What Do We Do With This Again?
Exploring How To Get Students in 3rd and 4th Grade Classrooms

To Follow Directions Efficiently

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April 28, 2007
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Introduction

“Hey, Ms. Hueston, when you go outside, can you send in this list of students? They need to fix the assignments they did this morning, five are done incorrectly, seven aren’t done at all, and three of those twelve don’t even have names on them!”

“Sure thing, I’m just heading out there myself to get my students who also didn’t correctly complete their assignments.”

“You’re struggling with this too? What are we doing wrong?”

“I don’t know, but if Sue and I don’t figure something out soon, we might go crazy!”

“I know exactly what you mean, my mentor and I spend more time answering the same questions a million times, collecting papers, and handing them back so that they can receive a name, be completed, or even redone! We never get through a full day’s schedule.”

“Same in my classroom! What are we going to do?”

This seemed to be the constant conversation every day in the intermediate division of Ferguson Elementary School. Between our mentors and ourselves, we were feeling very frustrated and unaccomplished as teachers, getting little done in an allotted time, and not seeing any change in our students. The issues we were encountering included students incorrectly following directions on class and homework assignments, students not putting their names on their papers, and students constantly having to ask for repeated directions. As two interns in the Professional Development School with similar frustrations, we decided to focus on discovering what we could do in our own classrooms to help our students follow directions more efficiently.

After discussing these issues together, we spoke with our mentors, only to find that they were feeling the same frustrations that we were. They stated that in the past few years they have been noticing a difference in the students and their ability to follow all instructions. We also
discovered that one of the two classes has had a reputation for poor listening skills since kindergarten. Having to repeat directions many times was common in both classes.

As beginning teachers, halfway through a yearlong internship, we wanted to try to discover what we could do to fix this problem and gain back wasted instructional time. We began by asking, “Are we doing something wrong when we give directions?” Were we making assignments confusing or overwhelming? When we thought this through we came to the conclusion that our classes should both be able to effectively handle the academic responsibility we are placing on their shoulders.

We are student teaching in two self-contained classrooms, one 3rd grade and one 4th grade. Each of the two classrooms is focusing on the same units and similar district objectives in many areas. As interns, we work together to plan and execute social studies and science units, as well as discuss ideas for teaching the Investigations math program, and share reading group strategies. We are also responsible for inquiring within our classrooms and others, to better our experiences as teachers and to further develop professionally.

Class one, the third grade classroom, contains twenty-seven students, fifteen boys and twelve girls. The majority of the students are middle class and white. The students have two teachers, one mentor and one intern (Ms. Hueston). The classroom also has a part time para-professional who helps the students throughout the day. Five students receive assistance outside of the classroom in writing, reading, math, and enrichment activities. Therefore, on an average day, two to three children are missing instructional time with their peers. When they return, they struggle to find a student who knows the exact directions for the assignment.

Class two, the fourth grade class at the same small, community-based elementary school, contains twenty-four students, eight girls and sixteen boys. Five children receive assistance
outside of the classroom for writing, reading, and math. Eight of the children are academically strong, higher-level learners who attend enrichment activities for math and science. Throughout an average week, two to five children are missing from the classroom at different times of the day, due to instrumental music lessons, enrichment activities, or learning support sessions. They also struggle upon their return, trying to find someone who can correctly inform them of the missed assignment. The majority of the students are middle class and white; however there is a small percentage of diverse students.

There is a positive atmosphere in both classrooms. Students are often very cooperative and pleasant: social issues are very rare and the students show great respect when speaking to their peers and teachers. Learning in both classrooms is both individual and group oriented. Students have good cooperative skills and are able to complete tasks in the allotted time: however, many times they may not have completely followed the directions. Both the mentors and interns teach the classes, reinforcing daily schedules and routine procedures.

**Reasons For This Inquiry**

In early December, after months of frustration, attempted solutions, and failed intervention systems implemented by our mentors and ourselves, we decided this needed to be fixed. As discussion of inquiry developed after Christmas break, we proposed that the threats, loss of recess, and positive reinforcement systems we tried were just not going to work. We were determined to find fresh ideas that would help our students improve in their listening skills so they could be more successful in the classroom.

We wondered if taking on this project would help not only our development as teachers but also our students’ development as pupils. First, we wanted to stop losing so much instructional time in our lessons; because so many students did not complete assignments or put
their names on their paper, transition times were extended. We found that we spend each transition passing out papers to those who did not complete them accordingly. This valuable time was adding up, leading us to notice that we weren’t accomplishing the many things we had intended to each day. The children were also becoming frustrated in our rushing through lessons that should have been allotted more time, only because we just had to get to science, or math, or any other important lesson that day. We wanted to stop the frustration all around, for our mentors, our students, and ourselves.

