CHAPTER 4

Planning and Preparing

On an August evening, I stopped at school with two friends. We walked through darkened hallways breathing the smell of new floor wax. I unlocked the classroom door and flipped light switches. As though I had waved a magic wand, a medley of bright colors and shapes appeared before our eyes. Catchy phrases, posters, and pictures flashed from bulletin boards covered with brightly colored background paper. My favorite children’s books lined the chalkrails and countertops. Disks of color, designed to resemble balloons and labeled with the color words, hung from the lights. Only one part of the room remained undecorated: a bulletin board set aside for self-portraits the children would draw on the first day.
After nearly two weeks of unpacking, arranging, and decorating, I had my room ready for the children’s arrival. My preparations for the opening of school were akin to those of an expectant mother preparing a nursery and, like a mother-to-be, I was eager to show off the results of my efforts.

My friends gazed around and then, very gently, one said, “Gee, I think if I was a first grader coming here, I’d feel a little scared. I mean, there’s so much to look at, so much I’ve gotta learn.”

“Really?” I answered. “I guess things have changed since you and I went to school.”

“Well, it’s all very attractive. It’s just that there’s so much.”

Looking back, I realize that the glitzy appearance of my classroom rivaled the fast-paced stimulation of television cartoons. I took room preparation seriously and sweltered for hours in the August heat to create that riotous display. I thought the definition of “dedicated teacher” depended on both time invested and elaborate appearance. Sometimes parents, administrators, and fellow teachers complimented my results, but despite all the effort I expended every year, no child ever commented on any aspect of the room’s appearance.

My lovely room remained neat for a couple of weeks. As September waned, the room became messy and the displays tiresome. The hectic pace of day-to-day teaching left little time to create new fancy bulletin boards. To decorate the room I relied on the children’s projects from art classes or bulletin boards from previous years, which I pulled from the closet.

I recognize now that all the preparations for school focused on establishing a classroom that belonged to me. I was the teacher and I believed the room decor was my responsibility. When my visitor indicated that perhaps my room was a bit overwhelming, I rationalized away the remark because I certainly didn’t want to make changes in my perfect room at this late hour. But the next August I remembered her comment and decided to cut back on the decorating—I hung nothing from the lights! Change came slowly.

**Structuring a Learner-Centered Classroom**

My preparations for school have certainly changed. I want the classroom to be warm and inviting when the children arrive that first day, but not overwhelming. I’ve discarded the visual bombardment of laminated colors and shapes, posters, cute quotes, and oversized characters that once filled the walls. Except for the strip above the chalkboard where I tack the children’s names, the bulletin boards are empty. In a few weeks these bulletin boards will display pictures of authors, children’s art work, a mural painted by some of the group in response to *Charlotte’s Web*, a collection of litter from our ecology planning.
study, and charts recording the children’s ideas on urban and rural communities. Although these bulletin boards may not look as polished as those I spent hours crafting, they mean more to all of us. The first year I decided not to decorate the room for the opening of school, I admit I was nervous! Like a child asking permission, I sought out the principal to discuss my decision. He had no problem; the anxiety was mine.

I moved from interior decorator to professional decision maker and now prepare for the opening of school by anticipating what the children and I need for smooth operation of our classroom. Before school begins, I do what is essential to focus on the children during those first critical days, leaving as many tasks as possible for us to do together. Everything that goes in this classroom must contribute to our purposes: learning and literacy development in a supportive community.

What brought about this change for me? I came to realize that all the careful preparations of the physical environment do not necessarily create a classroom structure that responds to children’s natural learning processes. Coming to understand the meaning of structure was a key issue in my professional growth. This changed me as a teacher, changed everything I did in preparation for school, and changed my teaching in the classroom. Donald Graves has often spoken about a classroom structure that is predictable (Graves 1983). Sometimes I hear teachers interpret predictability and structure to mean adhering to a tight and carefully orchestrated schedule and set of procedures. Traditionally, we in education have perceived a structured classroom to be one where the teacher is visibly in control, talking to children who sit quietly, listening and following the teacher’s dictates. But Graves speaks of an invisible structure rather than this visible one. The invisible structure lies in the flexible operation of the classroom, worked out with the students and in which everyone has an investment. The predictability inherent in such an environment enables children to learn how to make responsible decisions and to engage in purposeful learning.

