

LearningCycles

STATIONS OF THE CRECHE

An Advent Journey in Hope

Written by Sister Barbara Jean Brown
and Tracey E. Herzer



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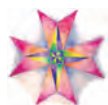
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About LearningCycles

What is LearningCycles?

LearningCycles is an innovative approach to faith formation. It takes seriously the spiritual development of children while providing creative and exciting activities that engage children in a whole new level of learning and retention. The rotation-style model means that children work on the same story or concept for several weeks, using different learning approaches in each workshop room they visit.

Ideas for possible workshops:

Art
Storytelling
Music
Group Activities
Cooking

Science Experiments
Games
Drama or Puppets
Movies
Geography or Map Excursions

Easy to Adapt

You can use the activities in this resource for shorter learning center events, normal classroom use, intergenerational gatherings, and more. Adapt what you find here to best suit your faith formation situation.



Recruiting LearningCycles Leaders

LearningCycles make it VERY easy to increase your number of volunteers, by dividing jobs into manageable parts. Here are some ways that parishioners of ALL ages can be involved:

CYCLE LEADERS sign up as part of a team of 2 or 3 adults who will teach one 4-6 week cycle. Teachers remain in the same workshop room each week of the cycle and teach the same lesson plan to different classes each week. Workshop rooms may use skills in areas as music, dance, cooking, quilting, gardening or painting, but you don't have to have a special skill in order to help. Teachers can sign up to help read stories, turn on computers, make popcorn, hand out art supplies, etc.

SHEPHERDS commit for the entire school year, but they never have to prepare or teach a lesson! Shepherds work in teams and travel with their class through each of the different workshops. Shepherds are the essential relationship part of this program, learning the children's names, providing continuity of leadership and being a friendly, safe presence in the classroom each week.

CYCLE COORDINATORS are needed for each different cycle. These people manage the details of a cycle, contacting all the volunteer teachers for that cycle, distributing the lesson plans, making sure supplies are purchased, etc.

Some churches have also used:

DECORATING TEAM A resourceful group of people is needed to create and plan new and evolving learning spaces. These folks might be interior designers, or they may be people who are just addicted to home improvement shows or have a knack for decorating inexpensively! Churches who share space or don't have the budget for large-scale renovations will need a group of creative thinkers to come up with props or posters that can be used on Sunday, but safely stored away during the week.

RESOURCE TEAM This "big picture" group can be comprised of all your cycle coordinators, as well as interested parents. Together the group handles trouble-shooting, long-range plans and communication to the entire church. For churches that already have a catechist or formation team, that committee can provide the functions of a Resource Team.



General Class Structure

1. **OPENING ACTIVITY** (10-15 minutes, as children arrive)

Welcome students and make sure everyone has a nametag. Opening activities give early arrivers something to start on immediately and provide a warm, busy room for children to enter. The activity could be simply drawing or decorating your nametag. It could also be coloring sheets or simple games. Check the “Filler Activities” of your lesson plan for ideas or ask your Cycle Coordinator.

2. **INTRODUCTIONS** (approximately 10 minutes)

- Introduce yourself: Tell students about you – your family, how long you have been at this church, what kind of work you do, what your hobbies are, why you signed up to help teach, etc.
- Introduce the cycle story or theme: Ask children what they’ve been studying or have done in other rooms on other weeks. Talk about the basic theme or season (see the Overview p. 6 for some ideas). Read the story to children.
- Introduce your activity: Tell the children which part of the story your room is focusing on, and perhaps ask them to re-tell you that part of the story in their own words.

3. **WORKSHOP ACTIVITY AND REFLECTION** (approximately 25-30 minutes)

See attached lesson plans for specific instructions about the main activity. Supplies should be in your classroom, but if you need help, ask your cycle coordinator. If you run low on supplies, please tell your coordinator so they can plan accordingly.

If children finish early, you can use any of the “Filler Activities” provided in each lesson plan. In addition, you may use activity sheets (see “Suggested Resources for this Cycle”) as “quiet work” for the early finishers while they wait for everyone to complete the task.

