

Setting the Scene

**My classroom context, background research, and
wonderings**



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My classroom epitomizes an energy zone with nineteen hustling and bustling first graders. As a whole, the class is very young, and even more active. When put to a task, they tend to rush through without first thinking about the end result. Also, thanks to their fidgety nature, the class as a whole misses directions and steps to some tasks. As fun as it is to teach kids with such enthusiasm and energy, the frustration of constant nagging about “being done” and “what do I do now” made my head spin.

Imagine this scenario: You have just had active first graders at the front of the room sitting for thirty minutes. Even though you’ve used books with great pictures, encouraged class participation, and mustered all of the enthusiasm you can on a bleak winter day, you still do not think the students really understand the directions of the assignment. They are raring to get back to their seats and write what they know about frogs and frog life cycles. (Did I mention that this is purely hypothetical?) Before you’ve had the chance to catch your breath, you hear, “Miss Hartman, what do I write about? Miss Hartman, I’m finished. Miss Hartman, so and so is being mean to me?”

The last question involves a completely different can of worms than my project is attempting to handle, so I’ll stick with the first two parts. The first thing that popped into my head was that we just spent ten minutes together working on a word web to help with the information. What do you mean you don’t know what to write? It is right on the board. Then you redirect that child’s attention to the board and offer to help them get started when they’ve had a chance to try themselves. The second thing that pops into my head is, “How can you be done? We’ve been writing for just five minutes and you only have one sentence.” This

particular student had offered more information to our conversation in the front of the room than he was writing. Why does he think he's done?

I wanted to pull my hair out. Why is it that some students strive to outdo themselves with every new assignment? They write everything they know, and they come to you to ask if you can give them more information so they can fill up their whole page. How can some students be so independent as workers and others need my assistance? I know that some students are more dependent because they need writing assistance and we are happy to help. I am talking about those students that are fully capable of writing an informational piece, but they choose not to. I wanted to examine the things that I do to lead these students to ask for help. Am I not clear enough with my directions? Am I too easily goaded into helping students who can do for themselves what I am doing for them? Something had to change!

To understand why I am doing this project, you need to briefly understand my philosophy of education—or at least one important part of it. I do not believe in extrinsic motivation in most of its forms. There are some instances where extrinsic motivation is helpful and I believe, when used in certain circumstances, it can be a positive motivating tool. For example, we reward those students who finish their work throughout the week with a video on Friday afternoon, and those students who need to finish work must do so then. Conversely, I do not feel that bribing kids to do their best work will have positive results. I feel that this will lead to students only doing their best when a prize is involved. I would rather my students did their personal best work because it makes them proud and because they see the importance of doing their personal best.

It is much easier to come up with ways to extrinsically motivate students because you can grab a prize or a treat anywhere. I know that finding strategies for intrinsically motivating students isn't so cut and dry. Upon consulting literature to get some ideas, I found that there was

more to the story of intrinsic motivation than I had originally thought. There is a common misconception about extrinsic and intrinsic motivation—they are polar opposites that can never overlap. According to Jere Brophy, though, in his book *Motivating Students to Learn*; motivation is more like a continuum with extrinsic and intrinsic being on each end (1998).

In examining the types of teachers listed in this book, I realized that my philosophy matches best with that of an autonomy-supportive teacher. I believe that my role is to facilitate “independent thought and decision making” and “to involve students in the process of learning by giving them choices” (Brophy, 1998, p. 130). Brophy listed four characteristics of classrooms where teachers offer a more autonomous approach to learning. He suggests allowing students to make more choices, allowing students to make active responses, giving students immediate feedback, and using game-like features. This coincides with the research of Joan C. Harlan and Sidney T. Rowland. Their book *Behavior Management Strategies for Teachers* lists similar ideas for intrinsically motivating students.

This team gets more specific about ideas for motivating students than does Brophy. They believe that there are essential preconditions to a motivational classroom. The atmosphere must be supportive, appropriately challenging, meaningful to the learner, and providing optimal reinforcements for behavior (2002). Harlan and Rowland offer management strategies to match both extrinsic and intrinsic classrooms, with overlapping qualities. I drew a parallel between their ideas about “maintaining success expectations” and doing your personal best. A classroom should be programmed for success, meaning that the atmosphere should be one where students feel like they can succeed. In order to be successful in this type of classroom, one has to define that success through goal setting, performance appraisal, and self-reinforcement. Harlan and Rowland attribute a successful atmosphere to the “link between effort and outcome” (2002, p.

41). Before choosing techniques that I felt would work with my philosophy in my classroom, it was important to see how much set-up work was needed in our classroom. Did we already have an atmosphere of success? Did students in our classroom get enough feedback about work? Did we make clear the link between effort and outcome? The answers to the questions will be explained later.

Harlan and Rowland also placed an emphasis on degrees of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. In fact, they made a separate category for the type of motivation that “capitalizes on students’ extrinsic motivation” (Harland and Rowland, 2002, p. 41). It is a hybrid and intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. I used this section to give me clues about the kinds of techniques that I would need to develop to properly motivate my students. The activities and techniques I would need to develop made sense when I examined the ideas of Harlan and Rowland. Making lessons and projects engaging and based on student interest is a good place to start. Also, providing variety and choice in lessons keeps the interest level higher for students and teachers alike. Providing opportunities for students to share and formally display the work gives that work significance (Harlan and Rowland, 2002, p. 42).