This change in the concept of structure has often led to misconceptions. Learner-centered classrooms have sometimes been perceived as having a “lack of structure.” On the contrary, these are highly structured classrooms where children take responsibility for their work, their behavior, and their learning. They know the parameters, understand what is expected, and operate accordingly. They also know how to make appropriate decisions without relying on the teacher for their every move. This environment has high standards and high expectations for children’s learning and their behavior—and the children know it!

The teacher’s role in this structure is different. A teacher reminisced about the way she began teaching. “I was forever trying to catch errors,” she said, “an octopus reaching out to grab hold of everything my students did wrong and stop it because I knew the right way. My role now is far more compas-
sionate and, therefore, I believe more helpful.” We use words such as *facilitator, nurturer, coach* to expand the definition of “teacher.” As I establish classroom structure, I hope to provide the security that there is definitely someone in charge, someone who plans, negotiates, and shares expertise, but who is also a learner. This teacher is continually looking out for the needs of each and every student, and she’s in touch with those individual needs because the classroom structure accommodates this.

One day a visitor in my room came up to me and said, “How do you operate without any structure?”

“Tell me a little more what you mean,” I replied.

“Well,” she went on, “the children move around the room. Everybody’s writing something different. It just seems so chaotic. And when do you collect their papers? How can you manage all this without a structure? This must work for you, but I just don’t see how.”

Another visitor commented, “What incredible structure you have here. There’s so much organization! I talked to every child and each one told me exactly what they were doing—and everyone was doing what they were supposed to do.” The two visitors observed the same group of children on the very same morning.

Children need a structure. So do I. We need to know that every day after lunch we will read, that in the late morning we will write, that each morning there will be time to chat and share together. We need to know that we will receive responses to our work and that we will make choices throughout the school day about what we read, what we write, and how to proceed in our learning. We need to understand that we will make mistakes and know that this is okay because mistakes are a natural part of learning. We need boundaries and we need flexibility.

As I establish the classroom structure, I’ve got to remember that learning is a messy, nonlinear, idiosyncratic process. If I look honestly at the children, this fact is obvious every day! But maybe this fact is precisely what brings the temptation to organize, sequence, and manage learning. I keep things simple by eliminating clutter and keeping only essentials. And I’m very organized. Most important, I strive to be very clear in communicating with the children how the classroom functions so that their understanding is clear. This provides us a solid foundation to begin together.

**Setting Up the Classroom**

When it comes to setting up the classroom, there are specific decisions I make to prepare the *physical environment* and the *academic environment.* (The following may seem obvious to seasoned teachers, but it is essential to setting up a
learner-centered classroom. There’s nothing sacred about this information and I’m forever tweaking it. Please skim and scan to suit your purposes.)

**Physical Environment**

I consider the materials and supplies we need and then plan the room arrangement.

**Materials and Supplies**  *Tools for writing.* I sharpen pencils (I prefer ones without erasers for beginning writers so that they quickly learn that it’s okay to line-out and continue writing rather than strive for a “perfect” copy), write names on crayon boxes, and set out unlined white paper for writing on the first day. I’ve found that lined paper can frustrate young children’s writing efforts because some kids feel compelled to use the lines but have difficulty. Unlined paper serves both drawing and writing purposes and creates a more natural and relaxed writing experience. It also allows me to see how children manage the blank space as they place letters on a page: left to right, right to left, top to bottom, helter-skelter. We’ll mount these first pieces of writing on the bulletin board. On our September parent night they provide a glimpse of the writing of all the children in the room.

I borrowed an idea from Mary Ellen Giacobbe and made blank books of forty pages (8½-by-11-inch) for the children to use during the first few weeks of writing workshop. These books certainly aren’t essential, but by using them, the children and I avoid struggles to manage several sheets of paper, to use the stapler, or to start a writing folder during the first days of school. In the past I made fancy books with wallpaper-covered cardboard, but now I give children oaktag to design their own covers and put together books with brads.

