

Making the Most of the Print Students See in the Early Childhood Classroom

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Abstract

This article reinforces the power of using displayed print in the classroom environment to develop literacy skills. It discusses the type of print to be examined in the early childhood classroom, how to complete a room scan, and four key considerations for each type of print. These considerations include purpose for the print, origination of the print, student representation, and engagement with the print. The article emphasizes that not all print is of equal value and that a regular reflection on the print and modifications made based on that reflection is key to making the most of the literacy-rich environment. With minimal time required to complete a room scan and reflection, the print in the classroom environment can serve as a valuable tool for developing literacy knowledge with early childhood students.

As teachers seek to develop students' literacy skills, thoughts often focus on identifying strategies, activities, and texts that can enhance learning. However, it is important to remember that the classroom environment needs to also be taken into consideration (Nyabando & Evanshen, 2022; Sunday, 2020). It isn't unusual to walk through an early childhood classroom and see a great deal of print. This print may include sheets of paper listing hand washing steps, charts graphing students' favorite colors, posters of famous people, and student-created work. When conversations and instructional activities are tied to it, this print can serve a valuable purpose in developing literacy skills (Stone et al., 2018).

Research continues to strongly support the importance of a literacy-rich environment on literacy gains (e.g. Axelrod et al., 2015; Reutzler, 2015). In fact, the value of a literacy-rich classroom is a point that few if any will debate, and displayed print plays an important part in the literacy rich classroom. (e.g. Stone et al., 2018).

Having print prominently displayed in the classroom environment can also increase second language learners' exposure to academic language. Students already enter the classroom with a wide variation regarding exposure to academic language, but it is evident that English Language Learners have an even larger range (Barnes et al., 2016). Exposure to print can help take students from where they are currently in their language development and strengthen their literacy knowledge (Dyenia et al., 2018).

While a literacy-rich early childhood classroom filled with visible print is important for all children regardless of socioeconomic level, Nell Duke's (2000) seminal study showed that often lower socio-economic schools have less informational print displayed in the environment than higher socio-economic schools. The early childhood classrooms she examined were found to vary in the quantity of print, the kinds of print and how it was used with children. This is especially important because ethnic minorities are more likely to come from lower economic backgrounds than Whites. In fact, in 2021, 19.5% of Black people living in the United States came from low socio-economic homes versus 8% of white people (Statista Research Department, 2022).

However, not all print is equally valuable, and it is important to periodically reexamine the print on display and its use in the classroom to ensure it is best meeting the needs of the classroom participants. The purpose of this article is to encourage educators to look at the classroom environment and determine the value of the print students view and what modifications can be made to the print on display to maximize literacy growth. After learning the type of print that should be examined, four key considerations for the print will be discussed.

Taking a Classroom Scan

The first step to examining classroom print is to take a scan of the environment to capture everything children view in the physical classroom. Consider taking a few snapshots on a cell phone or iPad of the various parts of the classroom environment in order to document all the print that is displayed. Then jot down each example of print displayed in the classroom. Focus attention on the print that is primarily displayed for the students in the class. Table 1 below is a chart that has been modified from its original form and can help teachers organize the information (Altieri, 2023/2024).

Table 1
Room Scan Form for Print Displayed in the Early Childhood Classroom

Print on Display	Origination	Purpose	Representation of All Students	Engagement

Some types of print don't need to be included. Notes directed to adults in the classroom such as teachers and paraprofessionals do not have to be included. Also, semi-permanent print, such as writing on a whiteboard, which will typically be erased at the end of the day, doesn't

need to be listed. Once the scan is done and a list of visible print is made, it is time to reflect on some key considerations for each example of print on display in the classroom environment.

Key Considerations

Think about the following considerations for each type of print that is visible:

Purpose of Print

First, there should always be a reason behind print that is in the classroom environment. If the print isn't meaningful to the teacher, the teacher and students will not engage with it (Gerde et al., 2016). The purpose for the print may be to develop letter knowledge or sight word knowledge through classroom rules, to enhance content knowledge of animals by creating guidelines for class pets or to introduce the months of the year or seasons through a class calendar. Student work is also often on display to reinforce content learning whether that be about plants or their neighborhood. There are many purposes for print to be on display, and these are just a few examples.

It may be that an example of displayed print initially served a purpose but that now the print needs modification to retain its value, or perhaps the print needs removed so that other print can replace it. Think about the purpose that the print on display currently serves and ensure that students are benefitting from it. If it is difficult to articulate the purpose, it may be time to modify the existing print or replace it with newer print.

