Everyone’s Got a Job to Do:
Fostering Independence in the Primary Classroom

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I. Context

My inquiry project is being conducted in a self-contained second grade classroom at Corl Street Elementary School in State College, Pennsylvania. The population of State College is very diverse and rather intelligent as well. Because State College is centered around the Penn State University, many of my students’ parents are professors or affiliated with the university in some way. State College Area School District prides itself on its educational programs and its student success rate. One contribution to this success is the number of specialists, teachers and paraprofessionals that work with the students on a daily basis. Corl Street Elementary, where my inquiry takes place, also has a significant amount of family involvement. Most of the students who attend Corl Street live in nearby neighborhood communities and typically remain at Corl Street from kindergarten through fifth grade. Because of this, families are well known at Corl Street and are welcome to get involved in classroom and whole school activities throughout the school year.

In my second grade classroom there are twenty-three students, eleven girls and twelve boys. Of the twenty-three students in my class, only five students struggle academically. These five students leave the room for one hour every day to receive individualized reading instruction. Seven students excel academically and leave the room weekly for math and/or writing enrichment. Two of my students speak English as a second language. While my students are different in many ways, I also notice common characteristics in all of my students that are typical of the seven/eight-year-old age group. Some of these characteristics include interest in one another’s behaviors and actions,
constantly changing social groups, desire to be the leader or have a job, and difficulty remembering to finish assignments.

Another key component of my classroom, and something I am looking closely at through inquiry is the student-teacher dynamics in my classroom. Currently in my classroom, as in many other primary classrooms, there is a paraprofessional for half of the day to work with students and assist the teachers. From the start of the day, at 8:30 AM until just after lunch, about 1:00 PM, there are three adults in my classroom. The classroom teacher, the paraprofessional and I, the intern, are constantly available to help students. Including all three adults in small group instruction and behavior management is a key component of how my classroom is run. The students in my classroom are used to small group and individualized attention and instruction and know that they have three adults who can assist them at any time.

II. Wondering and Sub-Questions

It is truly beneficial to me to critically examine my classroom and my students in order to better understand their needs and to make sure they are comfortable in the classroom setting. Questioning and wondering about my current classroom also helps me examine the kind of teacher I want to be in the future. Over the course of the last eight months, I carefully observed my classroom and began examining wonderings that I had about how my classroom was run. I began noticing how reliant my students are on the three adults in the classroom, which made me wonder how I would teach a class of primary students
next year if I were the only adult in the classroom. I also began to think about what my students would need to be able to do when they became intermediate students (grades three and four) and didn’t have as much specialized attention. All of these observations and questions led me to my main wondering about my second grade classroom.

How can a teacher in a primary classroom create a learning environment that encourages student independence?

Under that main question, or wondering, I began to develop sub-questions such as:

- How can I foster self-monitoring skills in association with student-led centers?
- What types of tools can I produce that will aide my students in completing independent classroom management tasks?
- How much independence should be expected of a second grade student?
- How can I keep students actively engaged and learning at an independent center?
- Can primary students self-monitor their work and keep track of what is finished and unfinished?
- How do beginning teachers set up their classrooms so they encourage and support student independence?
- What do teachers without assistance do to make their classroom run smoothly?
- How independent are intermediate students (grades three and four) expected to be?
III. Data Collection

Student Checklist

As I began to shape my sub-questions, I decided that monitoring student independence during the morning routine was a good place to start. This routine has been in place since the beginning of the year. It consists of students hanging up their coats and backpacks, turning in their homework, washing their hands, marking the lunch chart and working on seatwork until we begin our day. During this time many students were forgetting to mark the lunch chart, socializing with friends and not completing their seatwork. In order to aid students in independently completing this task, I created a morning routine checklist that I fastened to the corner of each student’s desk. These checklists served as a visual reminder for students to complete all of the morning tasks, and a few more such as sharpening pencils and getting supplies ready for the day. After the checklists were implemented, I stood back and kept a record of how many students followed the checklist. I based my record on how many students marked the lunch chart and then immediately went to their seat and began working.

Work Folder Checklist

I watched my students manage their morning routine independently, and I began to wonder if primary students were able to manage their work independently. My students already had work folders, and any unfinished work was kept in those folders to be completed either in the morning or during any free time during the day. I was noticing
that this work wasn’t being turned in and that unfinished work was piling up in the folders. Instead of walking around and checking folders every day, I wanted to see if my students could monitor their own work by using a simple checklist. The work folder checklist was laminated and fastened to the back of students’ folders. Students then used crayon to write in a given space the name of each assignment and the date it was put in the folder. On Fridays, students left their folders out on their desks to be checked while they were at music. Any unfinished work in the folders at that time was either finished at recess or taken home to complete over the weekend. Once work was complete, students checked it off on their checklist showing that it was completed in class, taken home, or done at recess. Each Friday, when I checked work folders, I recorded how many students were using and benefiting from their work folder checklists.

