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Inquiry Project Reflection
4/18/2008

Inquiry Project Final Reflection
Student Participation in Whole Class Discussions

In order to put our plan into effect, we started by having our students sit around

the room during our literacy instruction period and create a story together. Our activity

consisted of having students sit around the room in a large circle, facing one another. We

then told the students that as a group we were going to create a descriptive story about

school. We started the story with a sentence. Then, the student sitting to the left of the

teacher had to build on our sentence with a new sentence that made sense with the one we

made. The sentences were recorded by our CT's typing them in the back as we made

them. As we went around the room, students were patient, listening to one another, and

building on one another's ideas. This set a framework for what we wanted to accomplish

for our inquiry goal. After we made our story, the teachers read the entire story back to

the class in which they drew a picture to go along with their story. After the assignment

was over, we had a large group discussion about our inquiry assignment.

We were able to use the activity as an example of what we wanted to accomplish

in our classroom so that we could learn from one another in a more meaningful way. We

discussed the problem that we have been having, students not listening to each other,

being disrespectful, etc. and we asked students to think of a time when they felt

disrespected or stupid because of something a classmate said that hurt their feelings. We

explained that when you feel discouraged, you are less likely to take risks in your

learning and that goes against everything we believe in. After this discussion, we then

reflected on the activity we did by making the story as a group. We explained to the students that this was a model for how we wanted our learning to go all the time. Then, as a whole group we created a list of expectations in order to have discussions like the activity we did together as a whole class. We were able to discuss how people built off of each others ideas in order to further the story, or their own thinking. This was a great way to get students thinking about how they should treat one another and their ideas in class. After creating our list of what a good conversation looked like, everyone in the class signed it to say they would follow them. This sign was then hung up in the classroom so that we could refer back to it throughout our learning experience.

After we set the foundation for what a good conversation would look like, we were then able to start to try to enact our plan together as a whole class. We tried to enforce our plan throughout the whole day, not just science. At first, students had a hard time blurting answers out, making fun of classmates, and being disrespectful. We continually had to remind students of the contract they signed. This reminder was not enough. It was then that we decided to create a new system in which we called "Caught contributing". When we caught students making a good contribution, listening to other classmates, building on their ideas, and/or being respectful of one another's ideas, we put their name in a jar. At the end of everyday, we drew a name out of the jar. The person we picked from the jar had a chance to pick a prize out of our prize box. We realized that our students were so use to being rewarded with things that they were not simply motivated by their contract, they needed something more. After we began to implement this new reward system, we started to notice students starting to really try to listen to one another

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so that they could build on and be respectful of other's ideas. This was when we started to see a difference in our teaching and learning.

Throughout the semester, we tried so hard to get the students to follow the guidelines of good conversations. We noticed some improvement when we added the reward system because students wanted to get their name in the jar. Although they were trying to get their name in the jar, students were honestly listening to one another, building on their ideas, and being respectful of their classmates. Students often reminded us to put their names in the jar for good conversations. Then, students started recommending each other to be put in jar because of their contributions. This is when we started to notice a change in student behavior. Students stopped focusing on getting into the jar and more so on building on each other's ideas while staying respectful. This was specifically noticed while we were researching our hypotheses for our science question, what causes drastic changes in temperature.

While we were researching this overarching question, students worked together to form a hypothesis, research, and come to a conclusion based on the evidence from their research. While informally assessing the students as we observed their team conversations, we noticed that students were sharing their findings with one another and getting really excited about what they were finding. We often heard students sharing ideas and saying things like, "yeah! I was thinking the same thing." Or " That is a really great idea. What about this though…." Etc. Students were excited to hear what their classmates had to say.

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One of the most ground breaking experiences we had was when we were having a whole group conversation. We were testing our hypothesis about wind and if it made the temperature change. After pairs researched their data, we held a whole group conversation in which we discussed if wind changed the temperature. Students gave their ideas and supported it with reasoning. In the meantime, students were listening to each other and building on ideas. This was prevalent when one student said, " after we gathered our data, we realized that wind doesn't affect temperature." Another student added, "yeah, it doesn't matter because there was a lot of wind when it was warm and a lot of wind when it was cold." Other students then commented on this idea giving specific dates and wind direction/speed for the days in order to support their data. After students came to the conclusion together that wind doesn't affect temperature, another pair of students interjected their idea. "We agree that wind doesn't affect temperature, but there are different types of air." This building of comments was exactly what we were aiming for. This constructing of knowledge helped us to lead into the real reason temperature changes, air masses/fronts. As we moved into the idea of air masses/fronts, students were able to truly understand these abstract concepts because they were constructing their own knowledge together in order to make their learning more meaningful. It was so exciting to see our students building on one another's ideas to help each other understand concepts and to learn from each other.

Overall, our students' quality of conversation greatly improved from the beginning to the end of our inquiry project. The students are now listening to, building on, and respecting each others ideas without talking back and being disrespectful.

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However, there are a few things we would still like to work on to improve our students'

conversations. As we walked around observing the team conversations, we noticed there

were a few shy students who were not as engaged and participating as much as we would

like. We would like to come up with a plan to help these students feel more confident or

motivated to become an active member in their group. While the students did a very nice

job building on each others ideas in small groups, they still had some trouble with whole

group discussions. We still need to work with our students on turning to their classmates

for ideas rather than always relying on the teacher to guide the conversation. Student are

so used to whole group discussions being led by their teachers that it is understandable

students have difficulty with this situation. We need to help the students understand that

the only difference between a whole group discussion and a small group discussion is that

more people are involved. We both need to work on taking a step back to let the students

build off each other's ideas. In summary, we learned how important it is and how long it

takes to train your students to listen to, build on, and respect each others ideas. As a

result, it is essential to establish these discussions norms from the very beginning of the

school year, in order to have engaging, rich discussions throughout the entire year.