Secondly, we didn’t like who we were becoming as teachers. We detected more and more yelling and ridicule in our voices as the months went on. In reading a teacher database, we came across an article titled *Five Good and Not So Good Things to Say to Your Students*. We were intrigued in finding that “80 percent of all talk done in classrooms is done by teachers. It involves giving directions, reprimanding, reminding, questioning, suggesting, motivating, or explaining” (Haller & Moorman, 2006, p.1). The not so good things to say as teachers included: “What did I just tell you? Where were you when I explained this? Didn't I just explain that? Haven't you started yet? Do you know where your seat is?” (Haller & Moorman, 2006, p. 1). We realized we needed to rethink our teacher talk immediately because it didn’t help our students to succeed, and it made some of them acquire disgust towards assignments.

Thirdly, we wanted to truly help our students. We felt that effective listening skills were not only necessary in school settings, but also in life. According to Moorman and Haller (2006), “Learning how to contact, listen to, and trust that inner authority are important skills” (p.1). We wanted our students to be prepared for their higher education. Middle school and high school are quickly approaching, and the amount of support we give students now will not be provided to them in the future. We wanted our students to learn the skills they needed to achieve in many
aspects of their lives, and also to have the confidence and reliability in themselves, knowing that they can be and will be responsible for their own actions.

**Literary Expertise**

In researching this project, we were pleased to find that we were not the only teachers struggling with this issue. Interestingly enough, this is the second time an inquiry intervention has been attempted with the fourth grade class; their intern from two years ago had very similar wonderings when conducting her research.

We found much evidence to suggest that students struggle with directions because of the way their teachers present them. “The area of following oral directions is a component of listening that is vital to students’ success. The problem with this practice is, ‘…most children in typical classrooms have difficulties hearing and understanding their teachers at some point during the school day’” (Matheson, Moon, & Winiecki, 2000, p. 24). This article suggested that when teachers give oral directions they often assume the student heard the directions the first time. So students may still be confused even if the teacher repeats the directions a second time. This helped us decide to clearly repeat directions at least three times. “For those students whose primary learning modality is not auditory, teachers may not provide the extra instruction necessary to help the children succeed” (Matheson, Moon, & Winiecki, 2000, p. 25). In reading this quote we decided that we had to make a conscious effort to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of all learning styles, such as auditory, visual, and kinesthetic.

We also began to consider the importance of giving clear directions. “Teaching Tips” suggested, “The teacher, must be clear in his/her mind what he/she wants the students to do. He/she should think through the lesson step by step. DO the activity before it is presented to the class. Write down the directions. Reread them the next day. Revise. And clarify” (“Teaching
Lesniak & Hueston

Tips”, 2007). Therefore, while constructing our lesson plans we made sure to number our directions and share them with an outside source in order to make sure the instructions were clear and detailed. This article also suggested that practice in following directions would eventually help children develop their use of this skill. We found it very encouraging to know that we had a good chance of reaching success.

The most shocking piece of information we came across prompted us to reconsider every expression we use in the classroom. Moorman and Haller (2006) suggest, “Refrain from asking questions to which we already know the answer…if you already know the answer, then deliver your real message in clear, direct, respectful language such as, ‘I need you to begin now’ or ‘You were unfocused when I made the assignment. If you are ready to focus now I will go over the directions one more time’” (p. 2). We were disappointed to admit that we were aware of asking these questions many times throughout the day. We decided to help each other work towards goals of eliminating these unproductive questions from our daily language.

**Wonderings**

In thinking through our different thoughts and ideas, we reached a central wondering for our inquiry:

- How do we get our $3^{rd}$ and $4^{th}$ grade students to effectively follow directions the first time they complete an assignment?

In light of this wondering, we discussed many other wonderings that accompanied the topic:

- How does the way we give directions and address our students affect their listening?
- Does the number of consecutive directions affect their ability to obtain the information?
- What is the most effective way to present children with directions? Should they be written, oral, or both?
Can directions be differentiated for individual students? For example, what is the most effective way to give directions to students who were out of the room for Title One and/or learning enrichment?

With these questions fresh in our minds each day, we began to develop a plan that would help us through the many steps of the inquiry process.