Try to plan your time so that children finish the activity and still have a few minutes to process the class by journaling or drawing. Encourage them to take their work seriously, and try to foster a semi-quiet atmosphere that allows children to think about what they have heard, seen and experienced. Ask questions like “What did you learn today?” or “How did you feel while doing this activity?” Connect your activity back to the story. Studies show us that quiet reflection time is what helps move items from short-term memory into long-term memory so this piece is VERY important!

4. **CLEAN UP** (approximately 5 minutes)

Have children help clean up and make sure everyone has their papers, jackets, etc. If parents come to the classroom to pick up their children, this is a good time to praise children in front of their parents. This is also a good time to discuss any concerns or questions quietly with parents. Tell the children goodbye. Thank them for coming.



Theological Overview of this Cycle

Each year, we try to offer an Advent unit that tells part of the familiar story and also helps our children understand some aspect of Advent. This particular cycle will focus on the journey to Bethlehem and how different characters played different parts. It will also focus on the ways in which Advent is a season of Hope.

For this unit, we have created “Stations of the Crèche” (“crèche” is a French word meaning “crib” or “cradle” and is used to describe a nativity scene, including all the figures at the manger) that is similar to a “Stations of the Cross” experience that many churches offer during Lent or Easter. Each lesson plan station will tell a different part of the Christmas story, using not just the details of the nativity, but spanning from the Old Testament prophets to our modern lives today. Students will not need to experience all the stations (nor do they need to experience the stations in any particular order) to understand the value of digging more deeply into this powerful story.

From a theological perspective, this unit is not about the well-known details of a special baby being born in a manger in Bethlehem. It is about the Incarnation – how Almighty God chose to come to earth and be among us, not as a mighty king or a fearful warrior, but as a tiny, helpless baby who had to be loved, protected and nurtured by human beings.

God, in an act of ultimate mercy, love and trust, comes down to be with us in all our broken humanity. The Incarnation is one of Christianity’s central doctrines and this unit seeks to examine how it affected all the people who played different roles within the well-known story.

From the ancient prophets who believed that a Messiah would come, to Mary & Joseph who accept the “glorious impossible” and took unbelievable risks with their reputations and even with their lives...to shepherds and magi who traveled countless dark miles in a journey of hope... And even to us today, who faithfully tell and retell this ancient story to our children and our children’s children.... To all of us, this miraculous event serves as a powerful reminder to us of a Creator’s love for creation that knows no bounds.

During this unit, we hope that you will find time to reconnect with that powerful love and experience this story all over again. Let it touch you and move you... let it pick you up and carry you into the experience of the true meaning of Christmas. Let go of all the stuff you haven’t done yet or weren’t able to do perfectly... and trust in the hope of Christmas. You’ll be amazed at what can happen when you do...

Wishing you Advent miracles,
Tracey E. Herzer

“God takes on flesh so that every home becomes a church, every child becomes the Christ-child, and all food and drink become a sacrament.... God, in his many-faced face, has become as accessible, and visible, as the nearest water tap. That is the ‘why’ of the incarnation”

Ronald Rolheiser in The Holy Longing



Letter to the Parents for this Cycle

(We suggest you mail this letter to all parents with a copy of the cycle story, plus the Theological Overview)

There is a well-known story of a little boy who is afraid of thunder and lightning. One night, during a particularly violent thunderstorm, he wakes up and rushes into his parents' bedroom for comfort and protection. His mother gathers him up in her arms and says, "Don't be afraid, sweetheart. You are never alone. God loves you and is with you all the time." The little boy snuggles more deeply into his mother's arms, looks up and says, "I know, Mama... but tonight I need someone with skin!"

I think God must have known that about us... sometimes we just need someone with skin. And so, God chooses to come to earth as a small, vulnerable baby. This Incarnation – God taking on human form, is one of the most transforming, foundational pieces of our Christian faith and we believe it is an essential story to pass on to our children.

In many ways, you are the incarnational presence of God for your child. You are the one "with skin"... the one who is there to hold and cuddle and listen and comfort. Children are still concrete thinkers and they need concrete "skin" experiences to help them make these new connections. You can help your child by talking about the Christmas story at home. Talk about what Christmas means to you and what traditions are important in your family. Talk about the importance of hope and what it means to believe in a God who loves us and promises to be here with us, even when life gets scary or unpredictable.