Morning Greeting

I developed a morning greeting later in my inquiry. I did this because I began noticing that a few of my students were still not following their morning routine checklist. By creating a morning letter, I offered an extra reminder to students to complete their checklist and also work on anything else that I wanted them to do in the morning. While the students were working in the morning, I observed and kept track of how many students followed the greeting’s directions each day.

Independent Learning Center

Each morning in my classroom my students rotate through four centers including a guided reading center, a spelling/writing center, a phonics and word study center and a
computer/ listening center. In order to see how well my students could work independently on an academic activity, I created an independent center and implemented it at the spelling station every Wednesday. Students gathered together and read the directions together, sorted the supplies together and worked at the station without the help of a teacher. Each Wednesday, as the students worked at the center, they would record their answers and turn them in, their responses were then used as data as they were checked for completeness and correctness. Data was also collected at this station in the form of anecdotal notes as my mentor, the paraprofessional and I all observed this station at different times.

*Observation of Learner’s Choice*

During whole group instruction, I began to wonder how I would differentiate instruction in a classroom where I was the only teacher. I began to consider asking the students to make independent decisions about how they learned the best. I introduced learner’s choice during writer’s workshop, a time when the students who need extra help with reading and writing are with a specialist. With the remaining students, I would introduce the lesson and the instructions as a whole group. Then I would tell students to decide if they were comfortable being on their own to write. The students that wanted to get started on their own moved back to their desks. The students who wanted extra support came back to the classroom library with me and we brainstormed ideas for writing together. As students became more comfortable and had a clear idea of what they were going to write about, they could decide to leave our group and work independently. I began using this strategy in math instruction as well. When introducing a new concept,
students could choose to work in student groups, or if they were unsure or uncomfortable with the concept, they could work with the teacher.

Next, I began asking students to decide independently how they liked to work. I did this by creating quiet spaces in the room, away from the desk clusters, where students could choose to work independently if they were having difficulty focusing. During student work time, if students were not getting work completed because they couldn’t focus, students could choose to take their work and move to a quiet corner in the room.

**Student Survey**

My last collection of data came from a survey that I gave to my students. This survey included two parts. In the first part of the survey, students were asked about the responsibilities that they have at home. The second part of the survey asked students how often they felt they completed the independent management tasks that they were responsible for within the classroom. It also asked students how comfortable, or how well they liked, working independently in certain situations. This survey was created to see if there was a correlation between how independent students are at home and how comfortable they are with independent learning and management at school.
IV. Data Analysis

**Student Checklist**

Before I implemented the checklist in my classroom, slightly more than half of my class (56%) was completing their morning responsibilities. Therefore, the checklist was put in place as a reminder. In order to analyze its effectiveness, I kept track every morning of how many students were following the checklist by marking the students who marked the lunch chart and also the students who sharpened pencils and prepared materials. After collecting the data I looked at the data for trends. I found that on average, 73% of my class followed their checklist. This means that most days, 17 out of 23 students completed their checklist regularly, and six students did not complete their morning activities. These six students were not always the same, but I did notice that four students consistently did not complete this task. I began to see that while this reminder was working, there were still several students who consistently did not complete their checklist without one or more verbal reminders from one of the three adults in the classroom.

**Work Folder Checklist**

This management tool was put in place to see if students would self-monitor their work folder without reminders. Each Friday it was checked to see if students were managing their work and also to see if students were using their checklist. As I checked the folders on Fridays, I marked which students were using their folder checklist and I
marked which students had their folder work up to date and also which students needed to take work home or complete overdue work at recess. I found that 6 out of 23 students, 26%, consistently used the checklist and 10 out of 23 students, 43.4%, used the checklist, but did not use it consistently.

Close to seventy-three percent, or 17 out of 23 students managed to consistently keep their work folder updated. Only three students consistently had work to make up at recess or work that needed to be completed over the weekend at home. It is uncertain whether these results are related to the work folder checklist or if they are in relation to the Friday folder checks. Because the statistics concerning the work folder checklist are significantly lower than the percentage of students who monitored their work, it is reasonable to presume that students’ monitoring of their work is in direct correlation with the Friday folder checks.

