

Background Information

Description of My Teaching Context

I have had the pleasure of working as a Professional Development School Intern in a full day kindergarten classroom this year at Gray's Woods Elementary. My classroom contains twenty students, twelve boys and eight girls. I would describe my class as a very active, high energy group. Students represent a wide range of ability levels, an assortment of interests and learning styles, and varying lengths of attention spans. For these reasons, whole group instruction, or "carpet time," can be rather challenging.

My Inquiry Project and Wonderings

Throughout the year, I have frequently reflected on whole group instruction in my classroom. As a pre-service teacher, I have taught whole group lessons that went well and were interesting and engaging, as well as lessons that did not go well or spark much excitement or involvement. In some instances, after reflecting on my teaching, I was able to pinpoint something that I had done to make the lesson interesting and engaging for students. For instance, during a recent whole group lesson, I was able to engage all of the students in my class by asking them to figure out the next mode of transportation in the book Bunnies on the Go using rhyming clues. In this instance, asking the children to make predictions helped them to stay on task and participate.

Conversely, reflecting on my teaching can also help me to identify misconceptions or expectations that were not valid. For instance, later in that same lesson, I explained to the students that we would be going on an imaginary trip with the bunnies. I asked for volunteers to share something that they were looking forward to seeing or doing on the trip or any feelings they might have about going on the trip. I expected this question to incite my students'

imaginations and lead to an interesting discussion; however, they began to fidget, whisper, and look uneasy. In this case, because my students did not know very much about the context of the trip, I think that they began to feel uncomfortable and their discomfort caused them withdraw from the lesson.

While I am sometimes able to pinpoint the reason that a particular lesson was interesting and engaging by reflecting on my teaching, other times I have been left wondering about what caused the lesson to go well or not so well. For example, while teaching measurement this spring, I taught two very similar lessons addressing two different concepts. Both lessons were interactive and allowed students to manipulate materials and share ideas with their classmates; however, one lesson went well, but the other did not. During the first lesson, the students had “good manners” and shared “serious” ideas. Conversely, during the second lesson, the students did not have “good manners” or share “serious” ideas. A young student proclaimed within one minute of the second lesson, “Miss Preis, this is boring!”

While this comment did not really hurt my feelings because I know the child was just being honest, it did cause me to question why one lesson was interesting for my students and the other was “boring.” My supervisor and I spoke about it, and we both agreed that I did not do something differently in teaching the lessons to cause this discrepancy. We did notice, however, that after one student made the comment about the lesson being boring, a few other students piggy-backed and called it boring as well. These students began to act silly and feed off of each other. Following my classroom management protocol, I asked the disruptive students to leave the carpet and find a seat at a table. The students continued to act silly at the tables and ended up interrupting the whole flow of the lesson. It was very difficult for me to continue teaching the lesson because I was not able to fully regain my students’ attention after this.

It was this particular teaching experience that got me thinking about how a student's motivation to learn something can affect his or her behavior during a lesson and what he or she will absorb. It caused me to think about how I could increase my students' motivation to learn and how I could make whole group instruction more interesting and more effective in my classroom. My desire to understand situations like the one described above led me to the following wonderings:

- Main wondering
 - How can I increase the amount of student learning during whole group instruction in my kindergarten classroom?
- Sub Questions
 - What types of activities do kindergarten students find interesting?
 - What types of activities do kindergarten students find boring? When students find something boring, how can I make it more fun and interesting for them?
 - How can I increase a student's motivation to learn something that he or she finds boring, difficult, pointless, etc?
 - How can I facilitate more productive whole group discussions on the carpet?
 - How can I deal with disruptive students without disrupting the flow of the lesson?
 - How can I help students improve their impulse control?

Background Research

One part of my inquiry project deals with increasing my students' motivation to learn. According to Bomia et. al., as referenced in Brewster and Fager, student motivation can be described as "a student's willingness, need, desire and compulsion to participate in, and be successful in, the learning process" (2000). There are many factors influencing a child's motivation to learn, including the child's home environment and initial school experiences. According to Jere Brophy, as quoted in Lumsden, "Although students' motivational histories accompany them into each new classroom setting, it is essential for teachers to view themselves as active socialization agents capable of stimulating...student motivation to learn" (1994). Throughout my inquiry, despite my successes and failures, I have tried not to forget the influence I have as a teacher to kindle student motivation to learn.

