

BEYOND CIRCLE TIME: MEANINGFUL LARGE AND SMALL GROUP MEETINGS

By: Sarah Ozuna, MS
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ABOUT ME

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Sarah Ozuna is an Assistant Professor of Practice at the University of Texas at Austin and a Master Teacher at the Priscilla Pond Flawn Child and Family Laboratory at UT Austin. At the lab school, she teaches the youngest toddler class and the 3-4 year old preschool class. She has about seven years experience teaching young children in the Austin area and this is her fourth year at the lab school as a Master Teacher. Sarah was born and raised in the Austin area. She graduated from the University of Texas with a Bachelor of Science in Human Development and Family Science with a Concentration in Early Childhood and received her Master of Science in Human Development and Family Sciences with a concentration in Family and Community Services from Oklahoma State University. She has also completed graduate certification work in Play Therapy from the University of California at San Diego.

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Identify purpose of large group meetings & review ways to make them meaningful.
- Explore examples of successful large groups & identify 2-3 areas of improvement to current large group meeting.
- Explore different types of small group meetings & there benefits.
- Discuss child assessment opportunities & review examples of small-group activities.
- Identify 2-3 small group concepts to introduce in current program.

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LARGE GROUP
MEETINGS

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TYPICAL CIRCLE TIMES

- Often involve:
 - a welcoming song
 - calendar review
 - weather update
 - classroom job assignments for the day
 - discussions about seasons or holidays
 - and maybe a story, discussion question, or prompt.

...BUT WHAT IS MEANINGFUL ABOUT EACH OF THESE?

Beneke, S. J., Ostrosky, M. M., & Katz, L. G. (2008). Calendar time for young children: Good intentions gone awry. *Young Children*, 12-16.

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MAKING LARGE GROUP GATHERINGS MEANINGFUL

Targeting: community, concepts of time, sequencing, patterns, observing the outside world, number concepts, responsibility, emergent literacy, gross/fine motor movements.

Beneke, S. J., Ostrosky, M. M., & Katz, L. G. (2008). Calendar time for young children: Good intentions gone awry. *Young Children*, 12-16.

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WHAT DOES RESEARCH SAY ABOUT CIRCLE TIMES

- Temporal development evolves during preschool
- Need to understand concepts like *before*, *after*, *past*, *present*, & *future*
 - E.g., “I did that last-erday…My Mom will be back in three sleeps…”
- Duration needs to be developmentally appropriate for age & maturity

Virginia Department of Education’s Training & Technical Assistance Center at Old Dominion University. (2018, October). *Rethinking Calendar Time for Preschoolers*. <https://ttac.odu.edu/early-childhood/rethinking-calendar-time-for-preschoolers/>

Zhang, M., & Hudson, J. (2018). The development of temporal concepts: Linguistic factors and cognitive processes. *Frontiers in Psychology*, doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2018.02451

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SUCCESSFUL LARGE GROUP MEETINGS

Not all should be lost from the traditional large group model, but it must have meaning, be purposeful, and developmentally appropriate.

- Welcoming & build community
- Developmentally & age appropriate (short!)
- Interactive & engaging (include visuals)
- Consider (classroom schedule, time of day, seating arrangements, classroom design & physical space)
- Distinct transitions to & from group



Stanford University. (2018, August 14). *Making Circle Time Count*. <https://dreme.stanford.edu/news/making-circle-time-count>

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TIPS FOR A PRODUCTIVE LARGE GROUP MEETING

Be creative and innovative. Try something, see how it works, and adjust as needed!



- Establish standards & set realistic expectations
- Routines are critical
- Mindfulness strategies helps ground children → focus
- Consider transitions
- Be flexible & adjust as needed
- Avoid introducing concepts that can be addressed in small groups

Beneke, S.J., Ostrosky, M. M., & Katz, L.G. (2008). Calendar time for young children: Good intentions gone awry. *Young Children*, 12-16.