Remind your child that when we light the candles of our Advent wreath, we are doing more than just a mindless ceremony. To light a candle is an act of hope. We are honoring the people of hope who have gone before us – the shepherds, the Magi, Mary and Joseph, the angels... but we are also lighting our own candle as a symbol that we, too, believe and wait and hope.

While fighting apartheid in South Africa, faithful people prayed and hoped. And as a sign of their hope that someday apartheid would end, they lit candles and put them in windows, reminding their neighbors, their government, and themselves that they believed darkness could be overtaken by light. Even when the government made lighting the candles a crime, they persevered. And finally, it worked... those candles and the prayer and hope they represented helped to change the world they lived in. Morally shamed by its own people, the government conceded that apartheid was wrong and it was dismantled without a war. Hope had literally changed the world.

And that's what we remember in Advent... that hope has changed the world. To light an advent candle is to say, in the face of all that suggests the contrary, that God is here with us, still walking beside us, holding us when we can no longer hold ourselves up... the light of that Advent candle shimmers in the darkness, reminding us of the immortal words of Julian of Norwich that "all shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well..."

God's peace to you,
Tracey E. Herzer



Story for Cycle: Stations of the Crèche

To be read each week of the cycle

Since the very beginning of human life, God has reached out in love to build a relationship with us. Time and time again, we have wandered away and have tried to do things on our own, but God is always searching for us, waiting for us, and loving us beyond all reason or explanation.

In the Old Testament, we read how the children of Israel wandered in the desert. They were not always faithful to God, they were captured by enemies and they longed for their own land where they could worship God and be at rest. The prophets brought God's message of hope to the people and said, *"The People who have walked in darkness have seen a great light... for unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given."* (Isaiah 9:2&6) And so the people waited.....

And then, about two thousand years ago, something miraculous happened... In the town of Nazareth, there lived a young woman named Mary who was engaged to be married to a carpenter named Joseph. One day the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and told her that she would have a very special baby. The baby would be God's son and she must call him Jesus. Mary was afraid, but she agreed to do as God asked. An angel also appeared to Joseph telling him about Mary's special baby. The angel told Joseph to take Mary as his wife and he agreed.

When it was almost time for Mary to have her baby, the emperor ordered everyone to travel back to their hometown in order to be counted and taxed. Because Joseph was from Bethlehem, Mary and Joseph had to go on a long journey. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the inns were very crowded with other people who needed to pay their taxes. Mary was very tired and needed a place to rest. After a while, Mary and Joseph found an empty stable where animals were usually kept. And here, Mary gave birth to the baby Jesus. She wrapped her newborn son in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger full of hay.

At the same time, on a hillside overlooking Bethlehem, some shepherds were watching over their sheep. A bright light appeared in the sky. They were very afraid. It was angels sent by God. The angel told them not to be afraid, because he had some good news. He said the Son of God had been born and they would find him in Bethlehem, so off they went to find the baby.

After a while, some wise Magi from the East also came to see the baby. They followed a bright star and brought gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. These people were not the only ones who were excited about the birth of Jesus. There was also Anna and Simeon, who saw Jesus in the temple and they knew it was a sign of great hope that God had promised. But even more than that, there are all of us today who are still excited about this birth and what it means.

Even today, thousands of years later, we remember the birth of Jesus. We still celebrate the hopes fulfilled by coming to earth to be among us. This is more than just a story we tell at Christmas... it is a promise that God will be with us today and every day... and that changes everything. We can now live with the life-changing hope that with God, anything is possible!

Story re-told by Tracey E. Herzer
(Matthew 1:17-2:23 & Luke 1:1-2:40)



Suggested Resources for this Cycle

VIDEOS

In this cycle, we used the well beloved film **A Charlie Brown Christmas** from 1965. There are literally hundreds of Christmas videos geared toward children, but we felt like this timeless classic best illustrated the need we have to understand and remember what Christmas is all about. Feel free to use another video if you prefer.

The Brother Francis DVD **O Holy Night: The King Is Born** is another good option.



