

A. Background Information

Where Do We Teach?

At this time, we are kindergarten teachers at Park Forest Elementary School, which is also known as the home of the Park Forest Penguins! We have 21 students in our class, 13 boys and 8 girls. The demographics of our classroom are very interesting to say the least! We have eight Korean children and one Japanese child, none of which speaks English as their first language. We also have three students that receive instructional support, one of which rarely speaks. There is also a child in our class that struggles with emotional and behavioral problems. However, it does not end there. We also have a child that has severe autism who is unable to communicate in any way other than lots of yelling and shouting. Unfortunately, his yelling and shouting can be very distracting and disruptive, especially when the other children start to imitate him. We also have many levels of ability and need that exist amongst our students. They are also a very active and excited group. Let us just say, there is rarely a dull moment in our kindergarten classroom!

What Led Us to This Inquiry?

From an Intern's Perspective:

Throughout my experiences as an intern, I have been provided with a myriad of opportunities to immerse myself in all that occurs within a classroom community. Many of those experiences have left me questioning or wondering why certain things occur or why specific things prove to be ineffective. One area that I have developed a significant concern for is the way we spend the minutes prior to and following our morning announcements in our classroom. As a future teacher, I feel that it is very important to take advantage of every minute you have with your students because each minute provides for a teaching and learning opportunity. I also feel that the morning is a very special time for students and it is when they are most alert and ready to learn. Unfortunately, I did not feel as though our morning activities were as educationally appropriate or effective as I would have liked them to be. As I have mentioned above,

we have a very diverse group of learners with a wide range of ability levels and behaviors, which has proven to be challenging at times. In turn, I came to realize that our morning activities were not providing each of our individual students with the positive opportunity for learning that I would have liked nor was I using that time in the most effective manner. Because of those observations, I became interested in determining how to provide our students with morning activities that would prove to be educationally appropriate, effective, and set a positive tone for the day within the time that was allotted.

From a Veteran Teacher's Perspective:

Throughout my experiences as a teacher, I have always felt that morning is the best teaching time of the day. The children are fresh, bright-eyed, and they are excited to be at school. The teacher is cheerful and headache free! I also know, after reading a variety of literature, that mornings are actually the best time of the day for children to learn.

Last year was my first year in Kindergarten and we had a very successful morning routine. The children would come in, sign up for lunch, read the morning letter, and participate in our morning meeting. It was a relatively calm and positive start of the day. Then, this year's group of children came along. This year I found myself referring to our mornings as "Morning Madness." The children charge in, throw their coats and backpacks somewhat near the coat closet, run into the room, and look around for someone to get in trouble with. This year's morning routine was very different from last years! Because of all these factors, our mornings had become hectic, rushed, stressful and crazy. Of course, that set the tone for the day and our days were inevitably getting more and more stressful as a result. For these reasons, I decided to focus my attention on how to go about creating a more academic and calm opening routine.

What Do Others Know About This Topic?

This was a challenging portion of the project for us. We had literally stacks and stacks of resource materials to peruse to gain some insight into what the "authorities" had to say about how important the morning was to student learning. We thought that first we would speak to some fellow teachers in our building, and then in our grade level, to

see what they thought about how important the morning was to their day. We received many responses. Overall, there were certain consistencies across the board about what the morning holds for each of those teachers. They each felt that greeting the students was very important. Additionally, most teachers wanted to make sure that everyone felt welcome in their classroom.

We do know, from observing and speaking to fellow teachers, that the morning meeting time is a very busy time. Teachers like to use this time to take attendance, do lunch count, share important news, and discuss the schedule for the day. These things seem routinely consistent. Some teachers, however, also like to add certain academic activities to the start of their day. These vary from teacher to teacher, and from grade level to grade level. The primary teacher typically likes to use this time to review different topics through the morning letter. According to several of our first grade teachers, these topics can include doing math equations and math problems with the calendar, reviewing grammar and punctuation with the morning letter, and reinforce community building by sharing news of the day.