Brewster and Fager offer the following suggestions for teachers seeking to increase students' motivation to learn: "Ensure that classroom expectations for performance and behavior are clear and consistent...make students feel welcomed and supported...respond positively to student questions, and praise students verbally for work well done...work to build quality relationships with students" (2000). During my inquiry, I tried to keep these suggestions in mind, especially the one about building quality relationships with students. I feel that making a personal connection with each student is very important in fostering the student's motivation to learn. I also believe that classroom climate is a key factor affecting a student's willingness to participate in classroom activities. If each student knows that his or her contributions to class will be valued and respected, the student's motivation to engage in the learning process will increase.

The second part of my inquiry project has to do with whole group instruction in my kindergarten classroom. During the year, through both my observations and teaching experiences, I have noticed that the students in my classroom are not taking advantage of all of the opportunities to learn during whole group instruction. I understand that five and six year olds have limited attention spans and that it is difficult for students to sit on the carpet and actively participate in lessons that last longer than ten minutes; however, I feel that whole group instruction can provide valuable learning experiences for children as they are able to interact with and engage in meaningful discussions with all of their classmates. In my classroom, one particular challenge is maintaining the flow of a lesson when a student chooses to seek attention by acting out or misbehaving.

Kindergarten serves as the bridge between the home and the real world; therefore, it can be a very difficult transition for some children. According to Theodore Grubbe, a school psychologist, “The school is a new situation for the child; it will, therefore, reveal how well the child has been prepared to face new situations and particularly how well he has been prepared to meet new persons” (1963). If children are not well prepared and have a difficult transition, they will likely view their first school experiences in a negative light. When this happens, the students often become discouraged and teachers begin to see signs of this in their behavior.

Grubbe asserts, “Every action of the child has a purpose...The discouraged or misbehaving child is trying in his own mistaken way to feel important” (1963). It is essential that teachers try to determine the goal of a child’s misbehavior because when a teacher reacts to the child’s misbehavior in the way he or she wants them to, it frequently heightens the problem rather than lessening it. Once the teacher has determined the goal of the child’s misbehavior, he or she should also try to address it. For instance, if a student is acting out to get attention

because he does not get much at home, it would be wise for the teacher to redirect the attention from negative to positive. This way, the student gets the attention he or she needs, but not the kind of attention he or she was seeking.

My Inquiry Project

Inquiry Timeline

I conducted my inquiry over a five week time period. During the first week, I conducted a brief interview with all of the students in my class to get their input about and suggestions for improving whole group instruction. Using their ideas, I generated a list of three new strategies to try. During the second week, I implemented the first strategy: incorporating more opportunities for movement and choral responses. The following week, I tried the second strategy: using puppets. The fourth week, I implemented the third strategy: giving each child his or her own calendar to fill in during calendar time. Finally, during the last week, I conducted post-interviews to get my students' opinions about whether or not the strategies helped to improve whole group instruction.

Week One: Pre-Interviews

I spent the first week of my inquiry conducting pre-interviews with my students. As I called each child over, I explained that I wanted to ask him or her a few questions about whole group lessons, or carpet time, to find out what he or she thinks is interesting and boring and to get his or her ideas about how to make it more fun and interesting. Once I explained the purpose of the interview, I began asking questions. First, I described three whole group lessons: one primarily auditory, one kinesthetic, and one visual. I asked the students to listen carefully to the descriptions, to try to recall the lessons, and then to rank the lessons 1,2, or 3, with 1 being the

most interesting or fun and 3 being the least interesting or fun. I also asked the students to explain why they ranked the lessons as they did. Once I collected all of my data, I planned to use it to calculate the percentage of students in my class who prefer visual, kinesthetic, and auditory lessons.

The first lesson I described was calendar time, which is primarily an auditory lesson. During calendar time, students learn about the days of the week, months of year, seasons, and weather. I wanted to include calendar time in the interview for two reasons. First, it is one of the most challenging times during the day as far as behavior management is concerned. Second, when I teach calendar, I get the sense that the students are not very interested in what is being presented. I was not surprised to find that nine out of twenty students rated calendar time as a 3, or the least interesting or fun lesson, and that nine other students indicated that it was a 2, or somewhat interesting or fun. The remaining two students listed calendar time as a 1, or the most interesting or fun of the three lessons. One of the students that rated calendar time as a 1 explained that he likes it because everyone is quiet; the other student explained that she likes calendar time because she gets to be calendar buddy, or teacher, sometimes. Many of the students who rated calendar time as a 2 or 3 mentioned that they do not like sitting on the carpet that long, that they do not like it when they are not calendar buddy because they do not get to talk much, and that it is a little boring because it is the same thing every day.