I set up five small cardboard file caddies—the kind that are purchased flat and ready for construction—to hold the children’s writing. Once I used a plastic milk crate, but twenty-five or more children crowding around one container to retrieve and put away their writing books became chaotic. Assigning several children to each caddie eliminates confusion and also provides convenient units for me to peruse the children’s writing, going through one caddie an evening.

Gradually, we will establish a writing center, a place to keep the paper and tools for writing, but the books of blank paper, crayons, and pencils are enough to start. Eventually the writing center will hold a variety of paper: unlined, lined, paper with lines on half of the sheet and a blank space for drawing on the other half, construction paper for covers. The center will include tools for writing and editing: pens, colored pencils, tape, scissors, stapler, staple remover.

**Classroom library.** From the first day, children’s books saturate the life of our classroom. So, when I set up the room, a major focus is displaying lots
of children’s books. I’m particular about what I put out. I weed out old, shabby, or dull texts and strive for quality literature presented attractively. When children choose books to read, they initially go for attractive books and they will spend tremendous energy learning to read these books. I want them expending their efforts on quality material.

The genres of children’s literature I display at the beginning of school include:

- **Folktales and fairy tales**—stories familiar to many children. I choose several versions of favorite fairy tales with a variety of illustrative styles.
- **Wordless picture books**—books that invite children to “read” the pictures, to tell their own stories.
- **Predictable books**—those with repetitious language or plot sequences that encourage children to join in during an oral reading.
- **Songs and chants in picture-book format**—the text in these books is already familiar to children and they can “read” the words easily.
- **Poetry**—lots of poetry from Mother Goose to “easy-to-read” collections, anthologies, and small volumes on specific themes.
- **Modern classics**—traditional favorites that are popular with children year after year, such as Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are* or McCloskey’s *Make Way for Ducklings*.
- **Leveled books**—particularly books for children who have had little experience with books and books that will provide beginning reading material. I began reading workshop before “leveling” books became popular. Learning to choose appropriately was a reading skill we worked on, though we never spoke of “levels.” The children became very good at choosing books they could read. They never saw themselves as ahead or behind one another as readers and there was no rush or competition to move through levels.

Not all of the thousand or more books that I’ve collected will be available in the classroom on the first day; I will set aside some titles to bring out as the year progresses. And undoubtedly I will purchase new titles as the year goes on, for the arrival of new titles fuels our continuing interest in reading and in good books. The essential idea of a classroom library is lots of books on a range of topics, genres, interests, and reading levels that are accessible to all the children.

**Art supplies.** I distribute scissors, paste, and crayons to each child during the first days of school. I also store art supplies in a cupboard where the children have access to them. I include crayons, colored chalk, scissors, paste, clay, construction paper and drawing paper, paint, and brushes. Gradually, I add an assortment of other items for creative construction: toothpicks, empty
cardboard rollers from paper towels, buttons, lace, and fabric scraps. From time to time I share directions for constructing simple art projects, such as puppets.

**Drama props and puppets.** For imaginative play I gather a few items: hats, a telephone, a wig, a magic wand, aprons, etc. There’s also an assortment of puppets. Children need very little to stimulate ideas; with imagination, a Raggedy Ann puppet becomes a fairy godmother or a witch.

**Games, building blocks, puzzles.** The games I choose (such as checkers) emphasize thinking rather than chance. I’ve collected an assortment of blocks and other construction toys, and I have a few puzzles (the kind that become group projects over a period of days or even weeks).

**Media equipment.** A lot of options are available including tape player, record player, headsets, computer, television, camera, video player. For the opening of school, I put out the record player and some favorite records for sing-along and creative movement, set up an audiotape of a children’s book and connect it to individual headsets, and add copies of the book for the children to follow along as they listen. We use the computer for writing and researching in my classroom, never for electronic worksheets to practice “skills” out of context of authentic reading and writing. Once writers became fluent I introduce them to the computer and a rotating schedule allows for individual use on a daily basis. I want to provide the children with the computer writing experience but pen and paper, I’ve found, is basic for young writers.