**Inquiry vs. Project:**

“Teacher inquiry differs from traditional professional development for teachers, which has typically focused on the knowledge of an outside ‘expert’ being shared with a group of teachers. This traditional model of professional growth, usually delivered as a part of traditional staff development, may appear to be an efficient method of disseminating information but often does not result in real and meaningful change” (Dana & Silva, p.5-6). This quote describes our feelings regarding our project as inquiry. As part of a professional development program, we have learned that reflection is a key component to the inquiring process. We feel that our wonderings, exemplified in the form of many related questions, show that this is an inquiry-based project. We are researching, collecting data, and analyzing student performance to work towards a meaningful change in each of our classrooms. In light of not knowing what the main causes of these issues are, we wonder if there is something we can change about ourselves to create a higher functioning learning environment where students successfully complete their assignments, on time, the first time.

We have come to question, if we change our negative language (“Didn’t I just tell you what to do?”) to positive language (“Ask three then me” or “Check yourself”) when we speak to students will they be more prone to listen? We think this may change how we feel about ourselves as teachers and how our students feel about their relationship with us. We also are
interested to see if changing the amount of directions given will affect our students’ abilities to absorb and remember what we tell them. We also think that if we try to provide students with an organizational tool, they may find it easier to complete assignments quickly while still following all directions. We aren’t sure that these outcomes will evolve as we think they may, however we believe that they are worth attempting with hopes of helping our students become better learners and listeners.

The personal reflections throughout this inquiry process may or may not help our students in these classrooms, however it will further our professional growth as teachers and possibly help classes in our futures, an important aspect of all inquiry.

**Inquiry Plan & Data Collection**

The first thing we did was to develop an in depth plan to work through our inquiry, outlining what we would do week-by-week. *(Appendix B)* We began our project collecting baseline data, surveying the students and parent/guardians and speaking with other teachers and interns about strategies they used in their classroom to reinforce good listening and following directions. We reviewed the “good listening skills” posters that flooded our rooms and conducted a “Simon Says” activity to test the number of directions each child could absorb. Then we began implementing some new strategies in our own classrooms. We practiced many “following directions” activities, some created uniquely by us, and others borrowed from literature. We also implemented a checklist system with positive reinforcement for the students who followed directions successfully on certain assignments.

**To understand the background of our students and this issue, we first collected base-line data:**

*Student Surveys*
We were certain our students were aware that they struggled with listening and following directions because of how many times we have had to send notes home to parents, take away recess, and implement new strategies. However, we wanted to know what they thought we could do as their teachers to help them become better listeners who complete their assignments correctly. We surveyed students in the classroom in the first week of our inquiry. We were certain to allow enough time for students to share their advice on how we could help them follow directions better. We also told the children that the surveys would remain completely private with the hopes that they would give us constructive feedback. We asked students if they felt their teachers gave clear directions, what kinds of directions were the most clear to them (i.e. directions told to you, directions written on the board, both, or directions on a worksheet), and what we could do to help them become better at following directions. *(Appendix A)*

**Parent Surveys**

Next we wanted to get background information on student lives and activities at home. We sent home a parent survey via the children’s weekend information folder. We requested that the survey be returned within a week so that parents had plenty of time to complete it thoughtfully. The survey included many of the same questions that we asked students, however it also requested information on what the parents did at home to help their child complete their chores and at home tasks. Finally, we asked about the amount of time students spend reading versus the time the students spend watching television, playing video games, and using the computer. We wanted this information because we were curious whether there would be any correlation between the amounts of media in a child’s life to how well that child could focus and listen. *(Appendix A)*
Speaking With Other Professionals

Over the first two weeks we spoke with other interns and teachers, asking them if they saw any of the same patterns in their own students and what approach they used to counteract them. We were trying to come up with a fresh idea that included a form of positive reinforcement in our classroom. We found through reading the parent surveys and talking to other teachers that students were pleased when they earned a reward for doing something well. After reading student surveys and finding that many students suggested placing post-it notes on their desks, we felt that we should implement a tool to help students organize their thoughts and back it up with a reinforcement system to motivate them. We developed a checklist paper that we would use during activities in which we felt students might struggle to remember all of the directions. The checklists included three blank spaces for the students to write their directions in, as well as a checkbox for the students to check off when they complete a specific direction. Also, the checklist included a box that students could check off when they placed their name on the paper.