Origination of Text

Where did the text originate? Did students create the text or was it brought into the classroom? Perhaps classroom print includes a glossy poster displaying various occupations or a timeline the students created to show their class day. While print brought into the classroom is valuable, print that students create often is more meaningful to students (Maloch et al., 2004). Not only do students gain from the actual learning reinforced with its creation and the discussion or collaboration with peers that may have been part of the process, but there is a sense of pride in the fact that they played a part in the creation of the final product (Maloch et al., 2004).

We want to ensure that student-created print is visible in the class. Consider whether each type of print on display is student-created, brought into the classroom, or developed by the teacher with minimal feedback from the students. If the majority of print on display was brought into the classroom, think about how the various print present can be extended to connect with student-created print. For example, if a calendar is present in the classroom, perhaps students can draw or write according to their capabilities or preferences about their favorite month on the calendar, and this writing can be displayed. If there are content specific terms with definitions, consider having students create a visual to help them remember the various terms. Creating these connections to student-created print can strengthen the literacy environment by helping students to understand the various purposes of print (Dowhower & Beagle, 1998).

Student Representation

It is important that all students in the classroom participate in activities and be represented in the print visible in the classroom. This ensures that all students' voices are seen and heard. By modifying groupings in class and the type of scaffolding needed, teachers can

ensure that every student feels valued and plays a role in creating the print (Johnson & Busby 2015).

Check print that is visible to students. Are all students represented? Often some students may leave the classroom for special classes or may not be present when some assignments are completed. In addition, it may be that certain students have their work displayed much more than their peers on the classroom walls. It is important to monitor the print on display and the representation of students so that the room is a welcoming place for all.

Research clearly indicates that students' academic performance and sense of belonging will be influenced by visuals in the classroom (Graham et al., 2020). Through student-created work, students can ensure they see themselves in the classroom environment.

Engagement with Print

While the physical environment is important, also consider how students engage with the print on display. The findings from a recent study by Lee et al. (2021) which looked at 21 classrooms (grades 1-3) emphasize that it is important not to focus solely on the physical environment but instead to take into consideration the relationship of the environment with those in the classroom and instruction. If students are not engaging with the print, then changes need to be made to the print or the instruction. A study conducted with very young learners found that 95% of the print in the environment was not referenced as part of instruction (Gerde et al., 2015). Having print on display in the environment without meaningful student engagement with it, greatly limits the text's value and potential (Lee et al., 2021).

Think about the print in the classroom. How recently have students had the opportunity to actively engage with the print? Can instruction be modified to increase the learning potential of the print? Finally, if students walk past the print without really seeing it, then they really aren't benefiting from it being on display. The active interaction and engagement must be visible and a vital part of the classroom. Drawing students' attention to the print as part of classroom activities can ensure that the print is reinforcing their learning. If there is minimal engagement, and it is difficult to modify instructions to encourage interaction, replace the print.

A Look in One Classroom

A third-grade teacher completed a room scan of the print in her classroom and wrote the information shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Third Grade Teacher's Completed Room Scan

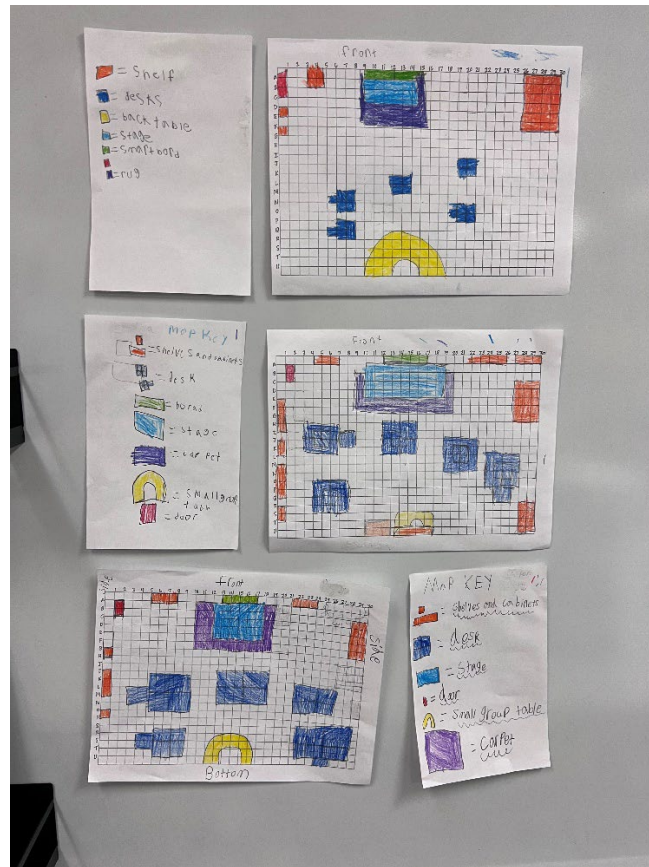
Print on Display	Origination	Purpose	Representation of All Students	Engagement
Maps of Classroom Using Alphanumeric Grid	Local	Learn alphanumeric Grid	Yes	Partners make up questions about maps
Picture Word/Definition	Local	Academic Vocabulary	Yes	Review at beginning and end of each