Activities Overview for this Cycle

WORKSHOP	SUMMARY OF CLASS PLANS	FOCUS
ART	Learn about Chrismons and make a tree ornament that represents our best gift	The Magi bring their gifts
PUBLISHING	Isaiah & other prophets Jesse Tree – Jesus' Family Tree	Prophets foretold a Messiah would come
DRAMA	Role play conversations between people who were visited by angels; learn about the magnificat	Angels appear to Mary & Joseph Elizabeth & Zacharias
MOVIE	Watch "A Charlie Brown Christmas" and talk about what Christmas is really supposed to be about	The story of Jesus' birth changes our lives today
STORY & GAMES	Use guided meditation to "experience" the trip to Bethlehem	Mary & Joseph travel to Bethlehem
KITCHEN	Make individual Shepherds Pies	The Shepherds hear the Good News
MUSIC	Lessons and Carols	The Angels Sing the Messiah's Birth



Stations of the Crèche: Drama Workshop

Bible Reference for the Cycle: The Birth of Jesus – Matthew 1:17-2:23 & Luke 1:1-2:40

Main Verse for the Cycle:

“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord”

Luke 2:11 (King James Version)

Key Concepts and Life Application:

- Advent and Christmas celebrate the Incarnation – when God assumed human form
- Advent is a season of Hope: we remember the promise of the Messiah and we celebrate that God has fulfilled that promise
- Each person in the Christmas story acts in hope – including us!

Summary of Class Plans:

Station Theme for this Workshop: Mary & Joseph / Elizabeth & Zacharias

The students will form pairs and role play the conversations between Mary, Joseph, Elizabeth and/or Zacharias. They will also learn Mary’s famous *Magnificat*

Materials Needed:

- Bibles
- Box of large pieces of fabric (or sheets) for costumes – keep it simple!!
- Box of smaller fabric scraps for headpieces, belts, props, etc.
- Paper
- Pens or Pencils
- Copies of the Magnificat (see following pages)
- Recordings of Magnificat by Bach, Vivaldi, John Rutter or other composers (optional)
- Music player (optional)
- Blank paper
- Crayons or markers

For Filler Activities:

- More paper
- Crayons or markers

Workshop Lesson Plans:

- **BEFORE CLASS** – Make sure you read over the scripture stories and are familiar with the characters and the basic structure of each story that will be used for the drama.
- You can refer to “A General Schedule for Class Structure” (included in the Introductory Materials) for ideas on how to introduce yourself and the story, as well as how to plan your class time appropriately.



- When it is time to begin, read the cycle story and follow it up by asking the class some questions such as:
 - How did Mary find out she was going to have a baby?
 - How did she respond?
 - What did the angel tell Joseph?
 - How might you have felt if an angel appeared to you?
 - What other people in the Bible were given messages by angels?
- After you have discussed the cycle story, tell the class you are going to share with them another story where someone got an important message from an angel. It is a story that is linked to the Birth of Jesus because it happened to Mary's cousin, Elizabeth, who was told she was going to have a special baby, too. Elizabeth's baby grew up to be John the Baptist, who helped prepare the way for Jesus.
- **For Older Classes (3rd-5th Grade)** Hand out Bibles and ask the class to turn to the first chapter of Luke and read the story of Elizabeth and Zacharias (Luke 1:1-25)
- **For Younger Classes (K-2nd Grade)** Just summarize the story for them
- After you read or tell the story, explain that we are going to “ad lib”... which means we are going to take part of a story and imagine what happened. Some things will be facts and some things we might make up, but it is a way to tell or remember a story.
 - ★ **TEACHING TIP** – As soon as you mention the word “drama” or “role play” some kids might get nervous. Keep instructions short and upbeat. Make sure to emphasize that this is a game and not a full theater production. You may want to start with a quick, silly warm up by asking students to stand up and quickly react with facial expressions, gestures and short words or phrases to any of the following scenes:
 - Seeing a new puppy
 - Stepping on a slimy worm
 - Getting an A on a test you studied hard for
 - Getting an A on a test you thought you failed
 - Telling your parents you broke a window in the house
 - Seeing a friend who has been gone all summer
 - Hearing a scary noise outside your bedroom window at night
 - Being at a game where your favorite team wins
- Ask each student to find a partner. Explain that you will read a scripture passage and then they will be given 2-3 minutes to re-enact a specific scene from the scripture with their partner. Then they will be given a scene that isn't in scripture and they will have to use their imagination as to how it might have happened.
- **ANOTHER OPTION** would be to divide up the different scenarios and give each pair a scene that they can practice for a couple of minutes and then perform for the rest of the class... but some students may be too nervous to do this. If you choose this option, be sure to praise each pair, encouraging boisterous applause from the group.