Morning Greeting

The morning greeting was put in place when it was noticed that several students consistently did not complete their morning routine checklist. This extra reminder was put in place for students to complete their checklist. After the morning greeting was established and introduced to the students, an average of 91% of my students completed their morning routine checklist. This greeting caused an increase from 17 out of 23 students to 21 out of 23 students independently managing their morning routine.

In the morning greeting, students were also asked to complete tasks in order for me to collect and analyze data. These tasks included saying good morning to the teacher, giving the teacher a high five, answering a question posted in the room, or completing a
worksheet or survey and handing it in. When these tasks were first introduced, only about one fourth, or 26%, of the students completed this task after they completed their checklist. As students got more comfortable with following multi-step directions, completing their checklist and completing the next given task, more students (20 out of 23) began completing their checklist and the task on the board. On average, the same three students consistently did not complete all tasks outlined in the morning greeting.

*Independent Learning Center*

This center was analyzed with anecdotal notes. These notes were divided into sections based on the four reading level groups that rotate through this center. Each group consists of five or six students. The groups are divided, by shapes, so that students are unaware of achievement difference, into above average readers (rectangle group), high average readers (triangle group), low average readers (circle group), and Title One readers (square group). Each group was given 20 minutes at the independent station. As each group came to the independent center, my mentor or I would take detailed notes about how the students interacted with one another, how well they were able to complete the task, and how often they were on task throughout the center. I began to realize quickly, based on observation, that the above average reading, or rectangle, group was the only group that was able to sit right down, read and follow the directions and decide how they were going to take turns completing the center. This group’s off task time was only five minutes compared to the other groups. The other groups off task times totaled between 10 and 17 minutes. The other three groups were unable to efficiently delegate responsibility. The Title one reading group, the square group, had a difficult time reading
and following the directions and then became frustrated and disinterested with the activity.

The following week I implemented jobs. Each person in the group would have a specific responsibility within the activity. The jobs included the directions reader, the supply person, the task master- who keeps everyone on task, the reporter- who reports student behavior to me after the station, and the play leader- who goes first in the activity and then decides which way they will rotate turns. Once these jobs were put in place, the independent station became a quick favorite for the students, and for me. The students had less and less off task time, with an average between 4 and 5 minutes off task for the rectangle, triangle and circle groups. The students used their time wisely at the station, produced quality work and had meaningful discussions about word use, phonics and language.

The square group, Title One readers, still had a difficult time reading and following the directions. Because of this, I would step in and help explain the directions to this group before allowing them to work independently. Even with this prompt, these students were off task for between 10 and 12 minutes total at this station leaving them with only 8-10 minutes of on task activity time. They had a difficult time following their roles or responsibilities within the game and therefore still remained frustrated and often argumentative with one another during this station.
Observation of Learner’s Choice

Implementing this activity made me somewhat apprehensive, because I was not sure how students would react. I feared that some students would not choose to work with the teacher for fear of being different from the students who felt confident enough to work on their own. To my surprise, many students in my class chose to be a part of a teachable group. I implemented this due to five or six students who, when asked to work independently, did not produce work. To collect data for this teaching tool, I focused on those students and monitored whether they chose to be part of a teachable group, and if they did, how that affected their work. For two of my students, during writing time, this strategy worked. They often stayed in the classroom library with me, and we brainstormed what to write about and talked until they felt comfortable working independently. After working with me in a smaller group setting, these two students then were able to produce writing during writer’s workshop.

The other three students in my observation group benefited from the quiet spaces in the room. These students often had a difficult time completing classroom assignments, and were often behind the rest of the class. By offering the quiet spaces in the room, these students had the option to move to a spot where they were able to focus better. One student began using the spaces as soon as they were offered, without prompting, and there was an obvious difference in not only the timely manner that work was turned in, but also quality of work. The other two students were invited to the quiet spaces by me. While they did not choose to go to these spaces independently, the quiet spaces in the room did have an impact on the time in which their assignments were turned in.
Student Survey

This survey was created to look for a correlation between independent student responsibilities at home and student comfort levels and opinions about independent responsibilities at school. I was impressed to find that out of 23 students, only 14 students did have real responsibilities at home. These ranged from setting the table, washing dishes, feeding a pet and dusting to helping with a younger sibling, making the bed and picking up toys. Of these 14 students, all enjoyed the independent station, 10 felt that they always completed their independent responsibilities in the classroom and 10 students said that they enjoyed having independent responsibilities at school.

The 9 students who said they did chores sometimes or never, or who only listed picking up their toys as a responsibility, also enjoyed the independent center. Seven of the nine students said that they always or often completed their independent responsibilities, but only two students said that they liked having independent responsibilities at school.