**ROOM ARRANGEMENT** To set up the classroom, I incorporate the following:

- Writing center—a place for writing supplies and for the children’s writing.
- Classroom library—shelves, tubs, chalkrail, a paperback book rack; I put books everywhere, many with their covers showing.
- Designated places for blocks, games, art supplies and a work area for art, drama props, puppets, computers, etc.
- Large-group gathering area—a place where the class can convene for read alouds, for sharing writing, etc. A twelve-by-fifteen-foot rug (our “story rug”) designates this area in our classroom.
- Small-group conference area—a round table of child height serves for small-group meetings for writing or reading conferences.
- Places for children’s interests—a counter to display the treasures they bring to the classroom and bulletin board space for each child; a sectioned-off area of a large bulletin board provides each child with a display space (photos taken of the children on the first day and stapled in the corner of each space identify its owner).
• Student space—individual student desks meet a basic need to provide each child a private space for storing supplies.

• Teacher space—my desk, a private space for my things. Like the student desks, it’s off-limits to everyone but the owner. I’ve considered removing my desk to gain floor space, but I need a place for my things and to say, “Put it on my desk.”

When I set up the classroom, I arrange student desks in two semicircles around a round table that serves as a small-group conference center and a place for me to work from for large-group instruction. The semicircular arrangement allows the children to make eye contact with others during our class discussions, a definite plus in building a community. I first saw this seating arrangement in my own first-grade class; Mrs. Kearney, in the 1940s, unbolted those old iron and wooden desks from the floor and fastened them to two-by-fours so we could move them around. She was years ahead of her time when she broke up the “little house on the prairie” schoolroom arrangement in favor of one that took the focus off the teacher in front of the class and shifted it to individual members of a group.

Later, I may move student desks together in pairs (maintaining the semicircles) to facilitate the natural talk surrounding reading and writing. Or we may move desks to “top-secret positions” for private work, such as a testing situation. But to start the year, I keep the desks separated. In September, first graders don’t tune in to large-group talk when they sit with a partner. With some classes, children can manage pair seating rather quickly and with some groups it takes months. It depends on the individual kids and the tone of the class.

I sit beside the round table as I read a children’s novel during the opening of the day or during large-group discussions. Years ago, when back problems prevented me from standing all day, I began sitting whenever possible. I discovered I enhanced communication and changed the entire tone by leaving an authoritative stance and moving to a position that invited natural conversation between the children and me. Such a little thing, yet how different from the edicts I remember from teacher training and administrator observations during my first years of teaching!

With student desks in place, I set up the rest of the room (Figures 4–1 and 4–2). I unpack my books, collect others from the school library, and display them around the room. Children need to see the covers of the books, not just the spines on shelves. I stand books on chalkrails, window ledges, counters, and shelving, and fill a paperback bookrack. The books project a welcoming appeal. When tempted to do too much, I remember Lisa, a first grader from years ago who one day in late March pointed to a word taped to the window and asked, “Mrs. Avery, why’s that word on the window?” The word: window.
I’d taped it there in August and Lisa had no idea what it said or why it was there. The children must understand the purpose of everything in the classroom, so now what goes up connects to classroom learning and usually is created with or by the children.

In the first few days of school I will spend time showing the children where everything is and outlining procedures for use. I keep instructions clear and simple and explain them a little at a time so that everyone knows how to make efficient use of our resources. Critical to room arrangement is accessibility.
ity. Accessibility means the room is designed and introduced to the children so that they know:

- where things are
- how to locate and use items and the appropriate time for using them
- the purpose of using materials
- how to make decisions for using class materials to enhance learning

I want children to use the classroom to the fullest. I want them to develop responsible and independent ways of using materials so that they don’t have to wait for me or get permission. They need access to books, paper, art supplies, puppets, games, etc. But to accomplish these goals, I must take time in the beginning to introduce everything and discuss procedures for use.

Accessibility is more than being able to get to materials. In setting up the room so that children have access to supplies, I am simultaneously clearing the way so that we are accessible to each other: child to child, teacher to child, child to teacher. Materials, supplies, programs serve us, are under our control, rather than the other way around. Learning in this type of classroom emerges in the context of human interactions, sometimes involving materials, but never removed from relationships with others.
ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT
The decisions involving the academic environment include curriculum requirements, time and scheduling, teaching strategies, and record keeping—always taking into account each learner’s needs.