***See Appendix VII for pictures and Inquiry Project Observation #6**

Finally, in circular fashion, after attending to my philosophy, then my classroom environment, then the characteristics of motivating tools, I once again had to examine myself. This time, I would have to find those characteristics of a good motivator to use during instruction. According to Harlan and Rowland, good motivators bring excitement and mystery to each lesson. They use color, sound, and movement when appropriate. They are available, meaning they provide continual support, feedback, and help. Good motivators show flexibility when working with students to get beyond making every student product perfect and working

towards giving the responsibility to the student to make their work their personal best. Again providing opportunities to share can be motivating for students. Lastly, providing clear, reasonable expectations and requirements for tasks is a key to good motivation. This particular point would become the basis for many of the ideas I've tried in my classroom to motivate my students to do their personal best.

Keeping all of these things in mind—my frustrations about disappointing student work to the desire to instill in my students a sense of pride and satisfaction in doing their best work—I developed the following questions:

Wondering: How can I influence students to motivate themselves to do their personal best?

Subquestions:

How can I get students to not accept sloppy/unsatisfactory work?

How can I get students to go above and beyond the bare bones?

How can I get students to self-check/edit work before deciding that they are done?

Sketching the Plot

**My tools, data collection strategies, and how I
analyzed my data**



Sketching the Plot

My tools, data collection strategies, and how I analyzed my data

Before getting started with any of my ideas about motivating students to do their personal best, I had to first get a baseline idea about what my students actually knew about the topic. It would be foolish to dive into something that the students would have no familiarity. I used a class meeting and a word web to record the students' thoughts about what it means to do your personal best. I tried to ask questions that would leave a lot of "wiggle" room for my students. I did not want to impose any of my ideas on them.

***See Appendix VII for pictures**

After the class meeting, I tackled the idea of doing complete work. Part of my frustration arose from the constant onslaught of students asking, "Am I done?" I used a whole class checklist that was very concrete in nature for a science lesson. The expectations were very clear, and I referred to the checklist several times throughout the lesson so that students would be familiar with it. Also, in this case, I gave each student a smaller copy of that checklist that they could physically check off when they had accomplished a step.

***See Appendix I for checklist and samples**

The same basic procedure was repeated for a math checklist. This task involved a problem-solving question where students had to think of a solution, draw it clearly, and add a number sentence. This checklist was very clear-cut, and the student either finished or did not finish each part.

***See Appendix II for checklist and samples**

After seeing how these worked, I wanted to make a more general checklist that could be posted and used for many different types of lessons. The checklist I made for the science lesson was more cut and dry and specific to that lesson. The second checklist was used for a whole-

class writing lesson. The whole-class format for our writing lessons drove me crazy because I felt like I was always spoon-feeding instructions to the students. With this checklist, I placed more responsibility on the students for making their work “complete.” With the science checklist, they either did the step or they didn’t. I also did not provide an individual checklist for this task. I added the question, “Did I do my personal best?” at the end of the general checklist as a reminder of their goal. My mentor also used this checklist when she was doing the instruction for similar writing lessons.

***See Appendix III for checklist and samples**

Because I did not employ a checklist with every single lesson, I used conferences with some students to get an understanding of things that motivated them to either try their best or not.

“I want to get a sense of how they feel they did, why they feel that way, and what they could improve. My plan for this initial confrontation is to speak with the student individually to make an observation of their thoughts. I really want to get some ideas from them about something that I can do to help them make their work their personal best.”

-Inquiry Project Observation #1 March 4, 2004

Attached are some examples of student writing, and the responses I got from each student when asked about whether or not they did their personal best.

***See Appendix IV**

The students and I created a rubric for an animal report that they wrote at the writing center. I gave them a model rubric to start with because we had never used the actual term rubric with them before. We had used a rubric to score their writing even though the students would not be familiar with this term. We based our animal report on this rubric. I did not give any of

my own ideas for the rubric. When each group came to me at the writing center, I started by showing them the familiar rubric used to score their story writing. We talked about the need to develop a rubric that was more suited to the needs of our nonfiction writing. The students gave me ideas of things that they needed to include in order to get the highest score. Then, together, we worked down the scale. They easily understood the concept, so I basically served as the recorder for their ideas.

***See Appendix V for sample rubric**

To get a different vantage point, I also employed a mini-rubric for a science observation that had been yielding sub par results. This was my attempt at surprising the students and holding them accountable when they were not expecting it. I gave the students a small evaluation that asked them to rate their work on a personal best scale. Then they had to explain their rating.