The second lesson I described was a living and non-living sorting activity, a more kinesthetic lesson because the students manipulated the materials. I was surprised to find that three students rated this activity as a 1, seven students rated it as a 2, and ten students rated it as a 3. I expected the majority of students to enjoy the lesson because it was hands-on, but their interviews did not support my assumption. The students who rated it as a 1 said they liked it

because they got to use their hands, because they got to look at a real goldfish, and because they learned how fish breathe underwater. The students who rated it a 2 or 3 explained that they did not like it as much because they did not get a turn, because people got too loud and started grabbing for things, and because it was easy.

The third lesson I described was a balloon rocket demonstration, a primarily visual lesson. I was surprised that the students rated this lesson higher than the sorting lesson because they were not able to handle the materials. Fifteen students rated it as a 1, nine students rated it as a 2, and one student rated it as a 3. The students who rated it a 1 and 2 mentioned that it was cool and fun to watch. The student who rated it as a 3 did not elaborate on her rating.

Based on this part of the interview alone, I gained valuable information about my students' preferred learning styles. Although other factors such as interest in the topic or content of the lessons surely affected my students' reactions, I discovered that in these three examples, seventy-five percent of my students prefer visual lessons, fifteen percent prefer kinesthetic lessons, and ten percent prefer auditory lessons.

After I described the lessons and had the students rank them, I asked them to think of any other whole group lessons that they thought were fun and interesting. I also asked them to think of some ways that we could make the "boring" lessons more fun and interesting. Many of the students had a hard time coming up with ideas spontaneously, but they mentioned the balloon rocket demonstration, an animal needs lesson involving a real hamster, greeting meeting, listening to stories, a visit from a DARE officer, and singing songs as fun activities. When I went through this part of my data, I found that eleven percent of the activities they described as fun or enjoyable were auditory, seventeen percent were visual, twenty-eight percent were verbal, and forty-four percent were kinesthetic. I was surprised to see that kinesthetic activities were

mentioned more often as fun or interesting by my students than visual lessons. This seemed to contradict the data I collected a few minutes before when I asked them to rank the lessons in order from most fun or interesting to least fun or interesting.

Some of the suggestions my students came up with for how to make calendar time more fun and interesting included: filling in their own calendars as the calendar buddy filled in the large calendar, incorporating more movement, having more opportunities to call out answers (choral responses) or letting everyone have a turn to talk, and involving a puppet. Their suggestions seemed to be largely kinesthetic and visual.

Before I concluded the interviews, I asked each student to think of some things that make it difficult for him or her to be a good listener on the carpet. Many students mentioned noise in the hall, their buddies talking to them, and their friends not keeping their hands to themselves as factors that lead them to become distracted. One student shared what I thought was a particularly mature response. He said, "It is because everyone has good ideas and wants to tell the teacher at the same time."

Week Two: Implementing Strategy #1

During the second week of my inquiry, I implemented the first strategy suggested by my students for making whole group instruction more engaging: incorporating more movement and choral responses. I spent a while brainstorming ideas for ways to naturally incorporate movement and choral responses into the daily calendar routine. I decided to try having the students call out the year, the month, the day of the week, and the date instead of calling on one student to give the answer. I also tried introducing three new songs I found on the internet to sing during calendar which focused on the days of the week and the date. As far as movement is concerned, I decided to try having the students do things like trace numbers in the air or on their

neighbors hand, hop once (or do some other type of movement) for each day we add to the calendar, and use motions to represent the pattern on the calendar.

Throughout the week, my mentor and I incorporated more opportunities for movement and choral responses during calendar time and other whole group lessons. My supervisor, my mentor, and I all took turns collecting data. We recorded the number of students off task every five minutes. Students who were considered off task were not sitting criss-cross, looking at the speaker, keeping their hands to themselves, and/or keeping their voices tucked in. We also jotted down other observations about things that increased or decreased participation and things that were effective or ineffective in maintaining the students' attention.

Some of the kinesthetic things that the students responded well to included: calling on someone who was wiggling their finger, tracing the date in the air before calling it out, making a silent pattern, adding motions to songs and chants, adding physical movements to counting and patterning activities, and using special hand signals for voting. Some of the verbal strategies that worked well included having students read or call out in a variety of voices, whispering answers to a buddy before calling it out (a kindergarten version of think-pair-share), calling out predictions, and letting more students share answers, comments, etc.