CURRICULUM When I initially planned for writing and reading workshops, I consulted the district curriculum guides, the scope and sequence charts from programs adopted by the school district, and assorted lists of skills considered appropriate for the grade level I taught. I compiled a list of all the concepts and skills I planned to cover during the course of the school year and referred to the list as a means of checking on myself. Was I covering the curriculum?

That first list contained specific skills under these categories: decoding skills, comprehension skills, attitudes and appreciation of literature, genres of literature, and study and reference skills. Initially, it was helpful to have this list for reference. Soon, however, I internalized the list and taught by responding to children, demonstrating specific content and skills and strategies as they were needed. Of course, I am still responsible for addressing the areas of the curriculum adopted by our school board. To do anything less would be to function as an irresponsible teacher—or a brazen revolutionary! But as the professional in the classroom, I am continually making decisions as to how to present curriculum. One result of a responsive teaching style is that curriculum in my classroom became integrated (see Chapter 18). But integration, I came to understand, was not merely connecting subject matter through teacher-planned units. Full integration occurred within each learner, as that learner constructed meaning from the classroom experiences. Facilitating this internalized integration required my expertise, my knowledge of content, and a keen awareness of the individual needs of the children. I needed to know the wide range of strategies that readers may employ while reading, be aware of techniques writers use to refine and craft writing, and stay abreast of new releases in children’s literature. I had to be informed of new discoveries and information about social studies and science areas. Maintaining one’s expertise on particulars related to curriculum is essential to being a professional.

TIME AND SCHEDULING Each year the principal distributes schedules of the times classes go to lunch and to special area subjects. The rest is up to the classroom teachers. I’ve learned that it is essential to provide chunks of time for the curriculum basics rather than splinters of time to address a fragmented curriculum. Each day I incorporate a block of time for:

- Writing workshop—time when we draft and craft writing
- Reading workshop—time to read, develop the skill of reading
• Literature time—time for reading aloud and talking about books
• Math—time to develop concepts and practice math skills
• Content areas—time to focus on science, social studies, and health. It’s impossible to fit all into each day, so I designate a time block and focus on one.
• Free play or individual choice—a structured time when children choose from established options: art, puppets, reading, writing, puzzles, games, etc.
• Opening of the school day—a beginning to bring us together and start our day. Beyond the traditional activities, our beginning includes a word-play activity and reading from a children’s novel.
• Handwriting—not a daily activity, but a part of the curriculum I address with two or three fifteen-minute, teacher-directed lessons a week

Identifying these parts of the school day, I map out the schedule (Figure 4–3). An important feature of the schedule is that it is both stable and flexible. I make adjustments as needed. If reading workshop is going well, I’ll extend the time, knowing that another day I’ll begin social studies earlier than scheduled. The exact time I move from free play into our opening each morning depends on the children’s activity and the demands of a particular day. And while the schedule denotes chunks of time for particular areas, I’ve found that the various parts of the school day begin meshing one into each other. In literature time, we read about science and social studies topics and we discuss authors and their writing processes. Reading aloud before writing workshop often establishes a natural connection, and there may be a writing mini-lesson embedded during the talk about literature allowing writing to begin with a brief, focused reminder of something discussed moments before. Children’s topics in reading and writing workshops emerge from books and topics discussed during other parts of the school day.

Teachers often tell me about all that they are required to cover in the school day and the way their day becomes dissected. In my experience, the class worked more efficiently when we had large chunks of time for the basics. First, we don’t drop as much time moving from activity to activity and, perhaps more important, we incorporate skills, that are often separated, into actual reading and writing where the children more readily pick them up.

GROUPING CHILDREN I’ve found it a definite advantage to teach in a heterogeneous, self-contained classroom (one where all the children stay with one teacher all day except for music, art, etc.). In our workshops, I can present lessons to the entire group and then work with individuals in conferences or convene small groups—groups with flexible membership to avoid falling into the old ability grouping. Learning connections develop with ease and almost
effortless grace in a self-contained, heterogeneous classroom. I can teach meaningful wholes instead of dissected parts. I save time. I avoid the hectic pace that is so much a part of ability-group tracking that schedules teachers with different groups of children each day. I can establish a community of learners who know each other well, understand and value each other’s contributions. All children learn much from their peers in such an environment.