V. Claims

Claim 1: The ability to complete tasks and academic activities independently is influenced by developmental readiness.

According to Chip Wood, the author of Yardsticks: Children in the Classroom Ages 4-14, children begin to develop the desire to be responsible or to have a classroom job as an older seven-year-old student (www.yardsticks4-14.com). In Inspiring
Independent Learning, written by Mary Ann Rafoth, it is said that by the end of second grade students should be able to independently use simple memory strategies, follow directions, use comprehension strategies and monitor their learning (Rafoth 23). After using all four of Rafoth’s strategies in my classroom, many of my students can still do this, but after reviewing my collected data I have noticed that five students in my classroom consistently do not follow through on the independent responsibilities within the classroom setting. Of these five students, three are Title One learners who spend a significant portion of the day out of the classroom and with a specialist. These students are also students who do not have independent responsibilities at home and therefore have not developed a sense of independence or responsibility. The other two students who do not follow through on independent tasks are significantly younger than the rest of the students in the class. Due to these correlations in my data, I have come to the conclusion that taking responsibility for independent management of learning and classroom routines is based on developmental readiness.

Claim 2: Students are more successful in independent learning situations when each student has a clearly defined responsibility.

This claim is based from observations and anecdotal notes on the independent learning station. When students first began the station and were expected to mange it themselves, it was not an effective learning tool and caused many students frustration, which was not my intention. As soon as students had defined roles, they were able to complete their tasks and also enjoyed learning at the station. According to Mary Ann Rafoth, author of Inspiring Independent Learning, primary students cannot typically
generate strategies independently (Rafoth 25). What I did find, however, is that once strategies are in place, students can independently monitor their learning, and they enjoy being self sufficient.

**Students are more likely to be successful at working independently if they know they will be held accountable for completing their work.**

The students in my classroom were not completing work that was associated with their independent station or that was stored in their independent work folder. When I began noticing this trend, I began requiring students to turn all of their work in from the independent station whether it was finished or not. When I did not receive student work from their station, students had to redo the station in order to make up their work. I also began requiring students to take unfinished work home on weekends or finish it at recess if it had been stored incomplete in their work folder for too long. As soon as I let students know the expectation that they had to get their work done and that it would be checked by me, they made sure to complete their work at the independent station. I also created checklists for the back of their folders to see if students would independently keep track of their work. I found that unless their checklist is checked on a daily basis, only 5 students marked their checklist. Because of these observations, I began to see that when students are held accountable for their work, they can monitor and complete it independently.
Claim 3: Students who have independent responsibilities at home seem more comfortable in independent situations within the classroom.

This claim is based on data that was collected after students completed a survey. I saw that students who did have responsibilities at home felt more comfortable in independent situations at school. Out of the 23 students surveyed, 14 had responsibilities at home and 10 of those students said that they felt comfortable and enjoyed working independently at school both at the independent station and completing morning routines. The other 9 students who did not have independent responsibilities at home, said that most of them liked the independent learning station, but only 2 students said that they felt comfortable or enjoyed working independently in the classroom overall. This showed me that more of the students who were used to having independent responsibilities at home felt comfortable being independent at school, too.

VI. Reflections

This inquiry project was very beneficial to me. It helped me plan and prepare for my future as a teacher who may be in a classroom with 23-26 students and be the only adult! One helpful part of this project was taking the opportunity to observe and interview other beginning teachers who are working without assistance. I had the opportunity to look at two different classrooms, one within the State College Area School District, and one in the Altoona Area School District. I also had the opportunity to interview third grade teachers and interns to see how they structured their classrooms and what my students would be expected to do in the following years. It was insights from
these observations, along with critical research, that helped me shape this project and implement several strategies within my classroom.

This project also helped me to become a critical observer within the classroom. Through this project I began to learn more and more about each student in my class and where he or she was developmentally. The inquiry also allowed me to observe how social development and social groups in my classroom influenced how students made independent decisions and also how well students functioned in independent settings. I feel that this project has prepared me to be an excellent teacher and an observer of student behavior in my classroom.

While I felt that this project provided a thorough examination of seven and eight year olds and their ability to function independently in a primary classroom as facilitated by the teacher, I feel that this project could have taken many different directions, as well. If I were to do this project differently, or possibly take more time implementing strategies and collecting data, I would also have included inquiry on students monitoring behavior. I feel that students reflecting on their classroom behavior could also be beneficial and know that it is used in many intermediate classrooms. I am interested if a strategy like this could be implemented in a primary classroom.