Refreshing “Good Listening Skills”

We began by re-examining the “good listener” posters that were used in the first weeks of school. (Appendix B) This activity was a simple reminder that in the next few weeks, we would be working hard to become better listeners who focus their eyes on the speaker, don’t talk unless they raise their hand, and are responsible for completing their own assignments. After reviewing these main ideas, we collected samples of student work without the students being aware. Work that was done incorrectly was photocopied and placed in an inquiry file box. We spent two
weeks collecting base-line data: student work samples in which they did not complete directions. In class one there was an average of ten out of twenty-seven students who did not completely follow directions. In class two, there was an average of fifteen out of twenty-four students who consistently did not follow directions.

*Direction Following Activities*

Then we used a number of other activities that focused on following directions with our students. We used some teacher designed and borrowed direction following activities to get students focused on listening. We used four other activities that focused on following directions with out students. *(Appendix D)*

We created the first activity. We had the students listen to oral directions during a spelling activity. We asked them to circle the words that began with vowels, underline the words that had one syllable, star two words that were homophones, and put their name in the upper left corner. In the second activity borrowed from *Education world*, we gave the students a set of simple directions that needed to be followed. These included drawing a heart in the center of their paper, numbering the left hand column one to six, placing their name on the bottom right of the page, and folding their paper horizontally. In activities one and two, we told students that the direction would be given only two times. This was to ensure that they would listen closely. In the third activity we wanted to check and see how carefully students were reading homework directions. We disguised directions are part of their math homework. Within the math directions it stated, “If you are a boy place a star on the back of this paper, if you are a girl place a dot on the front of this paper.” In class one only eight girls and ten boys followed this direction. In class two only three girls and ten boys followed this direction. For the fourth activity, to see if
students listened to our suggestions concerning reading their newsletter, we hid a secret password and asked students to share it with us when they came to school the following Monday. We were pleased to see more than 75% of the students in each class came to school and shared this password with us. We were hoping that the results of all these above activities would show us that each and every one of our students had the ability to follow carefully given directions.

*Simon Says*

Next, we knew we wanted to find out exactly how well each of our students could follow directions when they were focused on a specific activity. We went to Carrie Weismann, the Ferguson Township Guidance Counselor, to obtain some useful activities to test our students. She informed us of a “Simon Says” activity that tests the ability of students to follow consecutive directions. Her expertise had taught her that young children are developmentally unable to absorb more than four directions. Their minds stop focusing after three consecutive instructions. We tested our students using this activity. We used a chart of boxes to record tallies for each student as they followed a number of consecutive directions. The tallies represented how many successive commands each student was able to obey. *(Appendix C)*

**Next we began to implement new ideas and collect data from their results:**

*Checklist/ Reinforcement System*

Finally, after analyzing student and parent surveys we found many suggestions to be helpful in developing our reinforcement system. Students and parents both suggested that we constantly remind students of the directions, maybe even write them down, to ensure that students would follow them. Some students even suggested we place a “sticky-note” on their desk so that they had the directions clearly in front of them. We came to the conclusion that
students wanted to see the directions on the board, have the directions repeated to them one to two times, and then also have them written on a paper at their desks. We developed a checklist paper that we would use during activities in which we felt students might struggle to remember all of the directions. As stated above, the checklists included three blank spaces for the students to write their directions in, as well as a checkbox for the students to check off when they complete a specific direction. We also had a box that would be checked off as students placed their name on the paper. We had the checklist printed on yellow paper and introduced it to our students. We told students this was a new procedure we were going to try in the classroom to help them achieve more and avoid losing recess and redoing assignments. We explained that this checklist would be used to copy the directions for an assignment. Then after the assignment was complete, they would re-check their paper, mark off that each direction was followed, and finally staple it to the assignment. (Appendix E)

Although we are not sure this would work, we also told the students we would randomly reward good direction following. We wanted to make sure that the students were not just working toward the prize, so we never told them when they would be rewarded or what the reward would be. We also changed the rewards often, using small rewards such as erasers, pencils, and fruit snacks, mixed in with bigger rewards such as good notes home, homework excuses, or lunch and dessert in the classroom. (Appendix E) This resulted in students being unsure if they were going to like the reward, but they knew they had the chance to get something exciting.

During the few weeks of intervention and using our checklist system, we collected and recorded who followed directions on many different assignments. We analyzed assignments that
did or did not use the yellow checklist to see if this focus on following directions was making any difference.