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RECORD KEEPING  Before school starts I make up two folders for each child, one for reading and one for writing (color-coding the children’s names designates writing or reading). Inside the reading folder I staple two papers for record keeping. A blank one is used for “Anecdotal Records” on which I write observations of a child’s successes, comments, and interactions with books. The other sheet is the “Reading Record,” a simple form (with room for five entries on one page) for my notes when a child reads a book to me. Similarly, stapled in the writing folder is a blank Anecdotal Record sheet and a simple form labeled “Writing Record.” This form is designed to record notes from conferences (usually held with a small group of children) that I conduct when a child prepares a piece of writing for publication.

In addition, I draw up two record sheets to use with the entire class. One is a grid with children’s names down the length of the sheet and days of the week across the top, forming a daily checklist that lasts two weeks. I carry this paper with me as I move among the children during writing workshop as Giacobbe advocated. A key indicates the various markings I use to indicate my perceptions of the child’s engagement in writing as I talk with that child during a writing conference. The second record sheet is simply a piece of unlined eight-by-eleven-inch paper sectioned off into blocks, one for each child in the class. I use this paper to record anecdotal notes as I confer with individual children during reading and writing workshops. (See the appendices for record sheets.)

I label three more folders to hold these group records: one for the conference checklist and one each for the anecdotal records for both writing and reading workshops. I keep the group folders with the children’s individual record folders in a small cardboard file caddie on the round conference table where it is easily accessible. My record-keeping system to start the year is ready.

LESSON PLANS  I use a loose-leaf notebook as my plan book, adding pages I redesign each year to fit my schedule. I make a master weekly class schedule on two sheets of paper, filling in as much as possible. For example, under writing workshop I write: “Mini-Lesson” and leave a space to fill in the topic later. I duplicate the lesson-plan pages, punch holes in them, and place them in the notebook so that an open spread shows an entire week. I write a mini-lesson topic into the plan the day before I teach it. Planning any further ahead would defeat the responsive nature of the instruction. There’s space to write notes for any particular part of the day—plans for a publishing conference, for instance. In addition to the plan book, I keep a folder in my desk for substitute teachers that contains a two-page description of the classroom and
how it operates. I describe how writing and reading workshops are conducted, suggest a couple of mini-lessons the substitute might use, and explain the workshop checklists and record keeping. I've found that substitutes have no trouble working with the procedures and the children capably maintain the structure.

**SOCIAL CLIMATE**

The organizational planning I've described here is necessary, but alone does not determine the effectiveness of the learning environment. There must also be an atmosphere (see Chapter 3) where everyone is valued and where social interactions nurture each member of the classroom community.

On the Saturday before Labor Day, a friend and I leave the classroom we had just prepared for the opening of school. It took us only a few hours, in contrast to the days I once spent at this task. We pause at the doorway and look around.

“It’s mostly books,” she says.

“Yes. Without them it’d be pretty bare,” I admit and flip the light switch. The September twilight catches the long shadows of books the children and I will read together over the year ahead.

**FIRST ENCOUNTERS**

The night before school begins, I phone all the children to introduce myself to them, chat briefly, and ask them to bring a favorite book to school the next day. I reach two-thirds of the class. This task is time-consuming but very worthwhile. One mother told me weeks after school started of the importance of this phone call: “She went to bed with a smile, eager for the morning. Before you called, she had worried all day about going to school.”

The phone conversations with the children are fun and fascinating. I ask how I might recognize them tomorrow and they eagerly tell me of their new clothes and their physical descriptions.

“I’ll tell you one thing. I have dark brown hair and light shoes.”

“I don’t know what I look like. I’ll have to ask my Mom.”

When I ask about books, the children respond quite candidly.

“I got a whole pile of books up in my room.”

“My Dad reads to me almost every night, except when he doesn’t.”

“I do a little books. I’d rather play computer games.”
“I can tell you my favorite book. Storybook.”
“I don’t have no books, not really. I watch TV.”

When I ask one little girl to bring a book to school, her shy voice changes tone and she cries out, “Okay! I’m going to pick one out right now!” When I hang up from the final call, I too am eager for the morning.
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