VII. Future Practice

This entire inquiry project was based on my concern about my future practice. As this intern year progressed, I began to see how dependent my students were on the three adults in the room and it really concerned me. I was concerned for them as they entered the intermediate division (grades three and four) where I knew they would be expected to
exhibit more independent responsibility. I was also concerned for me as a teacher and wondered what I would do if I were placed as a beginning teacher in a primary classroom with no para-professional, and of course no intern. As I began implementing new strategies to foster independence among the students in my classroom, I began to see that if started early enough, primary students can be responsible for not only following through on independent tasks, but also independently monitoring their work and behavior.

In my future classroom, independent strategies will be developed from the very first day of school. My students will be responsible for independently making decisions about how to work within the classroom, working on independent learning activities and also monitoring their work and behavior within the classroom. Also, from the first day of school I will be sure to critically observe and collect data about my students and their behaviors within the classroom. I feel that this is the best way to get to know them and what they’re capable of, and then use this data to create a classroom environment that is nurturing to their needs and also facilitates independence.
Appendix

A. Morning Routine Checklist

Morning Routine Checklist

1. Hang up your coat and backpack.
2. Turn in your homework.
3. Wash your hands.
4. Mark the lunch chart.
5. Load homework into your mailbox.
6. Sharpen your pencil.
7. Mark your calendar.
8. Work on your ‘ketchup’ work.

This checklist was placed in the corner of every student’s desk so that he or she could use it to make sure that all morning responsibilities were taken care of. These checklists were placed on the desks from February until the present. Many students still use them.
Appendix

B. Work Folder Checklist

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<th>Work in my folder</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Finished</th>
<th>Recess Work</th>
<th>Take Home</th>
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Name: ______________________________      Month: _____________________________

This checklist was attached to students work folders. On this, they would write the assignment and the date that it was put into their folders. This date would serve as a reminder to complete the work. Once it was completed students could check off the finished box. If the work was not completed in a timely manner, students could choose to either take it home and finish it, or finish it during recess.
Appendix

C. Samples of Morning Greetings

1. **Good Morning!**
   Please do your checklist. Before you start to work on your "Ketchup" work, say good morning to your teacher.

   Thank you,
   Miss Miller

2. **Good Morning!**
   Please do your checklist. Before you start to work on your "Ketchup" work, say good morning to your teacher.

   Thank you,
   Miss Miller

3. **Good Morning!**
   Remember to do your checklist. After you finish your checklist, come see Mrs. Young or Miss Miller and get your math worksheets. Please try to finish these worksheets this morning.

   Thank you,
   Your Teachers

4. **Good Morning!**
   Please do your checklist. After you finish your checklist, choose a book from the classroom library and a quiet spot in the room and read.

   Thank you,
   Your Teachers
Appendix

D. Independent Learning Station Directions

Directions

Rectangle, Square, Circle, Triangle:

1. Supply person:
   - give each person 1 sheet of paper
   - lay the ABC letter cards face up in the middle of the floor
   - put one word ending from your group’s bag in the middle of the board

2. Everyone hamburger fold your paper, open it back up and put your name and the date on top.

3. Write the first word ending at the top of one half of your paper.

4. Take turns adding one ABC letter card to the beginning of your word ending (on the board) to make new words.

5. When someone from the group makes a new word write it down on your paper.

6. When you have gone through the ABC cards and made all of the words you can, move on to the next word ending.

Rectangle, Triangle:

When you are finished with adding one ABC letter card to your word endings, go back and add two ABC letter cards.

For example: add B and R to ight to make the word BRIGHT.

Rectangle, Square, Circle, Triangle:

When the station is over put your work in the work-in bin, even if you are not finished.
Appendix

E. Independent Learning Station
Appendix

F. Student Work from Independent Learning Station
Appendix

G. Anecdotal Notes from Independent Stations
Appendix

H. Pictures of Learner’s Choice

Students can choose to work in a quiet corner of the room. They may also choose whether they will work alone, work with other students, or work with me. With this choice comes the expectation that students will choose an environment where they will produce their best work.
Students can also choose to get a lab board and sit in the classroom library where I can give them specialized attention. Students can make this choice if they are not comfortable with the material and need some extra explanation or guidance. Students who choose to stay work in the library with me can decide when they are ready to go work independently. They can stay for as long or as little time as they need.
Appendix

I. Student Survey

Name ____________________________

Do you have responsibilities to help your parents at home?        Yes               No

What responsibilities do you have?

Make the bed                     Set the table                     Feed my pet
Take out the garbage             Help shop for groceries            Watch younger brothers/ sisters
Put away my toys                 Wash dishes

Any other responsibilities ____________________________________________________________

How often do you follow your morning checklist?

Always                     Usually                     Sometimes                     Not often                     Never

Do you like working at the independent station?