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WHEN PLANNING LARGE GROUP CONSIDER

- Location (distraction free, space for each child)
- Schedule (morning, mid-day, end of day)
- Goal of group time (realistic expectations & purpose)
- Transition to group
- Activity (engaging & meaningful)
- Transition from group

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LARGE GROUP EXAMPLES

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SCHEDULE, ROUTINE, LOCATION



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GOALS

- Attention & listening
- Ability to work in a group
- Turn taking
- Introducing a topic or theme
 - Patterns & sequencing through clapping songs or games like copy cat
 - Life cycles through a story book
 - Friendship through puppets or a flannel board story
 - Rhyming words through finger plays

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USE EFFECTIVE TRANSITIONS

- Transition to large group
 - Clean-up song
 - Jobs for those that need them
 - Gathering song (Meet Me at the Carpet, Have a Seat on Your Mat, Who Came to School Today)
 - Calming activity to center focus
- Transition from large group
 - Leaving song (Jack in the box, If you're wearing/If you're name starts with, End-of-day box)
 - Jobs for those that need them

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MAKE IT INTERACTIVE



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INCORPORATE TALENTS OF OTHERS



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CELEBRATE CLASS CULTURE



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LARGE GROUP
ANALYSIS!

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THINK OF YOUR CURRENT LARGE GROUP MEETING

Take a few minutes and consider:

- Do you meet in the best location?
- Are your expectations realistic?
- Are your expectations developmentally appropriate for your group (duration, interactive)?
- Are your normal large group meetings fun & meaningful for you & the children? How do you know?
- Identify 2-3 areas you could adjust to improve your large group meetings.

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SMALL GROUP MEETINGS

Small groups create an intimate learning environment to broaden and deepen children's knowledge and understanding of concepts across developmental domains.

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BENEFITS OF SMALL GROUP LEARNING



- Individualized attention
- Target academic & social skills
- Peer teaching & observational learning
- Increases engagement & participation
- Strengthens relationships
- Provides assessment opportunity
- Extends learning concepts

Tal, C. (2018). The Challenge of implementing small group work in early childhood education. *Global Education Review* (5)2, 123-144.

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WHAT DOES RESEARCH TELL US?

- Small group and 1-1 instruction offers social & academic benefits to children with developmental delays or disabilities *Garfinkle, A.N., and Schwartz (2002).*
- Carefully-designed small group instruction using instructional feedback increases children' s learning of target information *Lane1, J.D., Gast, D.L., Shepley, C., and Ledford, J.R. (2015).*
- Skills learned in small-group settings (e.g., sharing) can be transferred to classroom settings.
- Small group instruction increases children' s reading competencies in elementary settings *Wilson, T., Nabors, D., Berg, H., Simpson, C., and Time, K. (2012).*

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CAVEATS TO SMALL GROUP INSTRUCTION

Implementation is complex but key to successful small groups!

- Require skilled facilitator
- Be prepared to capitalize on organic moments
- Consider classroom staffing needs
- Time/Routine (daily schedule)
- Location (in classroom or out)

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MEANINGFUL SMALL GROUP MEETINGS

- Incorporate specific & observable goal
- Engaging & based on children's interests
- Intentionally planned & organized
- Take place in a smaller setting
- Can develop organically - take advantage of the learning opportunity



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SMALL GROUP EXAMPLES

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EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING SKILLS

- Planning
- Sustained attention
- Inhibitory control
- Perspective taking
- Managing emotions
- Pattern recognition
- Problem solving



Ex. Create a group story!

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MATH SKILLS

- Number sense (ex. counting)
- Measurement
 - Classifying
 - Sorting
 - Grouping
- Spatial sense
- Patterns & shapes
- Problem solving



Ex. Exploring patterns and geometry through parquetry!

Ex. Organizing sticks from tallest - shortest!



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LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

- Phonological awareness
 - Patterns
 - Rhymes
- Letter & sound recognition
- Name recognition → writing one's name



Ex. Discuss letters and sounds while writing child's name!



Ex. Connect print to spoken words!



Ex. Play letter leap frog!