**Teacher Talk 101**

Our last intervention had to do with improving ourselves. Through examining our research we learned several good and not so good things to say to our students. The article we read made us aware of the effect our words have on our students. We know that when students do not follow directions it can become very frustrating to teachers because we have experienced this frustration. Rather then saying, “What did I just tell you?” or “Where were you when I explained this?” the article suggests refraining from questions to which we already know the answers to. Instead the article suggests five good things we can say to our students. For example, have your students “check themselves.” According to Chick Moorman & Thomas Haller, “When a teacher asks her students to “check themselves,” she is encouraging self-responsibility while creating autonomous learners” (Moorman & Thomas, 2006, p.3).

We were sure to avoid any of the “not so good things to say” and focused more on only speaking positively towards those students who were doing what we wished. We consciously tried to stop all ridicule and negative talk in the classroom and only focused on rewarding the good. Therefore, we wrote each other a “post it” note to keep on our desk that reminded one another to use positive talk rather than reprimanding our students.
Another aspect we changed was our approach on giving directions. We were sure to break all directions down into only three parts because we knew this was what most of our students could follow.

**Lastly we collected final data to find out how our students felt this worked:**

*Final student survey*

To conclude our inquiry, we surveyed students to see what they thought about the checklist, and to find if they felt it helped them. In the survey we asked students to rate whether or not the checklist helped them, if they would choose to use it more in the future, and what they disliked most about using the checklist. We also asked them how they felt when we used negative vs. positive teacher talk, providing them with examples such as “Weren’t you listening to my directions?” and “Check yourself.” Finally, we asked what they most liked to receive as reinforcement so we could recognize what might help motivate students more. *(Appendix G)*

**Data Analysis**

Over the course of this inquiry project, we amassed an incredible amount of data on our students’ listening abilities and their progress in following and completing directions. In order to systematically analyze our data, we created several documents to help us reflect back throughout this process. By collecting our data in this fashion, it helped us to see if our intervention was working from the time we implemented it to the very end. It also helped us examine if it was the same students that were continuously not following directions.

*Student Surveys - Appendix A*
To analyze student surveys we sat down together and tallied whether or not students felt we gave clear directions. We also tallied which directions students found most clear. Then, we wrote down student responses to the question, “What could your teacher do to help you better follow directions?”

The student surveys were very insightful. They helped us learn what techniques motivate our students to follow directions. Many of the responses we gathered from our students led us to our intervention process. The results include:

- 90% of students said their teachers should state the directions aloud as well as write them on the board.
- About 50% of students suggested placing a note on their desk to help remind them of the directions.
- Almost all of our students felt we did a good job giving specific directions.

*Results from Class 1 (Third Grade)* - *Appendix A*

*Results from Class 2 (Fourth Grade)* - *Appendix A*

*Parent Surveys* - *Appendix A*

The responses we gathered from the parent surveys amazed us. Majority of the parents gave honest and candid responses that we found pleasing and shocking. From the surveys, we learned more about each child’s responsibilities at home, as well as the rewards and consequences he/she may or may not receive. We also asked the parents to rate, on a scale from 1-10 (10 being the highest), how well they felt their child followed directions. Furthermore, we requested the number of hours each child spent on a weeknight and weekend reading, watching TV, and playing video or computer games. Lastly, we asked the parents why they believed children today have a harder time following directions as opposed to when they were children.
To analyze these surveys, we recreated the questionnaire and under each number we recorded the variety of responses from parents/guardians. We tallied common chores performed by students in the household, the rewards along with the consequences they received for completing and/or not completing these chores, the suggested parent techniques for successfully helping his/her child, and the parents ratings on a scale of one through ten on how well they felt their child followed directions. We also used a chart to tally the number of hours children spent watching TV, playing computer games, playing video games, and reading. Some of the results we found:

• The most common chores in both classrooms in which more than 75% of children were in charge of included: cleaning their room, setting the table, taking out the trash, and caring for pets.

• The most common rewards that over half of our parents used were: giving an allowance, praise, and extra playtime.

• The most common consequences that over 85% of parents used were, taking away the rewards given, as well as, video game and TV privileges.

• About 50% of parents suggested using a timer or constantly reminding students to follow directions, while the other 50% suggested constant monitoring of student progress.

• Interestingly enough, only eight parents out of the fifty-two surveyed rated their children a six or lower at following directions.

The surveys did remind us that these children are between the ages of eight and ten, therefore we can not expect perfect listening skills. Also, the data we collected painted a clear picture of our students as we began our inquiry project; this helped us chose appropriate
interventions that we felt might be successful in getting the students to successfully follow directions.

