

Gathering Space, Brain Breaks, and Focus Lessons

When creating a culture for learning and independence, we consider two essential components: a gathering place and focus lessons.

A gathering place is an open space large enough for the whole class to gather while sitting on the floor. The space also includes a chart rack and whiteboard for focus lessons, class-created anchor charts, an overhead projector or document camera, a CAFE Menu board, and other teaching materials. We have a gathering place in every classroom in which we teach, regardless of our students' age level.

Behavior management through proximity and an elimination of the convenient distractions that desks hold are two payoffs of a gathering space. Sitting in a group also provides students with an opportunity to turn and talk, enhancing engagement, and giving each one an opportunity to express their thinking.

In response to the brain research, Dr. Ken Wesson has provided us a general rule of thumb for the length of time for our direct instruction: the approximate number of years our children are in age is the approximate number of minutes their brains are able to be engaged and processing information when we deliver direct instruction. Conducting our whole-group focus lessons on the floor makes us more aware to keep our lessons shorter and to the point. This results in better retention of the concepts we are trying to teach.

We know that children can build their stamina, eventually maintaining independence for 30–45 minutes, but asking children to sustain for longer than they are able results in off-task behavior and lower levels of performance. We signal children to the gathering place between Daily 5 rounds. This accomplishes two things at once: it provides time for a shift in their brain work and offers much-needed movement of their bodies (which is why some people call it a brain and body break). As children come to join us in the gathering place on the floor, it signals the shift in activity and thinking, from whatever Daily 5 choice they were just participating in to a focus lesson. In addition, being able to move from their independent work space to the gathering place provides a needed brain and body break.

Students come to expect that in between each round of Daily 5, they will not only have some much-needed time of movement for their bodies, but will also receive short bursts of valuable and focused instruction. It is this consistent pattern that leads to the lovely ebb and flow of teaching and practicing, teaching and practicing, that exemplifies the Daily 5.