***See Appendix VI for mini-rubric samples**

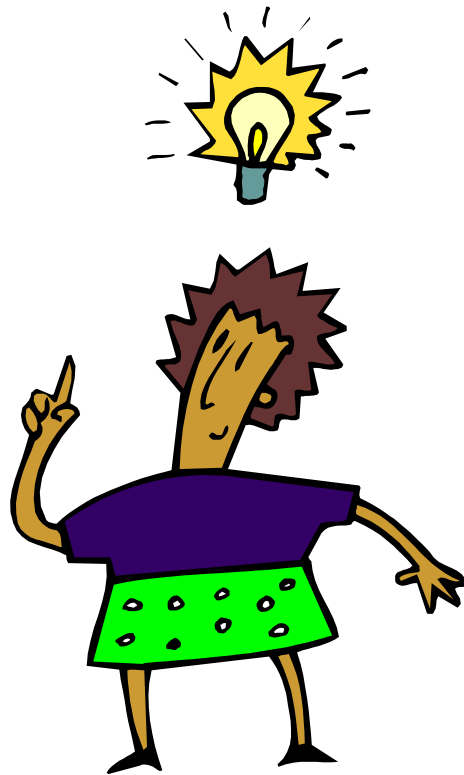
Throughout the process, I've kept an inquiry notebook. This is different from a journal in that I would write down quotes, strategies, and other things that I did not reflect upon. I did not include this notebook in my formal evidence because it is just a messy reminder pad for my thoughts. They were just keys to the next step in the process. I can't say that I had this giant tub of data that I had to spread out all around me to understand. I had one folder that I kept shut with a rubber band. It held my ideas. Each idea or tool that I used was born from a previous idea or tool, so really I have been analyzing my data the entire time.

To "officially" analyze my data, I put the information into piles in the order that I did them. The first checklist and results would be in one pile. Right beside that, I put the next checklist and what came of it. I did not code anything, and I did not really develop a system to

analyze the data. Instead, I saw the data as a story—a whole picture of all of the things that I learned. I used the piles to paint a picture of what my classroom is like now that I've implemented the ideas in front of me. I saw the little smiling faces filled with pride as they handed in beautiful work. I saw the flurry of pencils moving from nineteen little hands trying to write everything that they know. I saw when one particular student made the decision to do his best. I heard the words “personal best” being used in all kinds of situations from playing with cars to cleaning the art supplies. So while I didn't have a formal data analysis, I had this distinct picture and I used that picture to mold four claims about what I learned from this process. Then I fit the evidence under each “conclusion” because the evidence was what helped me to paint my picture in the first place. While I am normally a very scientific person, for this project I saw the results as artwork. I developed a picture in my head, which lead to the initial pencil sketch drawn from what I've learned and painted with color from the stories, student samples, and journal I've collected.

The “Resolution” to the Story

My claims and evidence to date



Claims

- 1. The idea of doing your personal best is abstract and it means different things to different students.**
- 2. Clear, concrete expectations increase the likelihood of personal best results while decreasing teacher dependence.**
- 3. Involving students in the assessment process helps them to find ways to improve their work.**
- 4. Doing your personal best can be taught and be made a part of a student's work habits if the right technique and atmosphere is present.**

The “Resolution” to the Story

My claims and evidence to date

My criteria for selecting a topic for this inquiry project were simple—in fact, I only had one criterion. I wanted to pick a wondering to explore that would be universal to any teaching context. I know I will not be in State College, and I do not know what grade I will teach. Little did I know that the topic I chose could continue for the rest of my career. I’ve discovered that there are numerous applications for all of the techniques that I’ve used, and there are undoubtedly other ideas yet to be discovered. Keeping this in mind, these are the “conclusions” I’ve come up with so far...

1. The idea of doing your personal best is abstract and it means different things to different students.

This was apparent from the very beginning of my project. My first implementation of this inquiry project was a class meeting to establish a baseline for what my students already know about doing your personal best.

Some students thought immediately of behavior. They felt that doing your personal best really had nothing to do with the actual academic work. It was more a way of acting—in that sitting still, being a good listener, and raising your hand qualified as doing your personal best. That is the funniest thing about first graders—no matter what preconceived idea you may have about a topic, they see it in a completely different way.

***See Appendix VII for pictures**

Even after discussing the idea of personal best as it relates to academic work, there were still varying opinions about what exactly would encompass personal best work. As indicated by the post-task survey and the animal report rubric, the kids’ explanations for why this work qualifies as their personal best vary. For example, some students felt that writing a certain

amount of information would make the work their personal best. These are some of the quotes taken directly from the post-task surveys:

“Added details and lots of writing.”

“I didn’t do less. I did more.”

“Because I wrote everything that I can think”

“Because I think I wrote everything I know.”

“Because I only did two sentences.”

“Because I did two sentences.”

***See Appendix VI for more quotes**

It was interesting that two students wrote two sentences, but one student thought it was his personal best, and the other student didn’t think she wrote enough. Again, this shows the variability of this process.

The result from the animal report rubric mirrored this sentiment about some students believing that quantity was the criteria for personal best work. On that rubric, there was a section for students to rate their facts. Every student who circled less than a four for facts indicated that they needed to write more in order to circle the four next time. This makes sense for students this age who are still learning to judge things based on quality and not quantity. This idea of quality was built into the rubric even! The only difference between a three and four for the fact part of the report was that a four had a lot of facts that were interesting. A three just had to have a lot of facts. None of the students thought that changing a fact or two to make it more interesting and unique to their animal could bump up their score. I believe that this has to do with the still concrete thinking of young students such as first graders.

***See Appendix V for student samples**

So while some students felt that doing your personal best has to do with the amount of work that you do, others felt that the appearance or neatness of the work was part of the equation. This was more evident in the animal report surveys than in the post-task surveys. These are a few of the notes that I took as the students talked about what they could do to improve their animal reports:

“I would do better handwriting.”

“I had nice handwriting.”

“Make better pictures.”

“I think I could do better handwriting.”

“It is nice.”