Week Three: Implementing Strategy #2

The second student-suggested strategy for improving whole group instruction was to use puppets, so one day during the third week of my inquiry "Shy Kitty" came to visit my class during calendar time. As it turned out, on this day my mentor teacher had a meeting in the afternoon, so a guest teacher came in and I taught the rest of the day. I asked the guest teacher to take some notes for me while I taught. I asked her to record the number of students off task

every five minutes and to make observations about the level of student participation in the lesson.

I began calendar with a song to get the children settled on the carpet. I noticed that one student did not sing the song or do the motions. I also noticed that another student was being very silly during the song. Once the students were settled on the carpet, I introduced them to “Shy Kitty,” a puppet that my mentor had used once before. I reminded the children that Shy Kitty does not like loud places, so that they would have to be very quiet so that she would want to stay. At this point, most of the children were quiet and attentive. The guest teacher noted that three students were off task. I then began the calendar routine. I asked the class to call out the month, the day, and the year in a whisper voice, a squeaky mouse voice, and a low voice. Only one student was off task during this portion of calendar. Next, the calendar buddy filled in the date, placed the day of the week on the board, and pointed to the “Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow” poster as the class read it aloud. The guest teacher observed that four children were off task when we began this part of calendar, but when I had Shy Kitty creep behind my back, the students began to quiet down and pay attention again.

A little later, I asked the calendar buddy to call on someone to tell me how many days we have been in school. One student called out the answer (125). I then held Shy Kitty close to my ear and told the class that she would like to write the number on the paper, but is embarrassed because she does not know how to write numbers. The children really responded to this; they all wanted to help her. I asked the children what the first number was and they all called out “one.” I then called on a child to explain what a one looks like to Shy Kitty. The child traced the number in the air and said, “A one is just a straight stick.” Shy Kitty then took a marker and printed a one on the paper. A few students said, “Good job.” I went through the same

procedure for the second and third numbers. The guest teacher noted that during this time only one student was off task.

By the end of calendar time, it was apparent that the puppet had lost its appeal. The students were no longer worried about how loud they were or whether Shy Kitty crept behind my back, so I put her away. Through this experience, I realized that puppets can be effective attention getters; however, they can lose their value quickly. If I were to use puppets again for the purpose of engaging students in a lesson, I would only use them every once in a while so that they do not lose their value and I would vary the puppets I use so that the students do not tire of any one puppet.

Week Four: Implementing Strategy #3

The third strategy I tried for improving whole group instruction in my classroom was giving each child an individual calendar to fill in during calendar time. The idea came from one of the little girls in my class. The logistics of implementing this strategy proved to be troublesome from the start. At first, my mentor and I tried handing out the calendars one by one. This took a really long time, and as a result, the students began to get chatty and fidgety. In my data, I noticed that during this transition time there were four to twelve students off task. I brainstormed ideas for new ways to hand out and collect the calendars. I eventually decided to try a timed transition. One day I placed the calendars in the students' cubbies and explained that they would have the duration of a song to quickly and quietly get up, get their calendars and a pencil, and sit back down on the carpet. Once the students got over the initial excitement of the new strategy, it became a quick and effective way to transition. In my data, I noticed that before, during, and after the timed transition there were zero to three students off task.

To help the students get acquainted with their calendars each day, I would ask them to point to the month, the year, and each day of the week. To keep it interesting, we sometimes sang the “Days of the Week” song as we pointed. After the review, I would ask the students to point to the box where the day’s date would go and call out the number. Next, I would have the students look up front as I showed them how to print the number in a quick printing lesson. I would then ask the students to print the number on their calendars. Finally, to give the students a little challenge, I would ask them to point to the box where we would have school next, where we would have a party, or when we would have a certain special subject.

In addition to the logistical problems, this strategy also created some management problems. For instance, once the students had a calendar and pencil in front of them, it was difficult to get them to look up and follow along. My supervisor, mentor, and I all noticed that the students frequently filled in the number before the mini printing lesson, drew all over their calendars, or banged on their calendars with their pencils. On average, there were three to five students off task during this time. I tried asking the students to place their calendars on their laps and pencils on the ground once they got back to the carpet, but the temptation to print, draw, and tap their pencils was often too great for them.