*Results from Class 1 (Third Grade)* - *Appendix A*

*Results from Class 2 (Fourth Grade)* - *Appendix A*

*Simon Says Game* - *Appendix C*

A goal of ours before implementing any strategies was to establish a baseline to learn how many directions our students could follow at a given time. We each divided our classroom into three groups. While we gave the commands two adults observed three students at a time. Those adults tallied how many commands each child successfully followed on a gridline worksheet. After averaging all the students’ tally marks we discovered that the majority of both classes could only follow three directions at a time. Therefore, throughout our intervention process we made sure we only gave three directions at a time. The number (1-4) following each name on our overall data collection chart, constantly reminded us the commands that specific child successfully followed.

*Intervention Analysis*

As stated earlier, each time the students were given a set of directions to follow they had to write down the directions and then check them off prior to handing their assignment in. In order to learn if this intervention was indeed successful we made two charts. The first chart was an individual checklist the teacher could refer back to, to help her keep track of which students followed or not followed the directions for each activity. This chart had a list of student names followed by the words “followed” and “not followed.” The top of the chart provided space where
the teacher could record what the assignment was, if the checklist was used, and when the assignment was completed. (Appendix F) As we examined papers we simply circled or checked “followed” or “not followed” to comply with the student work. Finally we documented if there was a reward for that assignment and what the reward was. This document helped us analyze the number of students who were successful in following directions for each activity. It was also useful in comparing direction following differences when the students used the checklist and when they did not.

The next document we used was a chart to record each activity that was checked, using the above system. We placed the date at the top of the chart and placed a mark next to the name of any student who did not follow directions on that particular activity. This helped us to see the students who consistently did not follow directions throughout the intervention process. We created this document to learn if it was the same students who continuously struggled with following directions. We also were able to learn if our intervention helped as time passed by tallying how many students did not complete the assignments correctly. (Appendix F)

Some of the results we obtained from this include:

- In class one, at the beginning of the intervention, seven of the students were not following directions on assignments. By the last recorded date, all but one student had improved in following directions.
- In class two, at the beginning of the intervention, fifteen students were not following directions on assignments. By the last recorded date, all but two students had improved in following directions.

These results showed us that we were definitely making improvements with our students.

*Teacher Talk 101*
We were not able to constantly record our own talk in the classroom. In order to analyze this data, we used our final student surveys. We tallied the amount of students who checked off that they felt embarrassed, sad, like they should have done better, did not care, or happy because it made them realize their mistake, when we used phrases such as “Weren’t you listening to my directions, I told you already” or “Where did I tell you to put that?” We also asked students to circle true or false if they preferred when their teacher said, “Check yourself” or “ask three before turning in your paper.”

From this we gathered that:

- 36 out of 52 students felt *embarrassed* when we used the above phrases
- 31 out of 52 students felt *sad* when we used the above phrases
- 32 out of 52 students felt *like they should have done better* when we used the above phrases
- 3 out of 52 students *did not care* what we said when we used the above phrases
- 9 out of 52 students felt *happy because it helped them realize their mistake* when we used the above phrases
- 48 out of 52 students preferred kind remarks (i.e. check yourself)

After analyzing our data, we were able to notice some students’ progress over the last several weeks. After taking all of this information in and thinking through how much progress we made, we were able to develop four claims about this wondering and provide evidence to support each one.

**Claims & Evidence**
Claim 1- A positive reinforcement system and organization tool helps students to focus on listening and following directions.

“Ms. Hueston when are you going to tell us if we followed all the directions on the math assignment?” This is a quote from one of the students in class one. The enthusiasm and anxiousness to know if they were making progress was great evidence in showing us that our children were motivated to succeed. After adjusting to the new routine, we found each of our students asking us these questions daily. Not only were students motivated by the reward system, but also their assignments demonstrated an improvement in following directions.

3rd Grade

![Bar Chart: Students Who Did Not Follow Directions]

4th
As you can see from the two charts above, class one and two both show a decrease in the number of students who did not follow directions throughout applying the checklist interventions and positive reinforcements. Throughout the intervention, we chose random days to represent these positive results. The time span went from March 27, 2007 through April 12, 2007.

At first we feared the disappointment and embarrassment that those students who did not follow directions would feel. However, we found that in not receiving the very special reinforcements such as kickball, good notes home, etc. our students worked harder to earn the rewards and positive encouragement from us.

In our final student survey, we asked students what rewards and prizes they liked receiving the most. Every student circled at least one reward, and the majority circled three or more. Among the most popular rewards were ice cream sandwiches, good notes home, and homework passes. One student even stated, “I don’t need any more toys. I think I have enough. All I need when I do a good job is a little praise and a little fun.”
Claim 2- Students do a better job absorbing directions if they are kept to a maximum of three steps.

