

Title of Action Research Project: Hocus Focus: Get Up and Get Learning!

Teacher Researcher: Jennifer O'Brien, Fourth Grade Teacher, Winthrop Elementary School

Contact Information: jobrien@melroseschools.com

Problem Statement:

The problem I face daily in my classroom is holding my students' attention and focus during whole group lesson times. I have found that with the increase in centers and small group learning over the past few years, my students have not built up the attention stamina to withstand a whole group lesson. While I understand the benefits of small group work and centers, I have noticed that this shift in the delivery of instruction makes whole group lesson time problematic. I have noticed an increase in the following behaviors in my students when transitioning to and during whole group lesson times: distractibility, noise, task avoidance, sleepiness, and fidgeting. These behaviors detract from time on task and affect the overall classroom climate during whole group lesson time.

So, it was with this Action Research class that I decided to see what could be done to improve my overall classroom climate during whole group lesson time. My goal with this project was to find ways to regain my students' attention and focus during whole group lesson time.

Literature Review:

Research suggests that incorporating physical movement into daily lessons and activities can have a positive affect on student learning (Dennison, 1986; Hannaford, 1995). Students learn best when instructional practices that include movement, songs, and stories are integrated into the curriculum (Reifman, 2013). With this validation, I began researching various ways to incorporate movement into my students' day. Would the incorporation of movement increase the attention and focus of my students during whole group lesson time?

Action Research:

My immediate thoughts when I began thinking about incorporating movement into my curriculum went to 'Brain Gym'. However, after more extensive searching I realized 'Brain Gym' was not just terminology, but pedagogy. I decided instead to research more informal ways to incorporate movement into the day. But even this was too broad of a scope. It led me to more questions: Did I want to be content specific? Did I want to think only about transition time? Was I interested in content-based movement games? Was I interested in incorporating movement into vocabulary? How about word and spelling chants? So, after a lot of soul-searching I decided I just wanted to focus on incorporating movement into the day. I decided not to limit myself to a specific program or method, but to implement movement into the day in a variety of ways both before and during whole group lesson times.

Data Collection and Analysis:

I began my data collection in early March. I created two questionnaires for my students to complete regarding challenges of whole group lesson time. The first required students to give a narrative response to three questions. The most telling information from this questionnaire came in response to the second question: What is the biggest distractor during whole group lesson time? Of the 22 students surveyed, 14 reported external noise to be the biggest problem. Noise as the biggest area of concern during whole group lesson times continued to be a prevalent response in the second student questionnaire. This one required students to identify the behavior reminders they hear me give most frequently during whole group lesson time. They were given a checklist of 9 behavior reminders to use when completing this task. The behaviors that received the most checks were all ones having to do with noise reminders. After the initial data was collected, it was apparent the classroom noise was the biggest challenge students faced when trying to focus during whole group lessons.

Next, I began to implement Brain Breaks (also referred to as Movement Breaks). The implementation lasted over a period of three weeks from March 23, 2015-April 10, 2015. I focused on incorporating movement breaks during transitions and before whole group lessons in mathematics, reading and writing a minimum of three times a week for the three-week duration. Students were introduced to movement using three specific approaches:

- Movement Sticks: A way to incorporate simple exercises such as chair squats or jogging in place for a period of 1-3 minutes.
- GoNoodle: A free online program that has movement breaks already created using dance and Zumba routines ranging from 1-15 minutes in length.
- Moving Vocabulary: This was the term we coined as a class for when we act out vocabulary. This approach was used across content areas.

Over the course of the three weeks we took time to establish behavior expectations for during and after Brain Breaks. We also established norms for moving safely in the classroom and in creating an environment where everyone felt secure to participate free of judgment from peers. After the three-week period was up, I resurveyed the students to get their thoughts on Brain Breaks. I again used a questionnaire that solicited narrative responses. All of the students surveyed reported in at least one of the three questions asked that they found Brain/ Movement Breaks helpful because they were able to get their energy out, and that they felt more focused after. In addition, many students reported that they found their classmates more focused, quiet and less distracting during whole group lesson times after participating in these breaks.

Taking Action:

I am definitely interested in continuing to implement Brain/ Movement Breaks into my daily schedule. I found them to be incredibly helpful in gaining the focus and attention of my students, and that they were also a good stress reliever. Although I don't have numerical data to show that these breaks contributed to higher test scores or a deeper understanding of concepts, I do have data to prove that the students enjoyed them; and that they found them to be a helpful part of their day.

Next year, I am interested in continuing with the three strategies previously mentioned, but am hoping to incorporate ideas from book, 'Rock It! Transform Classroom Learning with Movement, Songs and Stories' (Reifman, 2013). Unfortunately for this project, I discovered this resource after I had outlined my Action Steps. But, I have ordered the book and am looking forward to incorporating the strategies and ideas in it at the onset of the next school year.

Professional Reflection:

As an Action Researcher I learned a tremendous amount about myself! I learned that given the opportunity to explore areas of need in my classroom, I am never short for ideas. I had three potential questions to research before finally settling on this particular one. I was reminded through this process that I really enjoy learning and challenging myself. I also learned that I enjoy working in professional cohorts. I completed graduate school before I began teaching, so this was really my first experience as an adult learner/ classroom student. Participating in Action Research with my current class impacted my teaching because it forced me to look at my classroom, and my teaching with a critical eye.