***See Appendix V for more quotes**

I realize that the assignment had something to do with the things that students felt were important to doing their personal best. Based upon the initial class meeting, I created different checklists for different assignments. Speaking of those checklists...

2. Clear, concrete expectations increase the likelihood of personal best results while decreasing teacher dependence.

As I've described, my students are little balls of movement. It is hard to pay attention to details when you are a little ball of movement. Even reiterating directions did not seem to help with the missing pieces of tasks that students would forget to do. After establishing my baseline about personal best, I thought I should start out with making some clear expectations for each assignment. The first checklist I used was completely concrete in that students either did the step or did not do the step. There was no gray area for argument. To get the students to really embrace the idea of using a checklist for their work, I made each student a mini-checklist with the same information that I had on our larger checklist. It had boxes for students to check off a step when they had completed it. How are students supposed to do their personal best if they aren't even sure what I am expecting? It is a simple idea, and the results were clear, as I've reflected in my Inquiry Project Observation #2.

“Out of 18 students that did the project, 14 successfully used the checklist. I collected this data the morning after the start of the project. The project poured over into the morning work due to a fire drill. Interestingly enough, the students did not need to be coaxed back into working after the fire drill. My thought is that the expectations were set and they had a list to follow, so they had a mission.”

-Inquiry Project Observation #2 March 23, 2004

***See Appendix I for student checklists**

My second checklist was also very concrete in that the steps were either done or not done. There was no room for argument in this one either. I noticed, though, that my students would rush through to get the checklist items done, and then they did not see the need to go back

to make the work a little neater. So now I could get the students to finish their work completely, but there was still this nasty business of the work being their personal best.

***See Appendix II for checklist and student samples**

Luckily, the next assignment for which I chose to use a checklist wasn't so direct. It was time to tackle the assignment that really drove this wondering into existence. During our two animal-heavy units, we would do one animal report a week. This involved a teacher-directed lesson about the animal followed by a writing and art project for the students to do based on the information provided during the lesson. My first crack at this format was so stressful as described in the beginning of this paper.

I thought that by making this checklist less concrete, the students would have to work harder to make their work meet the personal best qualifications. The expectations and directions were still clear, but the actual checks would finally allow enough wiggle room for students to show me their personal best based upon their abilities. Not all of my students are at the point where they can write a lengthy amount of writing. Others can easily write paragraphs of information. The idea of personal best has to correspond to each student's own personal best.

I used terms like "write everything you know" or "my work is neat." This means different things to different kids. One student's neatest work is only mediocre to another student. The final check on this checklist was "Did I do my personal best?" I wanted to students to begin to equate completing work as neatly and completely as they can with doing their personal best.

The results from this particular checklist were amazing.

"When presenting the checklist, I really laid out what I meant. Write everything you know. Use the web to help you with ideas. Check your writing for capital letters and periods. My para was thrilled with the results. She hadn't seen me use a checklist before

because I used them in the afternoon before. She commented about the completeness of the writing and how much the students really tried to write the most that they knew.”

-Inquiry Project Observation #2 March 23, 2004

I first used the checklist with a lesson about frilled lizards and subsequently with lessons about bees and scarlet macaws. As shown by the sample pieces I've chosen, the students not only wrote more, but the quality of work was much higher. These students wrote twice as much as they had in previous lessons! Not only did they write more, but also they needed me much less. While I had always used a web to help the students organize information, they had never really used the web because my own practice was leading them to ask me for help. I bought into their complaints about not knowing any more information when I could have just pointed to the web. By presenting the checklist, they knew exactly what they had to do, and they knew exactly where to look for information because this was stressed when reviewing the contents of the checklist.

***See Appendix III for student samples**

My mentor and I also discovered that sometimes, you do not even need a formal checklist, but that simple tasks can be improved when expectations are made clearer. Looking back on my inquiry notebook, I found a note that I completed on the morning of March 15. The students are sometimes asked to write in their journals when they enter the room in the morning. In the beginning of the year, they only had to write one or two sentences. Usually, as the year progresses, the students naturally start to write more. Our students were not following suit. They would rush through the writing so they could goof off somewhere in the room. As my mentor and I pondered what to do about this, I thought, "Let's just call them on it." They have to know deep down that this work is not very good. At morning meeting, my mentor talked about

her expectations for the journals. She explained that now that we are better writers, we should be writing more than in the beginning of the year. Again, because our students are so young, they wanted a number of sentences that they could follow. She provided a number that she expected and then added, “Make sure that this is your personal best work.”

As I’ve explained, this particular checklist had some gray area, so I had to create assessments that would give feedback to students about whether or not they had truly achieved each check. Then I discovered...

3. Involving students in the assessment process helps them to find ways to improve their work.

I knew that I had to create some methods of assessments that were more concrete than just a nod of approval or a quick “that looks great.” The tricky thing about this idea of personal best is that it has to be the student’s responsibility to actually follow through. My project has aimed at providing help and support so students can do their best work, but the actual doing is for the students. In this way, I knew I had to include the students in the assessment process. If they are the ones who have to do the work in the best way that they can, then they should be able to tell me what their personal best work would really encompass.

I thought at first that I could fix some of this problem by conferencing with students who did not do their personal best work. As I called the students over and we talked about their work, I realized that they were not yet ready to discuss their work in the terms of personal best because we had not worked with it enough. As shown in Appendix IV, the students did not really have any solutions to fixing their work. I had to do something more concrete if I wanted to include the students more.