Social Studies Cards				social studies lesson
World Map	Imported	Mapping Skills	Yes	Use to initially tie into mapping
Math Vocabulary	Imported	Develop Math Vocabulary	Yes	Use in differentiated math time
Word Parts Poster	Local	Decode Unfamiliar Word	No	Students reference for reading and writing
Genre Posters	Imported	Reinforce the Various Genres	Yes	Students refer to during lessons involving reading and writing.

As shown in Table 2, the teacher has both local and imported print on display in her classroom that ties to a variety of content areas. Science and social studies are alternated at the grade level she teaches so that each subject is taught for four-week time periods. At the time the form was completed, the students were studying social studies.

While this teacher has a purchased map of the world and genre posters in the classroom, she also has local text comprised of some student-created classroom maps and sheets of paper with math vocabulary. Unlike the picture/word/definition social studies cards and word parts her students created and put on the wall, the math vocabulary terms and definitions that were placed in the classroom were entirely teacher selected, and students didn't have input into the terms selected and definitions created. Therefore, the social studies cards and the word part posters were labeled as local text while the math vocabulary she labeled as imported.

As the teacher and I discussed the results of her room scan, she talked about the maps students made using alphanumeric grids (Figure 1). The students created a map of the classroom and used the alphanumeric grid to locate objects on the map. This was the beginning of the social studies unit she teaches that develops map skills and the Earth's features. She stated that it is a precursor to learning latitude, longitude, and coordinates.

Figure 1*Student-Created Classroom Print: Classroom Maps*

Knowing this teacher is currently planning ideas for the next social studies unit, I asked her about the unit and what changes she might make regarding the print she has on display. She mentioned that moving forward into the next social studies unit, students will demonstrate an understanding of varied human, cultural, and economic characteristics across earth's surface. She felt she could use the imported print (world map) to encourage multilingual learners and those who have experiences with various places to share their knowledge. Doing that will incorporate various perspectives into her lessons. While she felt the student-made maps of the classroom were an excellent way of teaching how to understand an alphanumeric grid, she expressed a desire to expand on that and create a more personalized experience so that all maps won't be identical. She is considering having the students create a map of a space that is familiar or important to them. Through the completion of this chart, the teacher was able to reflect on the displayed print and create plans to improve her use of classroom print in the future.

Moving Forward

While print has been visible in early childhood classrooms for years, not all print is equally valuable. It is also important to keep in mind that the quantity of print in an environment is not the best indicator of the value the print serves in the classroom (Alsalihi, 2020). After examining 245 classrooms, Dynia et al. (2016) found the teacher child interactions with the print

in the environment cannot be ignored. As they clearly state, presence and use are not the same thing. Therefore, it is important to complete room scans to examine print in the classroom and ensure that it is quality print with which the students are engaging.

Depending on the early childhood classroom, room scans might be done monthly or quarterly. That time frame ensures that print is regularly being reexamined for its value. Although all print won't be removed at the end of each quarter, modifications can be made to the print already present to increase its value as a learning tool. While an informal print assessment can be ongoing throughout the year, make an easy to remember plan to reassess all print in the classroom at regular intervals.

Stone et al. (2018) found that intentional planning, strategic arrangement of the classroom and careful selection of materials will ensure that the literacy-rich environment benefits all students including those with disabilities. However, it should be noted that those with disabilities are often presented in a negative way or underrepresented in materials within the curriculum, so it is imperative that print in the classroom is reviewed for representation (Favazza et al., 2016; Price et al., 2016).

Reflecting on the purpose, origination, student representation, and engagement level, as well as regularly making modifications to existing print ensures that print continues to be a valuable part of the early childhood classroom. When thinking about the literacy development of young learners, the power of the print in the classroom environment cannot be ignored.

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