

# **Encouraging Self-Reliance in Fourth Graders**

Inquiry 2004

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**Background Information**

### *Description of our teaching context*

This project encompasses two separate fourth grade classrooms that have many things in common, such as: one ESL student per class, 3-4 learning support students in each room, and 3-5 learning enrichment students, to name a few. We each have 26 students, in a self-contained classroom. Based on the teaching experience of our mentors, this group of fourth graders is extremely unique. They are respectful, polite, high-achieving, well-behaved, and all around “good” children, behaviorally and academically. Our mentors both agree, with approximately twenty years combined experience, that they have never taught a class like this. On a larger scale, we teach in an academically competitive environment. Expectations for success are demanding, and parent involvement is substantial. For the purpose of this inquiry project, most of the similarities stem from their academic behaviors. The observations we have made over months, have led to this project. Our focus remains on encouraging students to independently follow the directions of an assignment and building their self-esteem, to help them recognize when they have done good work.

### *What led us to this particular inquiry project and wonderings*

Upon returning from winter vacation, our role in the classroom shifted from creating and implementing lessons for class, to being an integral part of the teaching team. Suddenly our focus changed from methods courses and ourselves, to the needs of our students and the educational process. Although they were important in the fall, our time was split among many different responsibilities. Now our time is devoted to the students, to successfully prepare them for fifth grade. Not only does this include meeting all academic standards, but it also includes building responsible, independent learners.

Having time to focus and reflect on the students in our rooms, we noticed that we shared similar observations that were really puzzling. Several times a day we had students approach us with questions about a particular task they were completing. More often than not, the answer was written in plain English at the top of their page. We could not understand how their eyes could so easily skip right over the crucial information that explained what they were to do. Every day we exchanged stories of our students asking us questions that could have been answered themselves, if they had taken careful note of the directions. We could not figure out why they were having so many problems following the written directions. Was it because we gave verbal directions beforehand? Was it because the students were too lazy to read the written directions? Was it because they were not visually appealing? These are just a few of the wonderings that led us to this project.

In fourth grade, we have tried to encourage our students to be independent learners, because from this year on, they will not be spoon-fed information, there will be higher expectations for self-reliance. When they get to middle school and high school, they will need to complete work on their own and will not have a teacher to hold their hand through the process. Although their questioning was frustrating at first, we turned that frustration into motivation to help our students.

### *What others think/know about this topic (literature/experts)*

Although we found limited literature on our topic, we interviewed several veteran teachers at Radio Park Elementary School, for their expertise on the subject. We received useful feedback from each one of them. Because the teachers interviewed represented different grade levels, they all contributed their own distinct comments.

- Marcia Heitzmann, 1<sup>st</sup> Grade Teacher, 35 year veteran

Marcia described how directions are used in a primary classroom, which vastly contrasts that of our fourth grade classrooms. For a majority of the year, many of the first graders cannot read independently, so therefore they do not use written directions. They focus on using verbal and pictorial directions. Although there are differences between our formats, once they implement written directions, they are concise, simple words listed. This similarly compared to what many of our fourth graders preferred to see in their directions, which we will discuss later.

- Julie Jobe, 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Teacher, 14 year veteran:

Julie shared an example of a writing prompt she uses during the year, in order to prepare her students for the PSSAs. The strategy that she used most often when creating the written directions for the prompt was consistency. Although the genre of writing would change for each prompt, the format of the directions remained the same. Her example also used a combined paragraph/bulleted form of written directions. She agreed that this was a very important topic to be researching, because at our school, when students reach the intermediate grade levels, the amount of adults in the room to depend on significantly decreases. Students must learn to be independent.

- Rebecca Lorantas, 5<sup>th</sup> Grade Teacher, 19.5 year veteran

Rebecca recognized similar trends among her students, with following directions, as we described with ours. She tries to tie in positive consequences for the students in her room, who are doing what they should be doing. Additionally, she takes time to talk with her students, prior to the PSSAs, about different types of directions. On the assessment they might see shaded directions, or directions written down the side of the paper. She points out that the test is trying to trick them, and they need to be alert. She also instills strategies to empower the students' sense of responsibility. For example, she uses the "3 before me" rule, where students have to ask their question to three friends, before they can come to her with a question.