The one thing that worked really well for me was asking the students to point to the box where we would have school next, where we would have a party, when we would have a certain special, etc. I think that this was effective because I was able to choose something different each day. I believe that this strategy of individual calendars is good in theory, but difficult in practice. I plan to continue allowing the students to fill in their individual calendars, but hope to fine-tune the process to make it more practical for me as the teacher and more beneficial for my students.

Week Five: Post-Interviews

During the last week of my inquiry, I conducted post-interviews with my students. The format for the interview was similar to the pre-interview. I called each child over and explained that I wanted to ask him or her a few questions about how he or she feels whole group instruction has changed. Once I explained the purpose of the interview, I began asking questions. First, I described the three strategies my mentor and I implemented: incorporating more opportunities for movement and choral responses, using puppets, and giving each student an individual calendar to fill in during calendar time. I asked the students to listen carefully as I described the strategies, to try to recall them, and then to rank them 1,2, or 3, with 1 being the strategy that made whole group instruction most interesting and engaging and 3 being the strategy that made whole group instruction least interesting and engaging. I also asked the students to explain why they ranked the strategies as they did. Once I collected all of my data, I planned to use it to find out the type of strategy that made whole group instruction most interesting and engaging for my students.

The first strategy I described was incorporating more opportunities for movement and choral responses. I reminded the students of two ways that I incorporated more movement: performing a movement for each day we added to the calendar (ex: fifteen hops on the fifteenth) and using movements to represent the pattern on the calendar. I then reminded the students of two ways that I incorporated more choral responses: asking all students to call out answers during calendar instead of having the calendar buddy call on one student and having all students sing calendar-related songs.

Five students rated this strategy as a 1, five students rated it a 2, and the remaining ten students rated it a 3. The students who rated this strategy as a 1 explained that they liked moving

around because it was fun, it gave them a break from sitting, and they sometimes got to pick their own spot on the carpet. One girl explained that she liked calling out because it “felt more fun.” The students who rated this strategy as a 2 explained that moving around was really fun, that they liked being able to stretch, and that they liked being able to call out. The students who rated it as a 3 said that they liked it, but not as much as the other two strategies. Some of the students complained that people got too noisy and silly during movement and choral response activities.

I was surprised that my students rated incorporating movement and choral responses as their least favorite strategy because, from my perspective, it was the most effective strategy. I expected the students to rate this strategy higher because it increased their participation and decreased the number of students off task. I figured that because it increased their level of participation, that they would have found it to be fun and interesting. It seems that the students and I rated this strategy from different perspectives. I rated the strategy high because I felt it was most effective; my students rated the strategy low because they did not find as fun or interesting as the other strategies.

The second strategy I described was using a puppet. I reminded the students of the time Shy Kitty came to visit during calendar time. I expected the students to rate this strategy as a 2 or 3 because it did not seem to spark much participation or interest. To my surprise, five students rated it a 1, ten students rated it a 2, and five students rated it a 3, making it my students’ second favorite strategy. The students who rated it a 1 explained that they liked helping Shy Kitty, that they liked it because I (the teacher) was very silly, that it was fun because they did not have to just sit and listen, and that it made calendar more interesting. The students who rated it a 2 said that they liked it because Shy Kitty is cute, because they liked helping Shy Kitty, because everyone had to be quiet, and because it was fun to listen. One of the students rated it as a 3

because he “knows Shy Kitty is just a puppet.” Another student mentioned that he did not like it because he did not get to call out. The other students said that they liked it, but not as much as the other strategies.

The third and final strategy I described was giving each student his or her own calendar to fill in. I expected the students to rate it a 2 or 3 because many students were off task or distracted when I was teaching with the individual calendars. As it turns out, ten students rated it a 1, five students rated it a 2, and five students rated it a 3, making it their most favorite strategy. Thus, the students felt that this strategy was the most effective in making whole group instruction more interesting and engaging. The students who rated it a 1 explained that they liked having their own calendars because everyone had something to do, that it was fun, and that it helped them to write their numbers better. The students who rated it a 2 explained that they liked it because they had something to do when they were not calendar buddy, they liked writing the numbers, and that it helped them with counting. Two of the students who rated it a 3 said that it was boring because they already know how to print numbers and that they had to wait too long to print the numbers. The other students said that they liked it.