In recent years, there has been an influx of books relating to the Morning Meeting, the Morning Message, and the Morning Routine. In fact, they were purchased as a part of the newly written kindergarten curriculum in the State College Area School District. Most of those resources have indicated that the first thirty minutes of the day are very important. According to Roxanne Kriete, author of The Morning Meeting Book, “The way we begin each day in our classroom sets the tone for learning and speaks volumes about what and whom we value, about our expectations for the way we will treat each other, and about the way we believe learning occurs.” (1999, p. 10) We, too, agree with her and support her feelings that learning occurs the minute the children walk through our doors. The way you treat one another first thing in the morning and the activities you do in that short period definitely set the tone for the day. Additionally, “the children notice if they are greeted warmly or overlooked, whether the classroom feels chaotic unpredictable, or ordered and comforting.” (Kriete, 1999, p. 10) Bobbi Fisher, author of Joyful Learning, also viewed the start of the day to have great importance. When writing about the start of the day, she said that although it takes up a short amount of time in the daily schedule, it is very important because it sets a positive tone for the

day, and helps the class develop as a community of learners. (Fisher, 1991, p. 35) Similarly, The New Kindergarten, Teaching, Reading, Writing & More, written by Constance Leuenberger, stated, “Morning meeting is the most influential and important time of the day. It’s the time when the teacher and the children come together as a community, building trust, acceptance and support. It’s a time for children to share concerns, questions, and comments about their classroom and world.” (2003, p. 30) After becoming familiar with such expert opinions, we became more confident in the path that we chose for our inquiry and continued to develop further our questions and wonderings.

What Wonderings Did We Have?

1. How do we make our morning time prior to and following announcements a significant teaching and learning opportunity for each of our students, while taking the wide range of abilities and behaviors that exist within the demographics of our class population into consideration?
2. How do we provide for a strong academic beginning of each day that will allow for positive interactions?
3. Which activities would be the most applicable for such a diverse group of learners?
4. How do we ensure that everyone is included and actively participating appropriately for his or her level of ability?

B. Our Inquiry Plan

What Did We Do to Carry Out Our Inquiry?

The process of carrying out our inquiry involved a variety of steps. The first step we took was to sit down as a team and brainstorm a list of our wonderings that we had. Some of our initial wonderings were as follows: How can we differentiate our instruction for such a diverse group of learners? How can we spend enough time and give sufficient support to learners that have many needs and hindrances? How can we go about

motivating and helping low-level learners to bring them up to grade level? Each of those wonderings encouraged us to look for an area of our classroom where such concerns could be addressed. In time, we realized that those wonderings were evident in the way we felt about our morning routine. We were not satisfied with the way our morning routine was being carried out nor did we feel that it was as educationally appropriate as it could be. Such a realization led us to develop further wonderings that were more specific. Once we finally knew the direction we wanted to take with our inquiry we took the next step, we devised a brief plan of action for how we could collect our data, which will be discussed below. Following our data collection, we proceeded to carefully investigate and analyze our data. We routinely carried out such a process throughout the entirety of our inquiry project because we were continuously searching for noticeable patterns and ways to better meet the needs of our students during our morning routine.

How Did We Collect Our Data?

The first way that we collected data was to visit other kindergarten, first, and second grade classrooms to observe what was involved in their morning routine and how it was implemented. In doing so, we visited classrooms in our own school, Park Forest Elementary, and also classrooms in other schools of our district. During each visit, we were active observers and collected pertinent field notes.

The second way that we collected data was to meet with the Curriculum Support Teachers in our district. We decided that it would be important to do so because we were sure that they would be able to offer us some helpful hints for how we could make our morning routine more educationally appropriate and effective. We met several times with the Math & Science Curriculum Support Teacher, Ms. M.J.Kitt, and also the Language Arts & Social Studies Curriculum Support Teacher, Ms. Mindy Cocolin. Each meeting was very helpful because we were given many suggestions for ways to improve our morning that would positively benefit all of our students.

The third way that we collected data was to conduct student surveys. We decided that it would be a good idea to know how our students felt about how we spent our time in the morning prior to and following announcements. We wondered if they found it enjoyable or if they found it to be dull and unexciting. We also wanted to gain a better

understanding of what they liked and did not like about it. In turn, we conducted six student surveys with a group representative of our classroom demographics and then reviewed each student's response.

The fourth way that we collected data was to implement a student pre-assessment, which can be referenced in Appendix A. We deemed it to be important to gain a better understanding of what our students already knew in relation to letter recognition, letter sounds, estimation, addition and subtraction. We hoped that we would become more familiar with their strengths, weaknesses and prior knowledge through conducting such an assessment. We decided to perform this pre-assessment with seven students that were representative of the wide range of abilities that existed amongst our students and then reviewed each student's performance.

The fifth way that we collected data was to reflect daily on the progress of our inquiry. Each day following our morning meeting, we would sit down and discuss how we thought our morning activities went, what we might change about them, and any thoughts that we had on our morning routine. At times, we recorded such data in our own personal field notes and at other times we did so in reflective journal entries.