□ Pauline Fogelsanger, Intermediate Learning Support Teacher, 31 year veteran

Because of Pauline's position in the school, she enables her students to become better readers of the directions. Many times they will repeatedly read the directions, either to themselves or aloud. To instill independence, she will then request that the students repeat back to her what is expected of them in the assignment. In comparison to our classrooms, Pauline spends time with the kids pointing out key words and phrases to help them with the assignment. We attempted to bold key words and phrases to help our students, when designing directions.

□ Mardi Frye, Learning Enrichment Teacher, 20 year veteran

When creating directions, Mardi tries to make them specific to the group, with which she is working. The group dynamic often dictates the amount of teacher guidance that is required for the directions. As a former teacher of both first and six grades, she informed us that she

made the same observations in those classes as we did in ours. She felt that teachers could lessen the severity of the situation by not being enablers of the behaviors.

□ Linda Knepp, Instructional Support Teacher, 31.5 year veteran

In her position she believes in teaching one step of a direction at a time. She breaks it down by demonstrating, modeling, and role-playing the direction. She spends significant time on one step directions, before she introduces multi-step directions. Similar to other responses, she also highlights and stresses the key words. Linda thought it would be interesting to test the reading level of company-produced directions that exist in our classrooms. Sometimes the reading level of the directions does not match the student's ability. This was an enlightening and useful consideration for the future.

### *Our clearly stated wonderings/questions*

1. Why are our fourth graders not reading the directions independently?
  - a. It was puzzling to have so many questions arise out of an activity where verbal and written directions were given.
2. How can we help our students, who lack confidence, become more self-reliant?
  - a. The questions came from students at all ability levels in our classrooms. Could this stem from a general lack of confidence in the students?
3. What strategies are the students currently employing to be independent learners?
  - a. We wanted student feedback on their current strategies, for reading the directions.
4. What could we do as teachers to ensure our students would read the directions thoroughly?

- a. We wanted to design directions, based on their feedback, that would be more user-friendly to our students.

After talking to our mentors, students, and each other, we decided our original wondering was too broad. At the beginning of this inquiry process, our wonderings covered the vast idea of building confidence and self-reliance in our fourth graders. As we brainstormed strategies to implement in our classrooms, we concluded that we would need a more narrow focus. Upon writing this paper, we found it very interesting how specific our wondering became. Although we keep that overarching goal in mind, the directions were something concrete that could have easily been manipulated to see progress. Even though it is one small aspect of self-reliance, it is an essential skill that they need, to be successful in their education.

## **Our Inquiry Plan**

### *What we did to carry out the inquiry project in our classrooms*

Several months ago we created a timeline that we stuck to, as best we could, for carrying out the activities of this project. We felt this kept us organized and on track for completing the entire project by May. This also took careful collaboration with our mentors, as far as scheduling and implementing activities. Additionally, we researched background information, however, many of the strategies we used in the classroom were created by us. Most of the research was directed towards parenting or primary classrooms. Although there may be some research on our topic, we feel as though we are pioneers in this area of study. Correctly following directions is important for fourth graders because it is a stepping stone, on their way to becoming independent learners, and our data shows that our students were successful in improving their ability to do so.

*All of the ways we collected data*

1. Before this inquiry started and throughout, we have constantly been observing our students' behaviors mentally, specifically during times when directions are being given.
2. We decided upon holding weekly class meetings, where we initially described our project and collected their strategies for doing good work and having confidence in their abilities. Upon hearing these comments, we decided to narrow our focus on following directions, and the remainder of the meetings consisted of discussing individual strategies for success. Together during these meetings, we also reflected on their reactions to the activities we conducted, which will be further explained. Conversations were transcribed during these meetings. This enabled us to analyze their thoughts. **(See Appendix A)**
3. The next method for collecting data involved individually interviewing all of our students. We asked a variety of questions, pertaining to their personal feelings towards following directions, including what they like, do not like, and would like, as well as their strategies for reading a set of directions on a given assignment. These were conducted over the course of several weeks and during the students' free time. **(See Appendix B)**
4. To really assess their ability to follow directions, we created a worksheet for a whole class activity. It is a popular method for evaluating a student's ability to follow directions. The directions at the top of the sheet were written in paragraph form. These directions specifically stated to read all tasks first, along with other reminders. Following the directions was a list of fifteen random activities, such as "moo like a cow" or "do five jumping jacks." If students had followed the directions, they would have seen task fifteen, which stated, "If you read through all the tasks first, like you were told, only do numbers one and four, then turn your paper over and sit quietly. NO TALKING!"