Before I concluded the interviews, I asked the students to share any other things that I tried that they liked or disliked, any other ideas for making whole group instruction more interesting, and any new ideas for how to help their classmates be good listeners. Some of the things that the students really liked were moving around more, singing the “Days of the Week” song with the snaps, Shy Kitty, being able to choose their own spot on the carpet, whispering to buddies, giving clues for the magic hat number, making the pond in the classroom, being able to call out, and switching the poem time from calendar to before lunch. Some of the things my students did not like were Shy Kitty, calling out because it was too noisy, sitting for a long time,

and waiting to print the numbers on the calendar. When I went through my post interview scripts and analyzed them, I found that thirty-three percent of the things my students said were fun or that they liked were kinesthetic, twenty-nine percent were visual, fourteen percent were verbal, and fourteen percent were auditory. This seemed to match the data I collected in the pre-interviews when my students' responses indicated that they preferred the visual and kinesthetic lessons over the auditory lesson.

Some of the suggestions my students had for making carpet time more interesting included allowing the students to write the date on the cards we place on the large calendar, giving students a weather graph to fill in, and dancing more. Again, these suggestions were largely kinesthetic. Some of the ideas my students had for ways to help their classmates be better listeners included reminding buddies to be quiet by holding a finger over your mouth and saying "Shhh," telling friends not to call out or touch others, saying "Stop" and giving I-messages when a neighbor is bothering you, and choosing not to sit near a buddy you know you will want to talk to.

My Findings

Claims about Student Motivation and Whole Group Instruction

My inquiry project has led me to form three key claims about student motivation and whole group instruction. My first claim is that the most effective and engaging lessons appeal to two or more different learning styles. My second claim is that individual participation and accountability, even in whole group lessons, are essential elements of instruction. My third claim is that students who are actively involved in classroom decisions are much more invested in their learning.

Claim #1: The most effective and engaging lessons appealed to two or more different learning styles.

One pattern I noticed in my data is that the lessons that my students found most interesting and engaging were lessons that appealed to two or more learning styles. Support for this claim can be found in the reasons my students gave for liking a particular lesson in their post-interviews. For instance, one student said that he liked when Shy Kitty came because when she talked it was fun to listen. Thus, the auditory aspect of this lesson engaged this student. Another student said that she liked when Shy Kitty came because she did not just have to sit and listen, she had something to look at. For this student, the visual aspect of the lesson helped her to pay better attention. Yet another student said that she liked when Shy Kitty came because she liked telling her how to write numbers. For this student, the opportunity for verbal responses maintained her interest in the lesson. This lesson was engaging for a greater percentage of my class because it appealed to three different learning styles.

According to Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, everyone possesses eight intelligences, including: verbal-linguistic, mathematical-logical, musical, visual-spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic. Each person possesses all eight intelligences in varying amounts, with some intelligences being more dominant than others. Teachers with knowledge of Gardner's theory are able to engage a greater percentage of students by varying instructional methods to address multiple types of intelligences. According to a University of California, Riverside brochure on multiple intelligences, "Students become actively engaged in learning and their academic performance improves when teaching is directed to one or more of their dominant intelligences" (n.d.).

Additional support for my claim can be found in a study conducted by Carolyn Vallarta. In her report entitled “Increasing the Amount of Time on Task for Kindergarten Students through the Use of Learning Styles,” Vallarta describes a program she designed to increase the amount engaged learning time for a targeted group of kindergarten students. She discovered that by incorporating the primary learning styles of the targeted students into her instruction, their engaged learning time increased by twenty percent (1991). My data, Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences, and Vallarta’s program all provide support for my claim that the most effective and engaging lessons appeal to two or more different learning styles.

Claim #2: Individual participation and accountability, even in whole group lessons, are essential elements of instruction.

Another pattern I noticed in my data is that when I provided opportunities for all students to participate, there were fewer students off task. To illustrate this point, I will provide a few examples from my observation notes. On April 2, during calendar time I asked the calendar buddy to find the date on the large class calendar. While the calendar buddy was doing that, I asked the rest of the students to find the date on their individual calendars. My mentor teacher observed that all students were actively engaged during this part of the lesson. On April 7, during a whole group science lesson on insulators and conductors, I asked each child to make a prediction about whether he or she thought a material would feel cool or warm against the skin. I allowed each child to share his or her prediction by voting using different hand signals. My supervisor noted that the students were all actively engaged and on task for the duration of the ten minute lesson. Also, on April 15, during calendar time, I asked the class to figure out the number of days in school, whisper it to a neighbor, and then call it out all together. I think of this strategy as the kindergarten version of think-pair-share. My supervisor observed that this strategy worked really well and mentioned that it generated high participation.