The final way that we collected data was to search for various resources that might prove to be related to the topic of our inquiry project and also the act of teacher inquiry itself. We did so by searching through our own resources that we had in the classroom and visiting local libraries. The Curriculum Support Teachers in our district also provided us with some wonderful resources to peruse. We used such resources to help us determine how experts felt about our topic and also to become more familiar with any techniques or activities that may have proven to be beneficial to our project and our students.

How Did We Analyze Our Data?

After we had collected sufficient data, we took the next step and began to analyze the data. The first stage of that process involved compiling all of the data that we had collected, which entailed all that we had collected together and individually. At first, it was a bit overwhelming and we were not exactly sure where to begin. In turn, we decided that the best thing to do was to take the time and carefully read through each

piece of data and evidence that we had. After we had taken the time to do so, we decided the next stage of the process should be to read through the data once again but this time to look for reoccurring patterns and themes. After we had done so we sat back down and discussed what each of us had learned or noticed about the data. Through our shared discussion, we devised a list of the many commonalities we noted and began to develop a new approach to how we implemented our morning routine. In turn, it was not long after we had done so that we introduced the new aspects of our morning routine to our students. After we had done so, we continued to reflect daily and analyze the data that we collected through our observations. We continued such a process throughout our entire inquiry project. As a team, we were continuously searching for the most appropriate and beneficial activities that would involve all of our students.

C. What We Have Learned

What Do We Know Now?

1. An abundance of brief math and language arts activities allow for enhanced engagement on the behalf of the student and fewer classroom management problems, while such activities prove to be educationally appropriate and effective even though not all students benefit in the same manner.
2. Children enjoy activities that involve movement and positive interaction. Such activities provide the opportunity for repetition of important concepts while doing so in a fun and enthusiastic way, which helps to start the day off right with a positive tone.
3. Inquiry is one of the best tools that a teacher can acquire, for with the power of inquiry one is able to delve deeper and take a closer look at their own wonderings, which encourages one to be a life-long learner.

What Supporting Evidence Do We Have?

In Support of Claim 1:

As stated above in Claim 1, we have learned that an abundance of brief math and language arts activities allow for enhanced engagement on the behalf of the student and fewer classroom management problems, while proving to be educationally appropriate and effective even though not all students benefit in the same manner. We feel that we are able to make such a claim due to the data that we have recently collected. The first piece of our data collection that provided supporting evidence for this claim was our many observations and personal field notes that were collected when we visited other kindergarten and primary classrooms in our school and throughout the district. Throughout our observations, we noted that many other kindergarten and primary teachers integrated a variety of math and language arts activities into their morning routine. For instance, in Mary Yahner’s kindergarten classroom at Radio Park Elementary School we noted that the students answered a question each day when they first entered the room and the responses of the students would provide an opportunity for tallying and graphing later during their morning routine. We also observed that Yahner implemented a “Word of the Day.” She did so by providing the students with a picture card, challenged the students to spell the word, revealed the correct spelling, counted the sounds and then clapped the syllables.

We also observed similar math and language arts activities integrated throughout Cathy Humphrey’s first grade classroom in Park Forest Elementary School. In her classroom, we observed the students grouping the numbers for the current days of school by ones, tens, and one hundreds using different manipulatives to do so. When they did so, the teacher and students discussed the meaning for each number, which helped to reinforce the meaning of place value. Humphrey also incorporated a variety of language arts activities. An activity that we found to be significant was her approach to the morning letter. The morning letter was written on the board for the students in a puzzle design. The students were encouraged to help fill in the correct numbers, letters and correct punctuation. All other pertinent information that we gathered during our observations throughout other schools in the district can be viewed in Appendix B.

The second piece of our data collection that provided supporting evidence for Claim 1 was our many observations and personal field notes that were collected throughout our daily observations and reflections in our own classroom. Each day we

made a conscious effort to be attentive to the participation and behavior of our students. After looking back through all of the field notes that we had acquired and our reflective discussions we found that our students' participation and positive behavior had increased. It became evident that those students who routinely were off task had become much more attentive. It was also noted that those children who were low-level learners had become more involved and were making more of an effort to be active participants. Specifically, it was noted during the final week of our inquiry project, April 12-April 16, the majority of our students remained on task throughout the greeting, the morning letter, the counting and estimation activities, and the word of the day activity. We recognized that there were only two children that were routinely inattentive, which was a dramatic difference from when we first began our inquiry project. At that time, there were at least six children that were normally off task.