Yes                              No

Why? ______________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________
How well do you think you follow directions by yourself, without reminders from the teacher?

Always    Usually    Sometimes    Not often    Never

Do you like choosing your own spot to work in the classroom?

Yes        No

When do you do your best work?

When I work alone    When I work with a group

When I work with the teacher

What is your favorite part of the school day?

Math    Writer’s Workshop    Stations    Science

Unit Activities    Read Aloud

Why? ________________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________
Appendix

J. Student Surveys completed

Do you have responsibilities to help your parents at home? Yes

What responsibilities do you have?

- Make the bed
- Set the table
- Feed my pet
- Take out the garbage
- Help shop for groceries
- Watch younger brother sisters
- Wash dishes

Other responsibilities

How often do you follow your morning checklist?

- Always
- Usually
- Sometimes
- Not often
- Never

Do you like working at the independent station?

Yes, because you have to work together.
How well do you think you follow directions by yourself, without coming from the teacher?

Always  Sometimes  Not often  Sometimes

Do you like choosing your own spot to work in the classroom?

Yes  No

When do you do your best work?

When I work alone  When I work with a partner

What is your favorite part of the school day?

Math  Writing  Reading  Science  Lunch  Recess

Why? you get to eat in.
Inquiry Brief

I. Context

My inquiry project is being conducted in a self-contained second grade classroom at Corl Street Elementary School in State College, Pennsylvania. The population of the State College is very diverse and rather intelligent as well. Because State College is centered around the Penn State University, many of my students’ parents are professors or affiliated with the university in some way. State College Area School District prides itself on its educational programs and its student success rate. One contribution to this success is the number of specialists, teachers and paraprofessionals that work with the students on a daily basis. Corl Street Elementary, where my inquiry takes place, also has a huge amount of family involvement. Most of the students that attend Corl Street live in nearby communities and typically stay at Corl Street from kindergarten through fifth grade. Because of this, families are well known at Corl Street and are welcome to get involved in classroom and whole school activities throughout the school year.

In my second grade classroom there are twenty-three students, eleven girls and twelve boys. Of the twenty-three students in my class, only five students struggle academically. These five students leave the room for one hour every day to receive individualized reading instruction. Seven students excel academically and leave the room weekly for math enrichment. Two of my students speak English as a second language. While my students are different in many ways I also notice common characteristics in all of my students that are typical of the seven/eight-year-old age group. Some of these
characteristics include interest in one another’s behaviors and actions, constantly changing social groups, desire to be the leader or have a job, and difficulty remembering to finish assignments.

Another key component of my classroom, and something I am looking closely at through inquiry is the student-teacher dynamics in my classroom. Currently in my classroom, as in many other primary classrooms, the students work with a paraprofessional for half of the day. From the start of the day, at 8:30 AM until just after lunch, about 1:00 PM, there are three adults in my classroom. The classroom teacher, the paraprofessional and me, the intern, are constantly available to help students, which is a key component of how my classroom is run. The students in my classroom are used to small group and individualized attention and instruction and know that they have three adults that can assist them at any time.

II. Rationale

As a teacher, I am constantly thinking about what my students need and what I can do to create a positive atmosphere and meet the needs of my students. Because I do not have my own classroom yet, I take all of my experiences in my current classroom very seriously. Often I look at scenarios and situations from my experience this year and try and apply them to when I have my own classroom next year. Something that I find interesting about my classroom this year is the number of adults available to meet the needs of the students.
Starting at the beginning of the day, the classroom paraprofessional collects homework, helps students wash hands and passes out the next homework assignment and my mentor and I circulate the room collecting lunch money and excuses, checking desks and folders and answering any student questions. During stations, the students are either in guided reading with my mentor, working on spelling activities with me, working on phonics exercises with the paraprofessional or reading silently. Any other time throughout the day the three of us work as a team to differentiate instruction, manage the classroom behavior, distribute and organize classroom materials, and execute lessons.

Looking at my classroom, I was very intrigued about how my students would function without all of the attention from three educators in the classroom. All of this began to make me wonder how I was going to manage a classroom by myself next year, as a first year teacher. It also made me think about how I could help make the students a little more independent or responsible for themselves and prepare them for what is expected of them in third grade.

III. Main Wondering
How can a teacher in a primary classroom create a learning environment that encourages student independence?

IV. Sub-questions

- How can I foster self-monitoring skills in association with student-led centers?
- What types of tools can I produce that will aide my students in completing independent classroom management tasks?
- How much independence should be expected of a second grade student?
- How can I keep students actively engaged and learning at an independent center?
- Can primary students self-monitor their work and keep track of what is finished and unfinished?
- How do first year teachers set up their classrooms so they are conducive to student independence?
- What do teachers without assistance do to make their classroom run smoothly?
- How independent are third grade students expected to be?