I think that it is important for all students to have the chance to individually participate in whole group lessons. In their book *Active Learning: Creating Excitement in the Classroom*, Bonwell and Eison assert that when students are actively engaged in learning, they "...are involved in more than listening" and "...engaged in activities" (1991, p. 2). I feel that the anecdotes above provide evidence of active learning in my classroom. My students were involved in more than listening as they engaged in finding the date on their individual calendars, making predictions using hand signals, and participating in think-pair share activities.

I also noticed that when I held each student accountable for taking responsibility for his or her learning, there were fewer students off task. I found an example of this in my observation notes. On April 15, after showing my students how to print the number 15 during calendar, I asked them to print the number in the appropriate box and give me a thumbs up sign when they were done. Many students put their thumbs up right away; however, I waited for each child to put a thumb up before I moved on. The students know that during calendar I do not always have the time to walk around and check that each child has printed the number correctly on his or her calendar. They are, however, aware that I expect them to complete the task, and that I do spot checks on the carpet or after school on occasion to make sure that they printed the number correctly, in the right box, and did not work ahead. By waiting for each student to give me a thumbs up, I held each student accountable for completing the task and made each student take responsibility for his or her own learning.

I feel that holding students accountable for their learning a very important part of teaching. When students take responsibility for their own learning, they are more likely to engage in the lessons, and therefore, less likely to be off task. In the online article, "Indicator: Engaging Learning Environments," the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory notes

that engaged learners “self regulate, taking charge of and investing themselves in their learning” (n.d.). When learners take charge of and invest themselves in their learning, they are not likely to be off task.

Claim #3: Students who are actively involved in classroom decisions are much more invested in their learning.

Children are motivated to learn about things that interest and intrigue them. If teachers actively involve students in decisions about what content to teach or how to teach it, the students will show greater interest in learning the content. I saw evidence of this in my inquiry. During the pre-interviews, I got a good indication of what kinds of activities my students find interesting and what kinds of activities my students find dull or uninteresting. My students’ suggestions for ways to improve whole group instruction were also valuable to me. They provided me with additional insight into the kinds of instructional strategies and techniques my students enjoy. Using this information, I was able to choose three new strategies to try during whole group instruction.

Because the students played a role in choosing the three new strategies to try, I feel that they tried harder to make the strategies work. For example, as I mentioned earlier, the individual calendars they suggested provided logistical problems from the start. My students were patient though, and with very little complaining, went with the flow as my mentor and I changed the way we distributed the calendars and the way that we used them a few times. Also, during the post-interviews, many students rated incorporating movement and choral responses as a 2 or 3 because other students thought it was a time to talk and/or act silly. The students explained that they liked the strategy, but did not think that it helped them to pay attention better. I thought that this was an interesting finding because my students seemed to be able to step outside of their

normal line of thinking for a few minutes to think about which strategy was most effective in keeping their attention, rather than which one was the most fun. I feel that my students' desire to give me honest feedback about the strategies I implemented shows their heightened investment in their own learning.

Academic choice is one of six teaching strategies advocated by the Responsive Classroom. In her article "The Responsive Classroom: A Practical Approach for Bringing Democratic Ideals into the Daily Fabric of Classroom Life," Belinda Gimbert asserts that academic choice is "an approach to giving the children choices in their learning that helps them become invested, self-motivated learners" (2002). My inquiry helped me to see that, "Encouraging and permitting children to make real choices fosters interest and engagement" (National Association for the Education of Young People, 1990).

Conclusions and Future Directions

Conclusions

Throughout the course of my inquiry, I have learned many valuable lessons. First, my inquiry project has taught me the value of conversations with colleagues. One thing that I have tried to do this year is establish clear rules and expectations and implement a consistent, predictable behavior management protocol. As a beginning teacher, this has been a great challenge for me. During my inquiry project, I realized that some of the problems with creating effective whole group lessons involved the need for more effective behavior management. Therefore, near the end of my inquiry project, I approached a colleague to discuss my struggles. She was very encouraging and shared some helpful ideas, such as the cork board. The cork board is a behavior management tool. On one side of the board, there is a list of all of the

