

## INDEPENDENT INQUIRY: PLAY IN THE PRIMARY GRADES

Inquiry is a process of intellectual activity fundamental to all learning. Inquiry is born of play and at any age, from birth to maturity, play with materials, ideas, and relationships, nourishes inquiry and refines the ability to think with increasing complexity.

Children are compelled to play by a deep curiosity and need to explore and understand their world. This is the genesis of inquiry and remains so throughout life. Through play as inquiry, the learner strives to form new relationships between ideas and to synthesize these into an existing cognitive framework. For this reason, inquiry at its best is independent and self-generated.

Independent inquiry is a teaching strategy designed to provide opportunities for self-directed learning through play. It can be used with students at all grade levels, from grade one on. The role of the teacher in independent inquiry is create an environment for inquiry, to help the children articulate their questions and their learning, and make sense of their discoveries. The goal is not to tell them what to discover but to invite them to share and reflect on their experiences.

Why is independent inquiry important in school? Learning through play during independent inquiry will involve all of the essential skills needed for tomorrow's workplace. It is a forum for peer-supported learning, and it can accommodate children who are at varying levels of development. By being self-directed, each individual takes from the experience what she needs.

Inquiry engages children in the following:

- Asking and answering questions.
- Making observations, (verbally, in written form or pictorially).

- Using various skills, (comparing, sorting, classifying, predicting, interpreting, recognizing patterns, using and creating data, drawing conclusions, justifying, hypothesizing, etc.)
- Collaborating with others.
- Problem-solving by applying known strategies and using new ones.
- Using tools to gather information depending on the inquiry, (measuring devices, magnifying lenses, sorting systems, etc.)
- Recording or representing information, (through sketches, drawings, graphic organizers such as webs, labeled diagrams, writing, drama, movement, music, etc.)
- Planning, (thinking through where to begin, what is needed, choosing a direction, evaluating a process that did or didn't work).
- Using imagination.
- Developing personal skills, (perseverance, risk taking, independence, etc.)



## WHERE TO BEGIN?

To begin with, the focus should be on the process of learning. For the educator, this requires planning to ensure children learn what is expected from the curriculum, and at the same time, engage in self-directed learning.

Self-directed learning involves making decisions, based on such strategies as weighing options, listening to perspectives, having a rationale, etc. Educators need to provide guidance in this process as it cannot be assumed that children instinctively understand how to make good decisions. Also key for self-directed learning are social and inquiry skills. Some children will need more support and guidance than others as they experience a different way of working than one to which they may be accustomed.

For their part, educators must fine-tune their skills of observation and assessment. It is important for educators to refrain from bringing preset assumptions to their observations of a child at play which could influence their assessment.

As a starting point, it may helpful for educators to reflect on the following questions to determine a focus for their observations:

- What are the children interested in?
- What are they doing well?
- What are their understandings? What are their misconceptions?
- How do they use language?
- What is their use of vocabulary, particularly in relation to content areas?
- What do they do when faced with a problem? What problem-solving strategies are they using?
- How do they apply what they know?
- What connections are they making?
- What mathematical processes are they using?
- What inquiry skills do they use?
- How do children use higher level thinking skills?

The initial focus on process does not mean that content is ignored. By attending to the process, content can be dealt with in a meaningful context. Once the children are comfortable with the freedom to play and become engaged in projects of interest, content can be introduced, incidentally at times, and deliberately at other times.