Because they had not read all tasks first, there were many children who were completing the silly activities. The vast majority in both classes did not follow the directions, which was very amusing to watch. Additionally, some students tried erasing their answers, once they read the final step. On this particular day, five out of thirty-nine students successfully followed the directions. Some children realized the point of the activity when they reached number fifteen, while others thought this was a “weird” activity, as quoted by one student, and not sure of the purpose. They had not realized we were doing this for a reason. We know they thought this, because we verbally discussed their reactions, immediately following the activity. Additionally, some erased what they had written, pretending to have followed the directions. They proved to be the exact stereotype we had created in our minds, of how students do not follow directions in our classrooms. They epitomized our reason for conducting this project. **(See Appendix C)**

5. We created a set of generic directions for a science activity. We took this general set of directions, and from it, designed three distinct types of directions to administer to our students. We hoped to gain a better understanding of what directions students liked best. Based on information taken from interviews and class meetings, we saw a few patterns emerge. Students liked directions written as a paragraph or a concise, bulleted list. Both the paragraph and the bulleted list were two of the three types of directions we administered to the students. The third set was a combination of the two, being a paragraph with bolded main ideas. We passed out each set of directions individually. For each set they had sixty seconds to read the directions and sixty seconds to write what was expected of them on the back of the paper. The order in which we passed out the different sets of directions was as follows: plain paragraph, paragraph with bolded key

ideas, and the bulleted list. We thought this was the best logical sequence for our activity. We realized there were limitations in doing this activity, for instance the students retained information just by rereading the same expectations, however, based on the results, we still obtained valuable information. After the activity we had each student write a few sentences about which set of directions they liked best and why, as well as any suggestions or comments. No students, between the two classrooms, chose the plain paragraph as the one they liked best. Twelve children chose the paragraph with bolded key ideas, and twenty-seven chose the bulleted checklist of directions. One student suggested that he would have liked a bolded, bulleted checklist. **(See Appendix D)**

6. The last way we collected data was through the use of a worksheet, similar to the first set of tasks. It was a worksheet, where the students were required to read all of the directions first, before attempting the sheet. To vary the format, this activity was math-oriented. We were pleased to see the results. Twenty-four out of forty-one students, over fifty percent, followed the directions correctly. We realized there were also limitations with this activity. Our students switch for math, so some were suspect of doing this in homeroom. We held a discussion, though, immediately following the worksheet that revealed to us that our strategies for helping students read the directions were successful. Students commented on the emphasis placed on the directions recently in our classroom. That emphasis led them to consciously do what they were supposed to do. Hopefully, as this continues, the next step would be to get them to subconsciously follow the directions successfully. **(See Appendix E)**

### *How we analyzed the data*

1. The observations we noted were analyzed verbally through discussion, almost daily.
2. For the information that we gained from the class meetings, we combined the transcripts and noted the similarities between our two classes.
3. As with the transcripts from the class meetings, we combined and compared the information that we wrote from each of our students' interviews. Again, we noted the similarities.
4. With the two direction worksheets, we analyzed the data almost immediately, judging by who had correctly followed the directions. We later totaled our numbers and noted that there were similar occurrences in both rooms.
5. We analyzed the three sets of directions activity by separating what students preferred into piles and totaling the numbers.

## **What We Learned or Now Know**

### *A clear list of claims or what we think we now know*

As this inquiry project comes to an end, we know now that there is not one specific format for directions, in order to make all students successful. We learned that what is important is consistency from the beginning and to provide a variety in attempt to meet the needs of all students. Another element to consider is the dynamic of the class that enters the room each September. Different kids are going to like different things, and it is our job as the teacher to differentiate accordingly. After completing this project, we now have a variety of ways to

accomplish that differentiation. We could use paragraphs, checklists, bolded ideas, pictures, and many more we have yet to discover. We now feel prepared to include the directions, as part of our community building activities in our future classrooms. Consistency from day one will hopefully establish an environment for success among all our students.

