**Laura Prosser’s Joint Inquiry Project**

**Introduce Question and Sub-question:**

My inquiry question is: “I wonder if students understand my directions?” My sub-questions include:

* Are my instructions clear and understandable?
* After directions were given, were the students working on the task?
* Is student’s behavior impacted by a lack of understanding the directions?

**Context of the Inquiry:**

I initiated this inquiry because during my observations of my co-teacher, I was having a hard time understanding his directions. He would release the students to independent work, and I didn’t really understand what he wanted them to do. As I observed and assisted the students, I noticed very few were on task. They tried not to draw attention to themselves, but they were not doing what he had asked. Some students would ask me what they were supposed to be doing, and I would have to ask the teacher to clarify before assisting the student. So, from my experience of trying to assist students following instructions I didn’t understand, I thought it would be a good inquiry to investigate “do students understand my directions?”

If you had asked me going into this inquiry “Do you think you give clear directions?” I would have answered: “I’m extremely good at giving directions!” It’s been eye-opening to learn that giving clear directions is not as easy as it sounds. I assumed, I will give my clear directions, the students will understand, and we can sail through the lessons. What I have learned from this inquiry, is that “clear” is a relative term. What is clear to me is not always clear to another. Each individual student has to run my instruction protocol through their filter of understanding, and that can create misunderstandings. On the great side, “giving clear directions” is a skill that can be learned and perfected if you know (and are willing) to work on it!

My practicum classroom is an eighth grade a middle school classroom, in North Salem. The school is located in substantially low socio-economic area. I am in an eighth grade classroom. In my class the students perform:

* 11% above grade level
* 20% at grade level
* 37% below grade level
* 32% significantly below grade level

The reasons 68% are below grade level vary, by student. The issues include: lack of interest, difficulty meeting basic needs interfering with the learning process, varying levels of language acquisition dysfunction, learning or emotional disability, and lack of attendance. Based on this context, it could be a challenge getting students to participate in the instruction following process.

**Data Collection Types and Processes.**

My plan of action in initiating the inquiry is to give explicit instruction. Having reviewed the literature on giving instructions, I learned the following (Jones, 2013) are important attributes:

1. Explicit Verbal Instructions
2. Provide Written Instructions with Verbal Instructions
3. Paraphrase Instructions
4. Ask students to paraphrase
5. Ask students if there are any questions?
6. Provide Wait time (Lemov, 2010)

My co-teacher and I went over these steps and how to implement them. We discussed “Wait Time” and the importance of providing students time to think after instructions are given. In Teaching Like a Champion the author describes wait time as “…delaying a few strategic seconds after you finish asking a question and before you ask student to begin answering it.” “The answers you can expect to get after less than a second’s reflection are unlikely to be… the most developed a student can generate” (Lemov 2010.)

I chose four data collection methods (Falk, B. and Blumenreich, M.) First, I wanted feedback on “is my instruction delivery understandable?” I needed an objective source to help me gain insight on the clarity of my instruction. My co-teacher agreed to create selective verbatim observation notes of my instruction delivery. I asked him to observe students to see if it appears to him they understand or do not understand my directions. He took observations notes on day one (November 18), day three (November 20), day six (December 2) and day nine (December 5.)

Second, to explore and answer the sub-question “after directions were given, were the students working on the task?” My co-teacher agreed to track on-task behavior of the students post instruction delivery using a coding system linked to the seating chart to determine if the students were initiating work. These observations were conducted immediately after instructions were delivered, on day one (November 18), day four (November 21), and day 6 (December 6.) The supposition is if they are on-task after instruction they understood the directions.

Third, I wanted to find out from the students what would help them understand the instructions better. I wanted to check in with them to see if my instructions are clear to them, or not. To determine if the students had ideas on improving directions, I asked an open-ended survey question of them. I asked the students to answer anonymously a response to: “What could the teacher do to help me understand directions better?” This survey was conducted on day 5 (November 22.)

Fourth, I took field notes daily and reflected in a personal journal on my impressions of my instruction delivery on day one (November 18), day two (November 19) and day 4 (November 20.) I wanted to check-in through reflection to ascertain if the students are understanding my instructions or not, and if I see behavior issues as a result of students’ being off-task.

I analyzed my data and was surprised by some of the results. From my first data source, my co-teachers observations and opinions evaluating “if my directions are clear and understandable,” I learned a great deal. He liked that all of my instructions were delivered orally and in writing. He felt that helped, but thought initially my pacing in delivering them was too fast. He also reinforced the necessity of “Wait time.” Twenty seconds of wait time is considered adequate. He noticed I waited approximately 5 seconds and felt I needed to wait twenty seconds. I agreed on both points. I felt rushed because I had a rigorous agenda I wanted to shepherd the students through, so I sped through the directions. In my rush, the progress ground to a “halt” because the students didn’t understand what to do. I learned it’s harder to give clear direction than I thought.