- Here are the dialogues we used:

Zacharias & Elizabeth (Luke 1:5-25)

- **REAL:** The Angel appears to Zacharias and gives him a message
- **IMAGINE:** What happens when Zacharias goes home to Elizabeth?

Gabriel & Mary (Luke 1:26-38)

- **REAL:** Gabriel appears to Mary and tells her she will have a baby
- **IMAGINE:** What is Mary thinking after the angel leaves? Where does she go?

Angel & Joseph (Matthew 1:19-25)

- **REAL:** Angel appears to Joseph and tells him to take Mary as his wife
- **IMAGINE:** How does Joseph explain Mary's unexpected pregnancy to his parents or friends? How do they react?

Mary visits Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-56)

- **REAL:** How do Elizabeth and Mary share their good news?
- **IMAGINE:** Two servants witness Elizabeth & Mary in the courtyard, exchanging stories. What do they talk about?

Elizabeth has a son (Luke 1:57-80)

- **REAL:** The elders come to name the new baby
- **IMAGINE:** What is Zacharias feeling before and after he can speak?

- **For Younger Classes (K-1st Grade)** You may need to stick with just one or two situations and repeat them many times, sharing new ideas or questions. With younger classes, you might try using the phrase "let's pretend" instead of "acting". You could also give them puppets to tell the story.
- When you have finished with the role plays, go back and look at the passage from Luke where Mary offers her prayer of praise and thanksgiving. Luke 1:46-55 is called "Mary's Magnificat" because it begins in the Latin Bible with the words "*Magnificat animum mea Dominum*," which means "My soul magnifies the Lord." This famous prayer has been set to music
 - **MUSIC OPTION** – You may wish to have a recording of one or more settings of the Magnificat to play for students – try Bach, Mozart, Vivaldi or John Rutter. There is even a recording of several different versions, called [*Magnificat: Classical Music for Reflection and Meditation*](#), available through Amazon.com.



- Hand out copies of the Magnificat and ask students to try and rewrite the words in modern language. Younger students can draw pictures of what they think the Magnificat means or what the words make them think of. Both groups could work while the music plays, if you use that option.

Filler Activities:

- Write a diary page for one of the characters from today's dramas. What would they have been thinking about? What would they be grateful for? What would they be worrying about
- You can also fill up the time by asking students to come up with other imagined scenarios or they can find a new partner and try their favorite scenes again



“The Magnificat”

Can you rewrite the words of Mary's famous hymn of praise, using your own words?

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;

he has filled the hungry with good things,

and sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,

according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and
to his descendants forever.

Stations of the Crèche: Music Workshop

Bible Reference for the Cycle: The Birth of Jesus – Matthew 1:17-2:23 & Luke 1:1-2:40

Main Verse for the Cycle:

“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord”

Luke 2:11 (King James Version)

Key Concepts and Life Application:

- Advent and Christmas celebrate the Incarnation – when God assumed human form
- Advent is a season of Hope: we remember the promise of the Messiah and we celebrate that God has fulfilled that promise
- Each person in the Christmas story acts in hope – including us!

Summary of Class Plans:

Station Theme for this Workshop: The Angels Sing the Messiah’s Birth

Students will talk about the important roles that angels played in the story of the birth of Jesus and how we can live out what the angels promised.