V. Timeline

- **Week one** (Jan. 14-18) Observe behaviors and needs in my classroom and begin brainstorming my main wondering and sub-wonderings for my inquiry
• **Week two** (Jan. 21-25) Begin compiling data about how often students do not complete tasks independently or do not follow through on assigned independent activities

• **Week three** (Jan. 28-1) Create, proofread and distribute checklists and folder organizers to students in order to assist them in following through with independent activities and remembering to complete assigned work

• **Week four** (Feb. 4-8) Observe and compile data based on observations made on student progress after checklists and folder organizers are put to use

• **Week five** (Feb. 11-15) Interview first year teachers about setting up an independent classroom; continue collecting classroom data

• **Week six** (Feb 18-22) Implement any new ideas given by interviewed teachers, continue observing, making changes and collecting data in the classroom

• **Week seven** (Feb 25-29) Work with students to train them on how to run an independent spelling stations

• **Week eight** (Mar 3-7) Survey intermediate teachers about student expectations in third, fourth and fifth grade; continue observing independent stations

• **Week nine** (Mar 10-14) Implement any new ideas to prepare my students for independence in the intermediate grades

• **Week ten** (Mar 17-21) Continue collecting data within the classroom; begin compiling data in a way that makes sense, is recordable and also is presentable

• **Week eleven** (Mar 24-28) Survey students to see how they feel about working independently, and whether or not they feel more responsible and ready for third grade
• **Week twelve** (Mar 31-Apr 4)  Begin preparing the inquiry report while still collecting and organizing classroom data

• **Week thirteen** (April 7-11)  Continue writing the inquiry draft to submit to my PDA

• **Week fourteen** (April 14-18)  Make corrections on the inquiry draft to make a final copy; begin preparing materials and powerpoint presentation for the inquiry presentation on April 26th, 2008

• **Week fifteen** (April 21-25)  Practice for the inquiry presentation and prepare for the annual inquiry conference on Saturday, April 26th

VI. Data Collection Ideas

1.) During week three, I placed a morning routine checklist on each of the students desks. This checklists gives the students a step by step guideline to follow while completing their independent morning activities. I have been watching them to see if they can monitor themselves and make sure that they complete each of the morning tasks independent from teacher help or reminders.

2.) During week four, I implemented a work folder checklist. The students attached this checklist to the back of their folder. When they put unfinished work in their folder, they use crayon to write a description of the assignment on their checklist. As they complete the assignments in their folder they check it off on their attached checklist. Each Friday I will check these folders
to monitor if the students are using the charts and how well they are keeping up with their work. In order to make students accountable for independently completing their work, if they have incomplete work in their folder during the Friday check they are made to complete it during recess or for weekend homework.

3.) Beginning on week seven, I will train students to work at an independent station while I observe and take notes. I am now collecting data on the best way to differentiate these stations to benefit all types of learners. Soon I will record results to see what works and what does not work in terms of how the station is set up, how effective the station is at keeping students on task, and how well the students are gaining information from the lesson presented.

4.) At the end of March, I will survey my students to gain insight into how they feel about being independent in the classroom. My survey will focus on three components. First I will ask students how they like working in independent stations and if they feel they get work done at those stations. The second part of the survey will focus on how they feel about completing morning activities and if the teacher’s tools are effective. Lastly, I will focus on what the students are made responsible for at home. I feel that this piece of information will be telling because it could offer insight into why my students have a difficult time following through with independent activities.

5.) During the months of February and March, I will be interviewing other teachers about what their students do independently. I will interview first year teachers about what they feel is most important in creating a classroom
environment that fosters both independence and active learning. It is also important for me to interview or survey intermediate teachers to find out what they expect from their students in terms of independence, which will help me better prepare my second grade students.
Annotated Bibliography


“Making a case for student-directed spelling programs” is an article that talks about allowing students to choose, study and assess the spelling words that they feel they need the most help with. This article discusses allowing students to work independently to learn word building strategies and patterns in spelling. While, in my classroom I do not feel that my students would be capable of choosing their words and assessing themselves, I do feel that it is important for them to work independently in a way that helps them learn spelling patterns and strategies. The literacy station on which I am focusing my inquiry project is mainly a spelling station and I feel that this article is helpful in getting me to think about how to run this station and help students work independently at a level that is correct for them.