students in my class with four different colored push pins next to each name. On the other side of the board there is a list of a six “good manners” rules that my students and I collaborated to establish. The rules we set are: keep your hands and other body parts to yourself, raise your hand, sit criss-cross, say kind things, be a good listener, and share “serious” answers. Using the cork board involves the following series of consequences. If a student is breaking one of the good manners rules, the teacher will pull the first, or blue, pin as a warning. The second time the teacher has to talk to a student, he or she pulls the student’s second, or green, pin and the student loses five minutes of recess. The third time the teacher needs to talk to a student, the teacher pulls the third, or purple, pin and the student loses 10 minutes of recess. If the teacher has to talk to the student a fourth time, he or she pulls the student’s fourth, or pink, pin and calls the student’s parents or sets up a parent-teacher-student conference.

This strategy has worked very well in my classroom thus far. The students think that it is fair because they helped to establish the good manners rules. I also get the sense that the students feel some sense of accountability for managing their behavior. For example, I have noticed a few students telling others to stop touching them or talking to them because they are breaking a good manners rule. I am interested to see if the cork board will continue to be so effective over time.

One student mentioned the cork board during his post-interview even though it was not one of the three strategies my inquiry focused on. He said that he thought the cork board was a good idea, but that he did not think that there should be a warning pin. He explained, “I think there should be no warning pin because that’s going to tell people that you better be good because you’ll get five minutes right away.” He went on to say, “They [the other students] don’t care if they get a warning. I don’t care if I do something bad because I know that I’ll just get a

warning.” He was right. I did notice that for a select group of students in my class, a warning meant nothing. On the other hand, I noticed one young girl get very upset when I pulled her blue warning pin. I personally feel that the warning pin is necessary. Although it means nothing to some children, it means a lot to others. For some students, a warning is all they need to know that they need to start behaving. For other students, it will take losing their second and third pins to realize that they need to start behaving.

I feel that the cork board is much more effective than simply saying, “Johnny, this is your warning.” I think that it is important for the students to see that they have had their warning, for instance, and have the visual cue that the next step involves losing five minutes of recess. I also think that the cork board helps me as a teacher to more consistently and fairly enforce my behavior management protocol. I noticed that before I had the cork board, I could not remember which students had received warnings. Having the cork board as a visual has definitely helped me. The final thing I like about the cork board is that the students know what is expected of them. Each student helped to come up with the good manners rules and, therefore, knows what I am looking for when I do “good manners” checks. My positive experience implementing the cork board strategy suggested by a colleague illustrates the importance of collegiality and shared problem solving.

Second, I have realized that each day I, in a sense, walk into a different classroom. Each day my students and I have different dispositions, new situations arise, unpredictable events occur, teachable moments surface, etc. Each day I need to adjust my teaching style and schedule to accommodate these circumstances. I have also learned that no strategy, method, or intervention will always be successful; therefore, I need to continually search for new ways to teach, manage my classroom, and interact with students.

Finally, my inquiry project has helped me to see the value of having an inquiry-oriented approach to teaching. This project allowed me to take a closer look at one aspect of my teaching, whole group instruction. By critically examining my teaching practices and finding out what strategies my students find most engaging, I was able to adjust my teaching to better meet their needs and incorporate their interests. I feel that the project has been valuable and that whole group instruction in my classroom has improved as a result. I would like to conclude my inquiry paper with a quote from A.W. Astin, as referenced in Austin and Mescia, that I feel sums up my claims well. He says, “Active learning accommodates a variety of learning styles, promotes student achievement, enhances learner motivation, changes student attitudes, and basically, causes learners to learn more” (2001).

What Next?

I plan to carry out my inquiry for the remainder of the school year and continue it next year in my future classroom. I hope to continue experimenting with new strategies for improving whole group instruction and research and test ways to increase student motivation to learn. I also hope to look into some of my new wonderings, including:

- Would the strategies I tried in my classroom be as effective in another kindergarten classroom?
- Would the strategies I tried in my classroom be effective at another grade level?
- How can I better incorporate multiple intelligences into my classroom?
- Is it possible to integrate “fun” or “interesting” activities into tedious or repetitive tasks?
- Does interviewing students produce better results because students feel that they played an active role in determining the activities in class?

The process I used for my PDS inquiry project is one that I will continue to use to improve upon my professional practice. The inquiry process itself gave me an important future direction, and although my focus may change based on future challenges, I feel that the process will help me grow as a teacher.

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