In correspondence with our nature unit, our class ordered chick eggs so that we could candle the eggs and record the progress of each egg. Every few days, the students would get to candle the eggs and then they would write about the progress and draw a picture. After a few attempts at this, it was obvious that our students were not taking the assignment very seriously and I wondered if the students were not doing their best with these tasks because they were not being held accountable with a checklist.

“I’ve used them [checklists] in individual form, whole class form, and electronic form. The general trend so far is that using these checklists does in fact alert kids to the

fact that they must do their personal best on this particular project. So I am now wondering if the students think that they only have to do their personal best when there is a checklist.”

-Inquiry Project Observation #4 March 30, 2004

We did not ask very much of them because our students have a hard time staying focused in the afternoons. We were not even getting the minimum that we asked. I decided to use a “sneak attack” as I called it. I reflected about the results of this “sneak attack” in Inquiry Project Observation #5.

“When the first student finished his work, I gave him an evaluation and explained what he was to do. I was actually hoping that I would “catch” kids not doing their personal best work. I wanted them to see that they had to be doing their personal best work all of the time and not just when I really emphasized it. Then I realized that some of the kids around him heard us talking about it. I noticed fervor in action. Little hands started moving more quickly and little eyebrows started to scrunch up ‘deep in thought’.”

-Inquiry Project Observation #5 April 3, 2004

The next idea I had was to introduce my students to a rubric. We had used a rubric with them in practicing their district writing assessments, but they did not have any part in creating the rubric. At the writing center, my students and I had been working on animal reports to fulfill the requirements of research and writing a non-fiction piece. This type of writing is much different than the district assessment so that rubric would not be applicable. One day at the writing center, I started out by showing the students the familiar rubric and explaining to them why we use it. Then we talked about why it would not be applicable to the animal report. They were able to understand this without trouble.

I then explained that by using the familiar rubric as a guide, we would have to create a new rubric to score our animal reports. I waited until the students were well underway with the reports because I thought it would be difficult to make a rubric for a report that they had yet to start. I did not want to wait too long, though, because I wanted my students to feel like they could go back and change anything if they wanted to improve their scores.

A four was the highest score, a three was the acceptable score, a two was not acceptable but partially there, and one was not even close. I had to laugh about what the students said. They picked up on the phrases that I use with them for other assignments. The groups decided that to get a three, you had to “write everything I know.” They talked about being neat and having colorful pictures. They described a two as not having enough facts and being hard to read. But the best part about the rubric process was something I did not expect.

“The neatest results came across for a rating of four in every single group. Someone in every group said that get a four, you had to do your personal best. This made me absolutely ecstatic! I’ve been wondering about how much the students thought about the idea of personal best when I wasn’t putting it right out in front of them. It seems to me that they are starting to internalize this concept.”

-Inquiry Project Observation #3 March 30, 2004

So the last sentence in each score on the rubric is a statement about doing your personal best.

***See Appendix V for student rubrics**

This leads me to the most important thing that I’ve learned from this inquiry project.

4. Doing your personal best can be taught and be made a part of a student's work habits if the right technique and atmosphere is present.

Just as the qualifications for personal best work depend on the student, so does the tool that motivates that student. For me, the goal was to find tools that were not extrinsically motivating. I think I've achieved this goal, although some may argue otherwise. For example, there are those students who are task-oriented and driven by checklists. A simple checklist that includes a statement about doing your personal best is enough. This can be backed up by the products of the insect checklist reflected on in a journal entry and by the photocopied student samples of writing.

***See Appendices I and II for student samples and Inquiry Project Observation #2**

Other students crave the praise and attention of others. That is why I created "B-8's Personal Best Work" Wall. One of my students has a really difficult time with doing her personal best work. We've even created a behavior card for which she rates her efforts throughout the day with a 1, 2, or 3. She loves to get praise, and she loves seeing her work on display. I told the kids about the personal best wall. I created a space in our classroom where students could hang their work if they think it is their personal best. The stipulation involved is that they have to nominate themselves. (Although, I'll admit that I hinted to some students about it)

This student brought me her writing and asked to have it put on the personal best wall, and I did not feel like it was her personal best. I asked her plainly if she thought it was her best work. She really wasn't sure. She said, "I really want to hang this up." It may seem harsh, but I would not agree. We made a deal. We talked about how much she thought she could write and we compared that to what she actually did. They did not match. Our deal was that she would

have a second crack at it. In a few days, we would be completing a similar assignment. If she could think about what we discussed and improve her work, it would go up on the wall. She came through without any trouble. As I monitored the students, I kept glancing her way hoping with all my heart that this would work.

“Finally, she finished, and she brought it to me. She only had three sentences again. What should I do? I hated to turn her down again, but I also knew that she did not do her best. It was hard to ask her if she really thought it was her best work. She’s a tough cookie, though, so I decided to venture that direction. I asked her if she remembered why I wouldn’t hang up her project from Monday. She said, ‘Oh yeah, I have to write some more. Let me finish, Miss Hartman.’ It was a miracle! Or at least as much a miracle as could be mustered from a difficult student. She wrote two more sentences, and for the first time, she wrote things on the back side of the sheet. It truly was her personal best.”