Jaime Bailey, Bev Bain and Gayle Nyquist are all professional educators who worked together with the Bureau of Education and Research to create this training video intended to create independent stations in grades three through six. This video focuses on implementing management systems and routines that help maintain student run
stations that are easy for students to navigate independently. The video also offers insight into how a teacher can monitor the stations to make sure that students are actively learning and involved even without constant teacher supervision. Although this video is geared toward intermediate classrooms, I feel that many of its strategies could be put in place in a primary classroom as well. This video was presented at a Language Arts Continuum that I attended and will greatly influence the types of independent literacy stations that I develop, and how I establish, run and monitor the stations to ensure active learning.


Ms. Abby Barto is a teacher at the school in which I am currently student teaching. She was also an intern in the PDS program at this school. When she first graduated, she got a job as a teacher in a fourth grade classroom where she did not have any assistance in her classroom. After a few years, Miss Barto moved to a second grade classroom where she did have a para professional in her classroom for at least half of the day. It would benefit me to talk to Ms. Barto about the differing levels of independence between the two grades and also how big of a difference a classroom assistant makes. Asking Miss Barto what she did to create an independent classroom atmosphere in both the second grade and fourth grade classrooms will greatly enhance the research for my inquiry project.

Ms. Jenna Muccitelli is a first year teacher in a second grade classroom that loops and has the same teacher two years in a row. Ms. Muccitelli works in the Altoona Area School District, which is much different from the State College Area School District. What interests me most about Jenna’s classroom is that she does not have a paraprofessional in her classroom each day to help her. Because of this she creates independent station that the students work at while she is working with small guided reading groups. By observing and interviewing her I will get a chance to see how a first year teacher sets up her classroom to facilitate independence both academically and with aspects of classroom management.


In this book, Mary Ann Rafoth discusses how to inspire independent learning in students during their many years of schooling. Rafoth provides an overview of the strengths, weaknesses and abilities of primary, intermediate, middle school and high school aged children. She talks about using independence in the primary classroom to build a foundation that will support independence later in life. This book is helpful to my inquiry because it explains what primary students are able to do independently and which independence strategies will benefit them the most. It also offers strategies and example worksheets for teachers to use in inspiring independent students.

Robyn Silbey’s journal article about helping kids to think and work on their own offers many tips on how to encourage student independence socially, academically and organizationally. Silbey focuses on how students perform on standardized tests and how encouraging students to work independently can ultimately affect test scores in a positive way. She believes that promoting student independence helps students feel confident and competent on their own. This article is very different from the others that I have looked at because it focuses on the affect of independence on standardized tests scores. Because these test scores are such a big issue in today’s schools I felt that it was important to see how they were affected by independence which is in turn what I am inquiring about.


Authors Harvey and Chickie-Wolfe make “Fostering Independent Learning” a very easy text to follow. The book discusses how to work with students as well as families on promoting independent learning in children. It also takes into account the preparation needed to be done by the classroom teacher and how to assess student performance. What is most helpful is that this book is that it discusses student independence in many separate situations in the classroom. It discusses empowering students to self regulate many areas such as motivation to study and learn, behavior, time and organization, reading and writing.

Elementary School.

Ms. Courtney Stitt is a first year teacher in a self-contained second grade classroom at Easterly Parkway. Last year she was an intern in the Professional Development Schools program. I am interviewing her to find out what strategies she uses to encourage her students to work independently either in an academic situation or with classroom management. I will interview Ms. Stitt about what she found to be beneficial in organizing her first classroom and what she does to maintain literacy centers especially any independent centers.


In Yardsticks, author Chip Wood takes teachers and parents through the life of a child from ages four to fourteen. This resource describes the major milestones that mark the mental, physical and social growth of the child. It discusses the development of a child with language, reading, writing and mathematical and logical reasoning. This text is most resourceful for this inquiry project because it allows me to focus on the developmental abilities of seven and eight year olds. It allows me to read about what they are ready for and helps me to shape my ideas about what aspects of the daily classroom routine they can and cannot do independently.


Pathways to independence focuses on independence in different academic areas in the
intermediate and middle school classroom. It focuses mainly on language arts and
discusses spelling, reading, writing and fluency. What particularly interested me about
this book is the insight it gave me for preparing students for these types of things for
third grade when they enter the intermediate unit. I also found the chapter on
preparing for students and assessing students to find out individual needs very helpful.
I feel that this text, although it is geared toward the teaching of older students, could be
adapted and made beneficial for how to encourage independence in primary students.
The best part about this resource is that it includes worksheets and surveys that are
easy to read and student-friendly enough to help students monitor their progress and
express their ideas and feelings about working independently to the teacher.