Connor, C.M., Morrison, F.J., & Slominski, L. (2006). Preschool instruction and children's emergent literacy growth. *Journal of Educational Psychology* (98)4, 665-689.

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SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL

- Express & manage emotions
- Regulate emotions
- Take turns
- Perspective-taking
- Initiate & sustain relationships
- Independence



Ex. Play board-games!



Ex. Work together to create shapes!



Ex. Explore colored shaving cream!

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USING SMALL GROUP
MEETINGS AS A
FORM OF AUTHENTIC
ASSESSMENT

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WHAT SKILLS CAN YOU ASSESS?

- **Cognitive**
 - Executive Functioning
 - Math
- **Language & Literacy**
 - Letter & sound recognition
 - Phonological Awareness
- **Social-Emotional**
 - Relationships
 - Managing emotions
- **Physical**
 - Fine & gross motor



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BENEFITS OF ASSESSING SKILLS

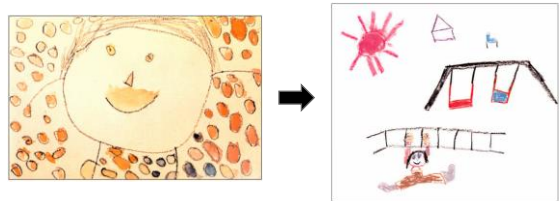
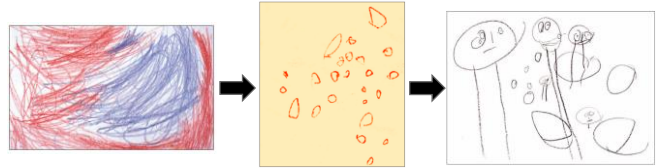
- Identify gaps in knowledge/areas of further growth
- Evaluate children in smaller settings
 - Confidence
 - Willingness to share ideas
 - More authentic assessment
- Generate emergent curriculum (ways to expand knowledge and take content to new directions)
- Unfamiliar vocabulary & concepts can be explained in the moment or expanded in future activities

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HOW CAN YOU ASSESS GROWTH?

- Initial baseline
- Repetition of activities
 - Growth over time
 - Skill development (ex. self-portraits)
- Document work over time



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CREATE YOUR OWN
SMALL GROUP
ACTIVITY!

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ELEMENTS TO CONSIDER

- When could you incorporate a small group meeting into your day?
- What is your purpose or goal?
- What materials do you need?
- How will it engage children & deepen their learning?
- What will you be observing - think of goals/skills?
- Where will it take place?

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THANK YOU!
QUESTIONS?

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LARGE GROUP RESOURCES:

- Stanford University. (2018, August 14). *Making Circle Time Count*. <https://dreme.stanford.edu/news/making-circle-time-count>
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SMALL GROUP RESOURCES

- Connor, C.M., Morrison, F.J., & Slominski, L. (2006). Preschool instruction and children's emergent literacy growth. *Journal of Educational Psychology* (98)4, 665-689.
- Garfinkle, A.N., and Schwartz, I.S. (2002). Peer imitation: Increasing social interactions in children with Autism and other developmental disabilities in inclusive preschool classrooms. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education* (22)1, 26-38.
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- Nabors, D., Berg, H., Simpson, C., and Time, K. (2012). Small-group reading instruction: Lessons from the field. *Dimensions of Early Childhood* (40)3, 30-40.
- Tal, C. (2018). The Challenge of implementing small group work in early childhood education. *Global Education Review* (5)2, 123-144.

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GROUP TIME IMPLEMENTATION SUMMARY

- **Large Group Meetings**
 - Location (distractions, space per child)
 - Schedule (morning, mid-day, end of day)
 - Goal of group time
 - Transition to group
 - Activity (engaging & meaningful)
 - Transition from group
- Are your expectations realistic?
- Are your expectations developmentally appropriate?
- **Small Group Meetings**
 - When to incorporate into your day?
 - Where will it take place?
 - Purpose or goal/what to observe & assess
 - Materials needed
 - How will it engage children & deepen their learning?

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