Resources
Get to know and connect with the community where your school is situated.	Visit community spaces, meet community members, and learn and explore where students and families spend time. For example, do your shopping in the community or attend community meetings.
Refresh your knowledge about developmentally appropriate literacy practices and resources for your children by considering commonality, individuality, and context (NAEYC 2020).	<p>Michigan ASCD Literacy Essential Modules michiganascd.org/literacy-essential-modules Developed for leaders and classroom teachers, these free resources show practice in action in real early childhood classrooms.</p> <p>Children's Literature Blog <i>A Fuse #8 Production</i> blogs.slj.com/afuse8production This blog supports adults in staying up to date on children's literature, from board books to chapter books.</p> <p>NAEYC position statements naeyc.org/resources/position-statements</p>
Assess your materials.	Inventory the resources you have. What resources do you need and/or want to create a community responsive listening center?
Solicit children's and families' ideas and expertise.	Interview children and families about their interests, home languages, and favorite books and songs; ask them what they want in their listening center.
Design your listening center area and prepare content.	<p>Consult reputable websites and lists to find books. This is one source: diversebooks.org/resources/where-to-find-diverse-books</p> <p>Ask families and community members to vet the materials. Create multiple opportunities for community members to record content, including in their home languages.</p> <p>Select a final set of materials, including high-quality, hand-picked children's texts and a recording device.</p>
Launch your new listening center.	Gather a small group of children and tell them you are going to listen to a story read by someone they may know. Ask the children to follow along in a book or use materials to creatively respond to the story. Push play and share the recording with children. Watch them react to hearing familiar voices.

Listening Centers as a Community Reflection

So often, we may forget that families are experts in their own right. This project influenced how current and future early childhood teachers thought about and engaged with their community as an asset to

children's development and learning. The listening centers they created were uniquely reflective of the children in a particular classroom: each listening center authentically incorporated classroom families and the larger community while effectively applying emergent literacy theories and research-based literacy practices.



EQUITY

A listening center with books and recordings in the children’s home languages is a wonderful way to support literacy and strengthen family-school connections. Encourage families to read to their children at home in their home languages, and share information with them about how this supports literacy development.

Teacher candidates and classroom teachers came to understand the political nature of early literacy, taking seriously the potential and real harm done to children when literacy practices—and schooling more broadly—attempt to separate children’s funds of knowledge and cultural wealth from their learning (Freire 1970 [2000], 1985; Moll et al. 1992; Yosso 2005b). As one of the teacher candidates participating in this partnership said, “Early literacy has everything to do with linking school and culture together in meaningful ways. We wanted there to be a space where the children could hear their community represented

inside the classroom as well as the different cultures within their families.”

As they seek to promote genuine literacy learning experiences, effective educators become knowledgeable of and responsive to the strengths, interests, values, and needs of a community. They are attuned to children’s and families’ cultures, identities, and home environments. In practice, this means that educators affirm, introduce, value, and reinforce multiple forms of literacy and refrain from normalizing only dominant ways of knowing (Kirkland 2013; Paris & Alim 2017). It also means that educators get to know the community and work to build authentic and deep relationships with families. As one teacher candidate said, “It is an ongoing process that needs constant attention and adjusting. All of these ideas and philosophies and strategies need to be something that is not only a part of who I am as a person and a teacher and a part of my belief system, but something I do and enact in my day-to-day life and in the classroom.”

Choosing Books for Listening Centers

When evaluating books for inclusion in a listening center, it is important to ask three key questions:

- › Does this book reflect the children in my classroom?
- › Does it offer an important window into a different perspective that they may not have experienced?
- › Is it responsive to children in my class and the surrounding community? Is it available in the home languages spoken by children's families?

Here are some book suggestions to help you start your own list:

- › *Baby Goes to Market*, by Atinuke (2017). Set in a busy Nigerian marketplace, this beautiful book offers rhythmic language, humor, and an introduction to numbers.
- › *Love Makes a Family*, by Sophie Beer (2018). By showing simple, joyful activities done by many different kinds of families, this inclusive book demonstrates that the most important part of a family is the love they share.
- › *Danbi Leads the School Parade*, by Anna Kim (2020). Danbi starts school in America after moving with her family from South Korea. Overcoming language and cultural barriers, Danbi shines as she makes friends and finds joy in school.
- › *Maybe Something Beautiful: How Art Transformed a Neighborhood*, by F. Isabel Campoy and Theresa Howell and illus. by Rafael Lopez (2016). A story about how one neighborhood transformed a neighborhood through art, this book will inspire children to create murals through pictures, colors, and shapes that represent their own community.
- › *What Is Light*, by Markette Sheppard and illus. by Cathy Ann Johnson (2018). A lyrical book that emphasizes the salient moments and simple pleasures in children's lives, this text reveals all types of light in the world.
- › *Holi Colors*, by Rina Singh (2018). In this board book of bright photographs and playful rhymes, Holi (the Hindu celebration) is featured as a magnificently fun way for children to explore colors.

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