-Inquiry Project Observation #6 April 3, 2004

Don’t let people convince you that peer pressure is always a bad thing. Just as I reflected in my journal about the “sneak attack” and how students changed their work because they overheard that they would be assessed, one student changed his work habits because he wanted to be more like his friend. At Park Forest, the principal has a good citizenship program set up that recognizes certain characteristics—one a week. One of the characteristics is personal best. After a few weeks of work with my inquiry project, the award for personal best came up, and we had to nominate someone to represent our class. We actually nominated two students who always turned in their very best work. (On a side note, one of the students we nominated had slacked off in her neatness earlier in the year. We showed her examples of her work that was

neat and work that wasn't neat. We nominated her because she completely changed her attitude and always turned in neat work.)

The best friend of one of the winner's had been having problems doing his personal best work. Writing is hard for him, so having to write a lot to qualify as personal best was not something he wanted to do. Also, the other students laughed at him when he complained about doing work, and he liked this attention. When his friend won the personal best award, we saw an immediate change in his work habits. All of a sudden, he was taking his time to be neat, and he was also writing more. I praised his new work habits, and I asked him what changed. He explained that he and the award winner liked to do the same things, so he wanted to do his personal best like her. His sample work is found on page...

No matter what tool is used, the most vital part to getting students to do their personal best is creating an atmosphere and a dialogue that supports your philosophy. Included at the end of this paper is an entire page of quotes collected from the students either with or without their knowing about it. These quotes illustrate a culture that has developed in my class that emphasizes doing your best all of the time. Do they still need reminders and little tools to help them? Yes. They are first graders, and they cannot be expected to keep this idea in the front of their mind when they need to concentrate on learning to read and write. But by using this language of expectations and terminology of personal best, it is clear that our classroom is an atmosphere where personal best work is cherished.

The Never Ending

Story

Implications for my future practice and new
wonderings



The Never Ending Story

Implications for my future practice and new wonderings

As I've explained, this project is technically over, but the ideas I've developed and new techniques I'd like to try motivate me to continue studying how to motivate my students. I am curious about the effects my ideas could have if started from the very beginning of the year. I only started implementing these ideas in late February, many months after the school year had started. Can the ideas surrounding personal best endure throughout an entire year or will they fade away as the students become more used to them? Will the results be as positive if I don't have a baseline or initial problem to attack? With this project, my ideas sprang from a need to *change* already existing work habits. If I start from the beginning before these work habits arise, will I know for sure that the students are improving with my help?

The ideas that seem so simple to me now are ones that I will continue to use in my future career, no matter what grade I teach. Providing students with clear expectations is something that I did not really do before I started examining the reasons behind my student's original work. Just because I have an idea in my head about what I'd like to see from the students, doesn't mean they'll know for sure.

Along with the community building and rule setting of the beginning of the year, I will set up these expectations that I have. I, personally, was so focused on starting kids out on the right foot behaviorally and socially, that I did not consider the importance of expectations academically. I noticed the rules of our classroom that were developed on the very first week of school, and not one of them included anything about always trying hard to do your best work. This is something that I will keep in mind when I am setting up my classroom next year.

This project really is a never ending story in that I will continue to search for and implement new ideas and tools that I come across in order to foster a classroom environment that

emphasizes doing your personal best. But to wrap up this project for the conference, I wanted to have one final class meeting to revisit the ideas of personal best from the beginning of the project. I explained that my project was winding down, and I wanted to see if they had changed their minds about what personal best really is. The final comment for the class meeting sums up my project perfectly:

“We shouldn’t stop because your project is over. We should do our personal best for the rest of the year—and for always really.”

Quotes from a Culture of Personal Best Students

“I’m going to do my personal best with these cars.”

“Can ‘Joe’ help us at Art Committee because ‘Bob’ isn’t doing his personal best.”

“I think a ‘4’ would be my personal best.”

“I want to do my personal best so I can hang this on the wall.”

“I think I did my personal best because I think I wrote everything I know.”

“I did my personal best because I took my time.”

”It feels good when I do my personal best.”

“I did my personal best because I didn’t do less, I did more.”

“I did my personal best because it’s neat and I concentrated.”

“If we do our personal best on this, maybe we can get a pencil on the wall.”

“We need to do our personal best on this.”

And during the most recent usage of a checklist not included in this paper:

Me: So what do we need to have on our plant?

Leaves

Stem

Roots

Flower

Extras

Entire class: PERSONAL BEST!

Inquiry Project Observation #1 March 4, 2003

While I was listening to the presentations on data analysis today in class, I was trying to get a feel for the specific kinds of things that I wanted to collect. I know that I want to collect student work, but I was trying to come up with things that would be appropriate. I was going through some science observation sheets from Monday afternoon, and I was making my usual about neat work or adding great details. I noticed that about half of the class does their personal best most of the time. Then there is another half of the class that really doesn't do their personal best on a consistent basis. Obviously since this is the idea of personal best, I don't deem one piece of work better than another because a student is a better artist or writer. What I personally was looking for was neat work that displayed that child's particular writing ability.

I expect, for example, that my top students should have four or more sentences with details that are legible. I also know that my weaker students may have one or two "bare bones" sentences because that is their personal best. It just struck me, though, that a few students did not work up to their ability. Their work was rushed and sloppy. Some of them had really great things to say, but I could not decipher them. Others wrote about the cockroach being red or black, and then their pictures are not red and black.