The third piece of our data collection that provided supporting evidence for Claim 1 was the data we collected when meeting with the Curriculum Support Teachers in our school district. We met with the Math & Science Curriculum Support Teacher, Ms. M.J. Kitt, and also the Language Arts & Social Studies Curriculum Support Teacher, Ms. Mindy Cocolin, several times throughout our inquiry project. When we met with the Math & Science Curriculum Support Teacher, she provided us with many helpful suggestions for various math activities that we could incorporate into our morning activities, which can be referenced in Appendix C. After reviewing the wonderful list of engaging activities that she provided, we chose certain activities that we felt would be most successful with the students in our classroom. She informed us that such activities would be highly beneficial to each of our students in some way no matter what. Of course, it was known that some children might benefit more than others may but we were encouraged because we were searching for more effective ways to meet the individual needs of all of our students and we felt we were making progress doing so.

When we met with the Language Arts & Social Studies Curriculum Teacher, she offered some helpful insight into how we may want to approach our morning meeting routine and what we decided to implement. She suggested that we make a conscious effort to move at a quick, yet appropriate, pace through our morning activities. She felt that if we were able to do so we would avoid leaving time for misbehavior and we would

also allow ourselves more time to integrate brief fundamental activities. She also made the suggestion of not incorporating “sharing” in our morning routine. She noted that the children do not necessarily listen to one another during this time and instead are busy thinking about what they will say. She felt that it might be more effective to incorporate “sharing” at a different time of the day, perhaps before the students go home while they are waiting to be dismissed. Nevertheless, each professional offered us pertinent suggestions and information that undoubtedly aided in the process of our inquiry.

In Support of Claim 2:

As stated above in Claim 2, we have learned that children enjoy activities that involve movement and positive interaction. Such activities provide the opportunity for repetition of important concepts while doing so in a fun and enthusiastic way, which helps to start the day off right with a positive tone. We feel we are able to make such a claim due to the recent data we have collected. The first piece of our data collection that provided supporting evidence for this claim was the student surveys we conducted. After reviewing the responses of the students and the data that was provided, we found a reoccurring trend that indicated the students truly enjoyed the interactive parts of our morning routine. One student commented that they feel “very involved” when they are encouraged to participate in such activities. Other students shared that they liked the “word game on the board,” and “different greetings.” Our data from the survey, which can be referenced in Appendix D, overwhelmingly indicated that our students enjoyed being active and engaged in our morning routine. It is important to note, six out of six students answered, “Yes” when asked if they enjoyed our morning routine, so we knew that we were on the right track. We just needed to find a more efficient way to integrate such activities.

The second piece of our data collection that provided supporting evidence for Claim 2 was the many observations we did of our students throughout our new morning routine. As the students became more accustomed to our new morning activities, a list of which can be referred to in Appendix E, they also demonstrated much more enthusiasm and became much more actively involved. It became evident that the students enjoyed such activities and in turn developed an attitude that was much more positive and shared

that attitude with their teacher and classmates. We observed that our students were much more excited about our morning activities. They also appeared to be happier and more energetic. The growing smiles made it evident that the students were having fun and they enjoyed the new activities. For instance, we routinely observed all of our students actively participating in our counting activities. The students counted by fives touching their head, shoulders, knees and toes in a consecutive order and then counted by tens first stretching high and then stretching low. Such activities provided for a fun and engaging learning experience that all of our students could participate in and evidently have fun doing so!

In Support of Claim 3:

As stated above in Claim 3, we have learned that inquiry is one of the best tools that a teacher can acquire, for with the power of inquiry one is able to delve deeper and take a closer look at their own wonderings, which encourages one to be a life-long learner. We feel that we are able to make such a claim due to the recent data we have collected and the recent inquiry project we have completed. Throughout this project we were encouraged to assume one the most vital roles of a teacher, the Inquirer. It became evident that with each piece of data we collected we were actively exploring our own struggles and wonderings. We also recognized that with each observation and survey we were learning more about our students, our fellow teachers, and ourselves. It was truly an enlightening and rejuvenating experience.

The second piece of our data collection that provided supporting evidence for Claim 3 was expert information that we have collected from the pertinent literary resource titled, The Reflective Educator's Guide to Classroom Research: Learning to Teach and Teaching to Learn Through Practitioner Inquiry, written by Nancy Fichtman Dana and Diana Yendol-Silva. According to authors, Dana and Silva, "Teacher inquiry is a vehicle that can be used by teachers to untangle some of the complexity that occurs in the profession, raise teachers' voices in discussion of educational reform, and ultimately transform assumptions about the teaching profession itself." (2003, p. 2) We felt that such a statement truly enveloped the meaning of inquiry and its significant capacities. Our inquiry project encouraged us to take the time to look further at those questions we

had about our teaching practice and our students. Teacher inquiry is undeniably one of a teacher's greatest tools in the classroom. It not only provides the opportunity to address pertinent issues in your classroom but it also "...invites intentional, planned reflection" (Dana & Silva, 2003, p. 7) on behalf of the teacher. Throughout this project, we have practiced active reflection that has been daily and continuous. It has proven to be a very meaningful teaching and learning experience for both of us. Due to our inquiry, we have been able to reorganize our morning routine and implement academic activities that are both appropriate and positively effective. We have learned first-hand the true importance of teacher inquiry.