The picture to the left shows an example set of directions written on the board during the early weeks of our inquiry. These directions were given prior to us discovering that majority of our students could only follow a maximum of three directions at a time. Below are some results that were recorded after students attempted these directions.

- **58% only followed three to four steps of this set of directions**
- **4 students miscopied directions three, four, and five**
- **Many students asked questions to clarify what was expected of them during this assignment**

The Simon Says Activity referred to earlier showed the results and numbers of directions students could follow:

- In class one, only seven out of twenty-six students were able to perform more than three consecutive movements
- In class two, only four out of twenty-four students were able to perform more than three consecutive movements

Therefore, we cut all directions to a maximum of three steps. Teaching Tips supports us in saying, “When giving directions; keep it sequential, 1-2-3, keep it short, and be clear”
 (“Teaching Tips”, 2007). In the charts presented for claim one, you can see the progress students made overtime when only three step directions were given and the checklists were used.

Claim 3 - Different students need directions in different formats.

We found through our student surveys that each of our students needed something different from us when instruction is given. One student said, “It would help if you wrote the directions on a sticky note and put it on my desk.” Another student said, “I need you to tell me the directions a few times.” While still another said, “It helps when directions are on the board.” These survey results exemplify the fact that we have to do all of these things to accommodate all learning styles in our classroom.

After surveying our students’ parents we found:

- In class 1, parents mostly suggested checklists, timers, and lots of encouragement to help their children
- In class 2, parents mostly used constant reminding and monitoring to help their students be successful

This data proves that different techniques work for different children both at home and at school. One of the parents from class two pointed out that, “Teachers take for granted that children can understand their directions.” We do not want to be considered “those teachers” who assume all children are the same.

Lastly in our final student surveys we asked the children if they felt the checklist helped them and if they would choose to use it more often. The third grade class found it somewhat helpful:

- 3 out of 27 students said it helped them A LOT

• 13 out of 27 students said it helped them *SOMETIMES*

• 7 out of 27 students said it *BARELY* helped them

• 1 out of 27 students said it *NEVER* helped them

This class did not feel like they would choose to use the system more when they were able to. Only one student would choose to use it more, while nine said they would choose to use it sometimes. The rest of the students said they would use it a lot less or never use it again.

The fourth grade class found it very helpful:

• 11 out of 24 students said it helped them *A LOT*

• 10 out of 24 students said it helped them *SOMETIMES*

• Only 3 out of 24 said it *BARELY* helped them

• 0 out of 24 students said it *NEVER* helped them

This class also stated that they would use it more or sometimes if they had the choice. Only five students said they would use it a lot less, and *not one* student said that they would never choose to use it again. This really showed us that they have taken more pride in their work and are willing to take action themselves at becoming better listeners.

These results most importantly showed us that we accommodated every student’s different wants and needs and it helped them to improve. Many of the third graders may not have liked the system or found it as effective as the fourth graders, but the results show the true improvement in their work.
Claim 4- Our positive teacher talk in the classroom creates a sense of comfort and success.

In discussing our inquiry each Tuesday after school and also with our PDA throughout the weeks we found that we felt much better and more positive in communicating with our students. We felt we had more respect from each of our students. “I feel better about myself when I find I achieve my goal to not use negative talk towards my students. I also feel more confidence and less anxiety in my students when they hand in an assignment because they know I will no longer ridicule them” (Tara Lesniak, Journal Entry, 2007). This proves that she feels growth on a professional level and appreciates her students’ effort more.

As stated before, one online resource we read suggests that the teacher have a clear idea of what they want the students to do before teaching the lesson (“Teaching Tips”, 2007). Below, is an excerpt of one of Ms. Hueston’s lesson plans in which she thought about which directions she was going to give to her students prior to teaching the lesson. The second is another excerpt from Ms. Lesniak’s lesson plan. Both of our steps are clearly noted in each lesson plan so that while we were teaching we felt confident in giving clear, precise directions.

Ms. Hueston’s Lesson Plan

Board Directions

• Strong Topic Sentence- what makes the sandwich taste so good, like you really want to eat it!

• 3 General sentences- layers of the sandwich- one general sentence in box 2,3, and 4.