I am still planning on working on the idea of personal best and motivating students to do their personal best, but I want to touch base with the students who I do not believe did their personal best on this project to see what was going on. I want to get a sense of how they feel they did, why they feel that way, and what they could improve. My plan for this initial confrontation is to speak with the student individually to make an observation of their thoughts. I really want to get some ideas from them about something that I can do to help them make their work their personal best.

My other plan is to say something to the students that did do their personal best on the work. These kids need the attention, too! I do not think it would be fair to “ignore” the efforts of these students. I have gone the route of writing a good news note, and I’m wondering if that is something that I could do to keep encouraging these kids. I know that when I’ve done this before, the kids who didn’t get a note noticed the fact that they didn’t get a note. I’m wondering if this pushed any of them to work harder. I’m a little weary of this practice, though, because I am afraid that it is stepping into the dreaded extrinsic reward territory!

I’m going to try to talk to the students who did not do their personal best this time, and see if this takes care of some of them. I know with one particular student, we noticed that her work had been sliding off on quality. After we talked to her one time about her work, she has turned herself around. She recently won the personal best award. I’m wondering if a simple conference explaining that we’ve noticed a downturn in work will do the trick with some other students.

We shall see...

Inquiry Project Observation #2 March 23, 2004

One frustration that has brought about this inquiry project was the constant onslaught of students tapping and tugging on me to ask if they are done. Either they did not carefully listen to all of the expectations, or more likely they just forgot everything that needed to be done. They are only first graders after all!

I decided that a simple checklist might be in order to help the students to remember what to do. My first attempt went really well. I made a small checklist to attach to each student’s paper so that they could physically check off a completed task. I also made a large version of their checklist and referred to it several times during me lesson. For this project and lesson, a

checklist worked really well because the items were quantitative. The task was either done or not done. The items were not judgmental things. Out of 18 students that did the project, 14 successfully used the checklist. I collected this data the morning after the start of the project. The project poured over into the morning work due to a fire drill. Interestingly enough, the students did not need to be coaxed back into working after the fire drill. My thought here is that the expectations were set and they had a list to follow, so they had a mission. Six-year olds are very industrious students!

I also did the same procedure for a math lesson. This lesson was about the concept of $\frac{1}{4}$. I needed to make a checklist that would give the students enough clear directions without giving away the concept of fourths. The students did a really nice job with it. They were able to finish the project and include all of the minor parts like labeling that would normally involve my intervention to get them to complete!

I made one more attempt at a whole class checklist for a writing project this time. Writing is one of those areas where I really wanted to focus my project. I had done similar writings with the class before. Basically, I present information about an animal to the students. Then they have to write about the animal and complete an art project. This is old hat for these students, but I wasn't seeing much progress. Obviously these students should be writing more for this animal than they did ten weeks ago or more in the Underwater Life unit. I added the big question at the bottom of this checklist. Did I do my personal best? When presenting the checklist, I really laid out what I meant. Write everything that you know. Use the web to help you with ideas. Check your writing for capital letters and periods. My para was thrilled with the results. She hadn't seen me use a checklist before because I used them in the afternoon before.

She commented about the completeness of the writing and how much the students really tried to write the most that they knew.

I want to stick with the checklist idea but refine it in some ways. For example, we did another writing assessment practice. My mentor had a rubric of sorts for the students. When she was explaining the writing practice, she did not use the terms personal best, but it dawned on me. This rubric was nice because it had a checklist, which is familiar to student, but it also gradates the work. Students that had previously only skimmed by on doing the bare bones had something to work towards. I know this was the case with one student in particular. He is a very bright child, but he is not necessarily motivated to push himself. Seeing that his previous story was only a three, he knew what he had to do to get a four. In all honesty, he has to push himself to get a four, and his quiet competitiveness made him want to get that score.

I would also like to experiment with self-evaluation. The students did get to self-evaluate their practice writing, but we have not yet had the chance to conference with the students to check on their thoughts.

Inquiry Project Observation #3 March 30, 2004

Today I attempted to make a rubric for our animal reports that the students and I have been working on at the writing center. We have been using a rubric with the students for their writing assessment practices, but that rubric could not be applied to this task because it is geared for writing a story. The kids are writing factual reports. I gathered each group together before I set them to the task of finishing the actual reports. I asked them what they thought needed to be included in each number. Our original rubric went from 1-4 with four being the best score. A three is acceptable, but we are trying to get across the idea that they can write a four if they really

try. So I started with a three in all three groups that I consulted for help with the rubric. We talked about the things that needed to be included so that the report is done.

The same basic responses came from all three groups. They agreed that they should have a lot of facts and nice pictures. For a two, they decided that they did not probably include enough facts, and their pictures were not very colorful. For a one, the students thought that they basically did not even write a report. The neatest results came across for a rating of four in every single group. Someone in every group said that to get a four, you had to do your personal best. This made me absolutely ecstatic! I've been wondering about how much the students thought about the idea of personal best when I wasn't putting it right out in front on them. It seems to me that they are starting to internalize this concept. I think they are finally starting to equate doing your personal best with being neat and complete without too much teacher intervention.

As a part of the rubric process, I really wanted to include that idea of personal best. In each of the four ratings, I included a statement about personal best. I also allowed room for the students to comment and rate their own work. After all, I am not really the one to judge their personal best. It is my goal to get them to understand what their personal best is. I am merely opening their eyes to the term and showing them what they are truly capable of.