D. Conclusions and Future Directions

How Does This Influence Our Future Practice?

From an Intern's Perspective:

I know now that it is possible to provide a variety of activities for a diverse group of students that will successfully provide a fun and engaging learning experience. Prior to completing this inquiry project I struggled with such a concept. I did not feel as though I was providing my low-level learners with activities that were academically appropriate. I was afraid that our morning activities were too advanced for those students. However, it has become evident that brief, fundamentally sound activities benefit all students in some way. In the future, I will provide my students with similar opportunities to learn. It is possible that I will teach at a different grade level but the necessity for such learning experiences will undoubtedly still exist.

In the future, I will also make a conscious effort to integrate a variety of interactive and engaging activities throughout the school day. I know now that such activities are very important to the success of one's teaching and learning experience. I have learned that implementing such activities encourages the children to remain on task and also provides for a positive interaction amongst the teacher and the students. They are also a great way to introduce fundamental concepts and allow for the repetition that is necessary. I certainly do look forward to integrating similar daily activities into my own curriculum when I have my own classroom.

After taking the time to complete such an insightful inquiry project, I now am able to understand the integral role that inquiry plays in the life of a concerned and dedicated teacher. From this project, I have learned how necessary it is to reflect continuously upon one's own teaching and the wonderings that may accompany it. This inquiry project encouraged me to take the time to stop and think about what was troubling me in my own classroom and what I did not quite understand. Taking the time to do so provided me with the opportunity to learn more about my students and how to more effectively meet each of their needs. In turn, inquiry is a tool that I will continue to carry with me always.

From a Veteran Teacher's Perspective:

I came away from this portion of the project with several important thoughts. First, kindergarten is a very different environment than all the other grades in elementary school. With this in mind, I need to be open to how the morning will look and feel in kindergarten. I should not expect them to sit attentively while I instruct them on the meaning of life. They are active, chattering, happy, excited, squirmy, talkative five year olds! They love to chant! They love to sing! They love to shout! This project has reminded me that if the children are not responding the way you want them to, it is not the child whose behavior needs to change; it is the teachers! It is okay to say to yourself, what can I change about my way of doing things to help these kids be successful? How can I help them to learn and still allow them to express themselves in the ways a five year old would?

In addition to remembering where a five year old is developmentally, I also was reminded about how important routine is for the children. If we maintain certain aspects of our morning, things that they expect every morning, they begin to feel a sense of security. They begin to recognize the words in the letter, the numbers on the calendar, the way we use tally marks, and so on. After a while, they are confident in what they are doing as a group. In turn, more kids take risks when answering our questions.

Doing this project with my intern was time consuming and also a bit stressful. However, the benefits are so great, that I would do it again in a heartbeat. Inquiry gives a teacher (and an intern) a non-threatening way to examine your own practice and beliefs,

and improve on them. This not only helps you become a better teacher, it helps the students in your classroom as well.

What New Wonderings Do We Have?

There are always more questions that come up during a project like this, that you stash away in the back of your mind for future reference. These are just a few of the new questions that arose over the course of our inquiry project:

From an Intern's Perspective:

1. How do I provide similar opportunities for teaching and learning during our daily math time that would prove to be educationally appropriate and effective for my students while taking their wide range of abilities and behaviors into consideration?
2. Although I feel that I have made some progress in better addressing the needs and ability levels of each of my students throughout our morning routine, I still wonder if there is a more effective way to go about supporting my low-level learners that would instill a greater sense of confidence and make them want to participate more often.
3. Although I have noticed that some of my student's behavior patterns have improved, I still wonder if there is a better way to address their negative behavior when it occurs that would self-motivate them to be appropriate and remain on task throughout our morning routine.

From a Veteran Teacher's Perspective:

1. With so many ESL children, would there be a way to incorporate other languages or perhaps sign language into a morning routine?
2. Are there different ways to present the morning letter?
3. Can I find some additional math strategies and activities that I can work into the morning routine?

We believe that this morning routine will constantly be changing and reforming with each group that we have in the future. We have come away from this project with a nice cache of ideas and alternatives for our morning routine. In turn, we now feel better equipped to meet the many needs that inevitably exist in every classroom. All in all, we feel it was quite a success!