I learned from the on-task behavior data collections that early-on the students appeared to be on-task. On the first observation 88% of the students were on task. I was surprised that I didn’t have a greater issues with classroom management. From there, the on-task evaluations took a dip. Day four I had 82% on task and on day six only 77%. At first blush from that data, it may appear my directions were getting less effective. But that was not the case. I was improving my protocol and delivery each day. There were additional contributory factors that may have impacted the decline. I had exceptional initial buy-in of my authority, but as time went on there was a progressive level of “testing” of this new teacher. They determined that I was not as strict as their regular teacher; they wanted to see just how “loose” I would go. It took me a couple days to catch on and only one day to correct. On Day 7, I reigned in the class to my acceptable expectations firmly but with no anger. After that, I had a much better behaved classroom. By that time, all on-task evaluations were completed. My co-teacher agreed with me that the classroom was significantly more on task as time progressed.

Where I learned the most about if the students understood my directions, was from the students’ themselves. On my data source that they anonymously answer “What could the teacher do to help me understand directions better?” The responses amazed me! I was able to learn from them, if they were understanding me or not. I have to say before reading their responses, I would have said I was performing pretty well at being clear. However, I learned I could do better. I categorized their responses by like responses. I found eight categories. Then, I collected total to create the percentage of students that had a similar request per category.

Here are the results:

* 28% - needed the directions clearer
* 17% - asked if I could “model” before asking them to do a task
* 13% - asked me to “slow down” giving directions
* 13% - wanted to work independently
* 6% - wanted individual assistance
* 6% - give instructions in steps
* 3% - wanted me to move from the screen so it was readable
* 17%- did not answer

I was amazed at the clarity of their response! I took it very seriously and immediately made changes to improve my instruction delivery. I slowed down, and spoke very distinctly to make directions clear. I changed my assumption from “no one is asking questions, so they must understand” to “I need to check for understanding.”

I had to learn how to “model instruction.” I talked with my co-teacher and he discussed gradual release of responsibility with me. We discussed the process of going from instructing with modeling, to shared responsibility, and then on to independent work. I learned that step-wise approach helps student shift to independent work more seamlessly.

I learned that I needed to provide superior differentiation. My subset of students that learn very quickly (the ones who requested to work independently) needed to work more independently breezing the material. I had separate lessons and a work area for them to “fly on” beyond us. I also identified the students (the ones that requested individual help) that needed additional differentiated scaffolding and provided individual support for those learners.

I wanted to double-check my instructions before I employed them in class. I gave my instructions to my husband, who does not know the material, and asked him “with those instructions what task would you do?” His answers helped me locate any steps missing in the directions (for the students that requested steps.)

**Conclusions:**

As I reviewed my reflections from journaling on my field notes, there appeared to be a couple of significant paradigm shifts in my thinking. The first paradigm shift in my thinking is that giving clear and understandable instructions to others is not as easy as it sounds. I have come to realize that my “abstract random” way of thinking is not the same way others think. I need to step outside myself and try to give each step of the instructions even if it feels like I’m over-explaining. I needed to really grapple with that concept, to appreciate that “clear to me,” is not “clear for others.”

The second major paradigm shift that occurred for me is the necessity of employing gradual release of responsibility. I started on the project with an understanding of the instructor instructing then the students doing what was instructed. That is an old way of educating. Today, releasing students gradually provides them background schema to understand the task before initiating it. I really didn’t get that…and now I understand its necessity, especially for students that require additionally scaffolding.

I finally learned the necessity of having established protocols. For instance, when I give a redirection to the class, what is my redirect statement? Where do I stand in the classroom when I ask for redirection? What is the consequence for not following my redirection? I did not have these protocols in place before starting my lessons so, they were literally evolving when needed. It’s hard for students to follow direction when the protocols are evolving.

**Future Plans:**

In the future, I need to use my classroom management plan and continue to refine it to make sure my protocols are in place prior to teaching. I need to have set protocols which would help me explain my expectations. The result of pre-established protocols would be improved students’ understanding. The results of improved understanding of my directions would be improved compliance. I feel I learned a great deal from this experience that giving clear instructions is extremely hard and omnipotent in developing understanding.

**References:**

1. Jones, V. and Jones, L., 2013, *Comprehensive Classroom Management*; Pearson Publishing.
2. Lemov, D., 2010; *Teach Like a Champion*; Uncommon Schools Publishing.
3. Falk, B. and Blumenreich, M.; *A Guide to Teacher and Student Research*; City College of New York Publishing, Page 91-113.