Inquiry Project Observation #4 March 30, 2004

I've used personal best checklists now in a math lesson, several writing lessons, and a science lesson or two. I've used them in individual form, whole class form, and electronic form. The general trend so far is that using these checklists do in fact alert kids to the fact that they must do their personal best on this particular project. So I am now wondering if the students think that they only have to do their personal best when there is a checklist. After we candle our

chick eggs, the students must write a quick observation about what they saw and they must include a picture. Some kids did an absolutely terrible job on this. I wonder if there are any other factors that contributed to this or if they think that they do not have to do their personal best all of the time.

I think my next plan of attack will be to do surprise personal best evaluations. Of course, I'll allow the students to rate themselves first, and I'll make a note about the results for my own reference. I'll make a quick note of what I personally think about their work, and if I disagree, I plan to conference with the students about it. I wonder if using sporadic personal best evaluations after the fact will have an impact on when the students do their best work.

Inquiry Project Observation #5 April 3, 2004

The more I work on this project, the more wonderings keep flying through my head. With each new technique, something crosses my mind. As I was looking over some of the data I've collected thus far, I see one thing emerge. The students really are doing a much better job with doing their personal best work. But, are they only doing this personal best work when they know they are being held accountable for it? Another interesting questions would be whether or not they are only doing their personal best for me? My mentor has used some of my techniques to help support my project in the classroom, but I am mainly the one who is doing all of the pushing of the personal best ideas.

To tackle these questions simultaneously, I decided to "sneak attack" the kids with a personal best evaluation. That is the best term I can use because I wanted the students to "finish" their work before they found out that we would examine the work for personal best qualities. I made a small evaluation that had the students rate their work as a 1, 2, or 3. Three was the highest rating. Then they had to write why they thought they deserved the score.

When the first student finished their work, I gave him an evaluation and explained what he was to do. I was actually hoping that I would “catch” kids not doing their personal best work. I wanted them to see that they had to be doing their best work all of the time and not just when I really emphasized it. Then I realized that some of the kids around him heard us talking about it. I noticed fervor in action. Little hands started moving more quickly, and little eyebrows started to scrunch up “deep in thought.”

I had unintentionally caused the students to work harder on the project by giving them a summative assessment. While this was not my intention, I was not disheartened. I have yet to see if they got the point that personal best work has to be done all of the time, but at least I got another good piece of evidence that my efforts are causing an increase in personal best efforts. As a comparison, I’ve kept copies of some of the kids work from before this evaluation and some of the work from after the evaluation. In general, though, the kids wrote more and paid more attention to the pictures. No, it did not go quite as planned, but it is another effective tool for increasing personal best efforts.

Inquiry Project Observation #6 April 3, 2004

In my quest for more and more tools that teachers can use easily in their classrooms to promote personal best work, I’m teetering on the edge of extrinsic motivation with my newest idea. I thought that it might be nice for the students to showcase their work. I made a B-8’s personal best work wall. Students can bring their work to me and we talk about whether or not it is their personal best. I know it is motivating for some of the students because I have a particular anecdote. We are having trouble getting one particular student to do any work, let alone her personal best work. She really wanted to get her work on that wall, though. But I wasn’t going to just put any piece of work on that wall. She is fully capable of doing much more work than

she does, and I didn't want her usual efforts to be seen as personal best. They aren't. She came to me and wanted to hang up a piece of writing and art. She only wrote three sentences, when she could easily write twice that much. She drags her feet at everything. So I told her that that particular piece would not do, but that we were doing a similar project in a few days, and she could try again. This seemed to make her happy.

I was eagerly waiting to see what would happen. This could be a big step for her if she was able to actual do her best work without any prodding. I knew that this would not carry into other project yet, but I was hoping for one step. On that Thursday, we went through out information and we went to work. She did not immediately get to work, and I was worried she had forgotten our deal. I did not want to step in here and say, "Remember, if you do your personal best, we'll hang up your project." I wanted her to take that responsibility. I will admit that I did not have much confidence. Luckily, her neighbor had finished her beautiful project, and she wanted to hang it up. So I hung up her project in full sight of my targeted student. Something clicked and she get to work.

Finally, she finished, and she brought it to me. She only had three sentences again. What should I do? I hated to turn her down again, but I also knew that she did not do her best. It was hard to ask her if she really thought it was her best work. She's a tough cookie, though, so I decided to venture that direction. I asked her if she remembered why I wouldn't hang up her project from Monday. She said, "Oh yeah, I have to write some more. Let me finish, Miss Hartman." It was a miracle! Or at least as much a miracle as could be mustered from a difficult student. She wrote two more sentences, and for the first time, she wrote a few things on the back side of the sheet. It truly was her personal best. I was thrilled!

The wall has had the same effect on other students, although admittedly it wasn't quite as exciting as when this particular student stepped out of her comfort zone. Students are trying to get their work on the wall. So yes, they are getting the extrinsic motivation of getting recognition and praise from their classmates and teachers, but I am okay with it because it is really positive. I think that it is better than getting a "treat" for doing their best. And there is no question that it is a motivator for students. It is also accomplishing my goal of getting students to evaluate their own work. I cannot nominate work for the board. They must do that themselves. Although I do try to mention the wall when I haven't gotten any recent submissions.