*Evidence to support those claims from our data and the literature/experts*

Just as several of the veteran teachers we spoke to said, there is not one clear answer for this common problem that plagues all teachers. However, there are other characteristics of the directions process that we can manipulate to make them more manageable for the students. According to Hartley-Brewer, “Things are always easier to remember if we can make sense of them when we hear or read them. Completely new information with alien jargon simply goes in one ear and out the other” (1998, p. 21). We used the students’ input to design instructions that best met their needs. One of our main goals was to make user-friendly directions, so it was important to not use a language that was unfamiliar to the students. One of the most popular requests for directions from the students was some kind of checklist, providing explicit tasks that they could cross off when complete. Hartley-Brewer agrees and says, “Breaking projects down into bite-size chunks can remotivate them. And most children will find it even easier to apply themselves and show determination if the stages of the project are recorded and can actually be checked off when completed, so that progress is visual” (1998, p. 103). Because we had them provide so much input for the creation of the directions, they really began to have a sense of ownership with them. This made it easier for when they had questions. They were able to figure

things out more easily, because they created the directions. This was also a useful tool for us in building their independence, because when they asked questions about the directions, it was easier for us to relay the responsibility on them, because they had created them. “Directing makes children feel impotent and frustrated. The more directive a parent or teacher is, the more rebellious and resistant children become.” (Glenn & Nelsen, 2000, p. 59). This quote epitomizes the underlying belief of our inquiry project. We want to better prepare our fourth graders for fifth grade and beyond. As this quote states, the more directive we are, the more negative results will be produced. We are trying to teach the opposite. We want to build responsibility and create ownership with the directions, so hopefully we have fostered a sense of accomplishment and pride. We want them to feel that they have done something on their own and done it well.

## **Conclusion and Future Directions**

### *Implications for our future practices as teachers*

What we have concluded for our future practices as teachers, is that it is important to gain a feel for the dynamic of our classrooms. Different directions appeal to different students for different reasons. Referring back to our interviews with our students, we found that our avid readers liked their directions in a paragraph form. The other end of the spectrum liked the short, bulleted list of directions. It would be very difficult to vary the directions of every lesson we taught, in order to accommodate the needs of our students. However, it is another element of the teaching process that we had not ever taken into consideration. Before this project, we never thought of attributing lack of success or confidence in an assignment to the format of the directions. Just like Gardner established multiple intelligences, so do multiple interpretations of

directions exist. Next year, we would not want to limit our students to follow a single style of direction. We will do our best to meet the needs of all our students in daily lessons.

*Any new wonderings that we have developed*

1. Have we adequately investigated our wondering?
  - a. It was difficult to find literature-based resources on this topic that were focused on an intermediate grade level. We found that there was more information printed for parents and primary-age students.
2. Could we have discovered more ways to help our students, given more time and resources?
  - a. If we had a full year to emphasize this practice as a part of the classroom routine and expectations, we feel we would have been able to establish this behavior earlier in the school year. In our opinion, we feel this should be a part of community building and expectations in our classroom from day one. It is a life-long practice they will use, in more than an educational setting.
3. Will this research be helpful to other teachers? Do other teachers struggle with a similar problem in their classroom?
  - a. Due to the lack of research on this topic, we hope our paper can encourage other teachers to explore the possibility of using a variety of directions to build independent, successful learners.
4. Will this research help me to be a successful first year teacher?
  - a. We hope to follow through with our findings next year, because our findings can only be advantageous to the success of our students.

## **Reflection on the Inquiry Process**

During this fast and furious time of wondering, collecting, analyzing, and reflecting, on a whole, we have found working together to be a very positive experience. Having someone to validate our concerns and ideas with was a comforting feeling. It was nice being able to rely on somebody else knowing how we felt. Not only did inquiry teach us lessons in the inquiry process, but we also learned valuable lessons in teamwork and friendship. This project was conducted over a time that was high-stress, for various reasons, and even though we each had our own responsibilities for the project in our own classrooms, we were motivators for one another to get work finished. Overall, this was a nice way to close the year. Throughout the course of the internship, we have created countless lessons together and have really worked side-by-side. We could not have envisioned finishing off this inquiry project, or the year, in any other way. As the saying goes, two minds are better than one, and true to this quote, we complemented one other, with each of us contributing our own unique ideas.

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