Materials Needed:

For Class plans:

- Church hymnals or other songbooks if needed
- Guitar or piano
- Bibles
- Music player
- Recording of music that might sound like angels. We used the Vivaldi & Handel Glorias – available from Amazon at http://www.amazon.com/Vivaldi-Dominus-Soloists-Monteverdi-Gardiner/dp/B000050IU0/sr=1-8/qid=1164621150/ref=sr_1_8/102-5899047-1372950?ie=UTF8&s=music
- Pictures of different angels:
 - <http://www.christusrex.org/www2/art/angels.htm>
- Copies of angel coloring page (p. 36)
- Colored pencils

For optional filler activities:

- Blank paper
- Pens/pencils
- Songbooks or hymnals
- Crayons



Workshop Lesson Plans

- If possible, have some music playing as children come into the room and gather. Remember that different children will respond to different pieces, so try to build some variety in what kinds of music you play for your group.
- You can refer to “A General Schedule for Class Structure” (included in the Introductory Materials) for ideas on how to introduce yourself and the story, as well as how to plan your class time appropriately.
- Some basic tips for teaching music to children:
 - **Be Enthusiastic!** Your mood really sets the tone of the class – if you are bored or intimidated or cautious, chances are the kids will be too!
 - **Be Confident!** Children really don’t care how well (or how badly) you sing – they just want to have fun!
 - **Be Creative!** Use simple instruments, teach them some sign language (available online or in books) or help them make up motions for some words
 - **Be Repetitive!** Children – especially pre-readers – will need to sing something several times before it “sticks”. When teaching a new song, you might try singing one line to them and have them sing it back to you
 - **Be Active!** It is hard for children to sit still for long so if you want them to really get into the music, encourage them to clap, sway, add motions, etc.
- Begin by reading the cycle story. You may want to have children lay down and close their eyes while you read. You might also consider choosing some soft classical music in the background while you read – for children who learn best using a musical approach, this will help them retain more details about the story.
- After you have finished the story, ask children to open their eyes and slowly sit up and then ask them some of these questions:
 - What did the angel say to Mary?
 - What did the angel say to Joseph?
 - What did the angels say to the shepherds?
 - How do you think each of these people felt when an angel appeared?
 - How would you feel if you heard an angel?
 - What do you think an angel looks like?
- Explain that today we are going to talk about angels and the role they played in the Story of Jesus’ birth. Remind children that angels are messengers from God and they have important jobs to do. In the story we just heard, the angels are the ones who let everyone know what is going on!
- After a few moments of discussion, explain to the class that you will be singing some Advent and Christmas songs about angels. Ask the class what angel songs they can think of. As they generate their list of ideas, you may want to write up their ideas on a chalkboard or piece of poster board.



- There are many, many Advent and Christmas hymns that mention angels, but here is a short list to get you started with your list. Sing at least a few of these:
 - Hark, the herald angels sing!
 - It Came Upon a Midnight Clear
 - Angels from the Realms of Glory
 - While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks by Night
 - Angels we have Heard on High
 - The First Noel
 - Silent Night
- After everyone is warmed up from singing, ask everyone to stand up and spread out in the room. Ask them to think about the ways in which angels move. Turn on some classical music that might evoke pictures of angels. Ask everyone to close their eyes and (while staying in one place) move their arms, head, etc in a way that makes them feel angel-like. How could we praise God with just our bodies? What does this music make you think of? What do you see in your imagination?
- After a few minutes, ask everyone to open their eyes and return to their seats. Remind students that we are not angels, but we can do some things that angels can do... we can praise God too. Christmas is a time to celebrate, remember and thank God for the gift of Jesus.
- Ask students what they think angels look like. Talk about (or show) several examples of popular angels – chubby baby cherubs, delicate-looking feminine creatures, etc. Talk about how angels always start with “Don’t be afraid”. Would you really be afraid of a tiny chubby baby with wings? Maybe there are different kinds of angels.
- Hand out copies of the angel figure on the next page. (This angel is the work of Mary Kenney, who drew this angel for the Journey to Adulthood J2A program for young people) Ask the students what they think about this angel:
 - Is it male or female?
 - Is it scary or just strong-looking?
 - What does it make you think of?
- Allow students to quietly color the angel or write or draw in their journals as they reflect on what they have learned today. You may want to turn on the music you began with to help students relax and write or draw.

Filler Activities:

- More Music – In the music workshop, you can always fill up any extra time with more singing or more listening to music! 😊