• 3 Detailed sentences- expand on writing (what is good/special about this?) Toppings of the sandwich

Ms. Lesniak’s Lesson Plan

Once these connections are made I will have students work on a worksheet that asks the same questions about their own pack of skittles. They will work alone to figure out the most likely color they will pull each time, the least likely, and if they have any that are impossible. (5 minutes)
Directions:
  o Place Name your paper
  o Sort skittles and fill in the probability chart.
  o Answer only questions 1-4, we will do 5-8 together.

Finally, to show that this helped our students succeed, as stated before, we surveyed our students and asked them how they felt when we used negative vs. positive language (See page 23 above). Many students felt embarrassed, sad, or like they should have done better when we used negative talk. Also, all students said they preferred us to use kind, positive language.

Conclusions

At the completion of this inquiry, we feel that we achieved some success helping our students improve in following directions and listening skills in each of our classrooms. Although we did not see drastic results in this process, we feel that if we continue to implement it, the results will continue to improve as students grow even more accustomed to the procedures. We also enjoyed the fact that we were not only helping those students who once couldn’t follow directions, but we were also rewarding the few students who do always follow directions and are forced to constantly listen to us reiterating the good listening process.

Some changes we have considered in continuing implementation in the future include possibly creating a whole class reward system. Neither of our classrooms has enforced a class wide reward system. We feel that if we choose those prizes that the students have liked the best, such as kickball fifteen minutes before recess, ice cream sandwiches, homework excuse passes, as well as lunch in the classroom with games and teachers, and combine them with some new rewards such as pajama day (wearing pajamas to school), beach party day (wearing beach gear to
school), and movie day (watching movies in the afternoon with popcorn), then students might help encourage each other to listen more effectively and complete tasks with more accuracy.

This intervention process, while effective, has its downfalls like any other intervention. We asked students what they felt was the hardest part about using the checklist. One student said “I can’t remember to staple it to my paper and then I lose it.” Many others said, “Writing down all of the directions takes too much time.” In implementing this in the future we would add a check box to help students remember to staple the checklist onto their paper. We would also try possibly having this in a computer template and copying directions down for the students beforehand to save writing time. We feel these changes are well worth trying if this problem ensues in future teaching.

We also feel despite how the list was revised, the changes in reinforcement mentioned above would be necessary in order to continue seeing improvement. As time goes on, we assume students may become bored with our intervention system. They will need fresh activities and incentives to motivate them. This goes along with the fact that a teacher’s job is never complete.

**Future Practice as Teachers**

Not many pre-service teachers have the opportunity to test out the inquiry process. We have definitely benefited very much throughout this study. We have recognized our own actions as we speak to students and we plan to be much more aware of our language when we talk to our future pupils, whether they be younger or older. We have discovered that this really does affect our students and how comfortable they feel in the classroom. We also plan to implement this positive reinforcement system in the future. We have discussed how it can be re-designed and utilized for many different activities or even issues in the classroom.
This inquiry has been extremely effective in furthering our knowledge. It has made our mentors and us more aware of our actions. It helped us to develop professionally, helped us learn to study and analyze issues we might face in our future classrooms, and encouraged us to try fresh ideas without fear of failure. Most importantly, we learned that not all interventions have immediate results and that some may not work at all, this will be a crucial idea that we will keep fresh in our minds as we attempt many new strategies and interventions in our own classrooms. Nevertheless, we have learned that completing an inquiry is critical for effective teaching and growth. Finally, we look forward to using the inquiry process in our future teaching to attempt to better our students and ourselves.

**New Wonderings**

While our official inquiry process has ended we continue to use our techniques to help the students further succeed and work towards our ultimate class goals. In discussing the finalization of our project we came upon a few new wonderings that we hope to consider for inquiry in the future.

- Should students who didn’t make as much progress in the process be our new focus…how can we help them succeed using a different technique(s)? Also, why didn’t this intervention work specifically for these students?
- For the students who didn’t like the system, what could we do to make it more useful and enjoyable for them?
- Does intrinsic motivation last longer in primary students as opposed to intermediate students?
• Does the amount of TV, video games, and computer games directly affect how long these students are motivated by certain interventions? We touched upon this in our parent surveys and would really like to investigate the correlations further.

• If we simply use the checklist system, omit all positive reinforcement, and only reward with encouragement, will students still make progress towards being better listeners and direction followers?

We fully intend to continue on through the rest of our teaching experiences reminding ourselves that positive language is known to create stronger relationships between teachers and their students. We feel this may also be a future inquiry we can investigate. Through this experience, we recognize that we are not fully teachers yet, but still university students. We as learners have found that the learning process will always be continuous for us as well as our students. We feel confident that we may accomplish future success through other inquiries.
References


