

INTRODUCING THE STUDENTS TO INDEPENDENT INQUIRY

- ▶ Prepare students through a whole class discussion on the purpose of independent inquiry.
- ▶ Set out several basic rules for participation in independent inquiry:
 - Must make your own choice of activity.
 - Need to respect others and share materials and space.
 - If there is a problem, need to try to solve it yourself.

(These can be revised after a few days with input from the children.)

Respect and child-initiated problem-solving should be standard practice in every classroom environment. Should these qualities not be prevalent, there may need to be an emphasis on modelling and providing extra support. Let children play, and have the freedom to choose what and with whom.

Children may continue to choose the same thing over and over. This occurs for a variety of reasons; they may be comfortable with this activity or material, they may have experienced success and want to repeat the experience, they may be overwhelmed by choices, or they don't know how to work with others, or they are unsure about what is available. In knowing the individual child, educators can determine when to provide guidance and when to invite the child to try something new that is out of their comfort range.

- ▶ Assess the outcome and make necessary adjustments:
 - Is there noticeable improvement in how the children interact with one another?
 - What are the most frequently selected activities?
 - What do the children do?

- What are they learning?
- What needs to be changed, (materials, routines, working areas, ...)?
- ▶ Things to Remember:
 - For the first few days to a week, the children will tend to sample the various activities before settling into something substantial. Some children may require more guidance, particularly if they have no confidence in themselves or have not had the opportunity to play or make choices. This is a time for the teacher to step back and observe what the children are doing with as little interference as possible. She may begin to collect observations in a journal for later assessment.

FACILITATING LEARNING THROUGH DEBRIEFING

Debriefing with the students following a period of exploratory play is one way of helping the players articulate what they are learning. This is of particular importance when the exploration involves science concepts. The debriefing of learning through play can be done spontaneously with an individual or small group while they are engaged in the activity or at a later time. The debriefing could take the form of a Think Pair Share where each child has the opportunity to talk to a partner. It can also be done with the whole class, as in the zoo example. For those who use the community circle, the focus might be on a new discovery or learning, with each child having a turn to share or pass if they wish. The debriefing provides valuable feedback for the educator as well as the children, and helps with planning. It also provides the opportunity for the teacher to direct play toward mandated topics, without interfering or controlling the activity.

In her book, *Serious Players in the Primary Classroom* (1990), Selma Wasserman, an

eminent Canadian educator, describes a process of learning through play as play-debrief-replay. Wasserman suggests that successful interaction during a debriefing begins with the skill of attending, which involves listening closely to what the student says about her discoveries.

- Make and hold eye contact.
- Listen to what is being said. Be naturally interested and show with your body language that you care about what the student is saying.
- Discern the tone and the nuances of expression.
- Avoid interrupting or commenting on the student's ideas.
- Avoid giving you own idea in response.
- Make it safe for the student to risk presenting her ideas.
- As you apprehend what the child is saying, begin to think about formulating a response that does not evaluate the student's idea.

There are three types of facilitative responses:

- paraphrasing the student's ideas;
- requiring the student to be analytical;
- challenging the investigator to dig deeper.

The first type of response is paraphrasing. This allows the teacher to listen carefully to what the student says without having to formulate a question. A paraphrase can be a concise telling back, or it can be interpretive, whereby the teacher interprets the student's response in a way that shifts focus and leads to a formulation of a big idea that the student would be unlikely to express independently. This intuitive response is quite sophisticated.

Responses that require students to analyze what they discovered prompts habit of the mind that teaches children:

- to take ownership for their ideas;
- to examine alternatives;
- to base arguments on data.

Children in the primary grades are not too young to begin this thoughtful process.



The third type of response is the one that challenges the student to think more deeply. In the primary division, this means making inferences from the data, explaining how the theory might work, and thinking about how to test the theory. The following chart provides terminology to generate this higher level thinking.

The teacher might prepare a "crib sheet" with several of these open-ended questions to get the debriefing rolling. These questions will ensure that the teacher is moving the students' thinking toward big ideas and new perspectives.

THINK ABOUT IT

How do you talk about play with your students? How does that support their learning?

Things to Remember about Implementing Independent Inquiry

- Establish a protected time each day for uninterrupted play. At first, the teacher will need to adjust the amount of time spent on the core subjects, but what occurs during

the independent inquiry integrates learning from all of the subject areas.

- There needs to be sufficient time for students to fully explore their ideas.
- There needs to be sufficient number of choices to allow every child the opportunity to pursue her interests and needs.
- Generally the ideas for what they do come from the children themselves. The activities should not simply be workbook-like tasks presented in a different format. Learning is focused through the selection of the materials. The teacher may want to present a specific challenge from time to time, but on the whole she does not suggest what will be done.
- Independent inquiry is not a time when the teacher can mark books, put up a bulletin board, or kick back and relax. The teacher should be busy observing, interacting, serving as play partner, assisting with problem-solving, and so on.
- If students have not had the opportunity to learn through play in school since kindergarten, or perhaps not even then, allow time for the students to sample the various activities and explore the materials. Generally, this should be a matter of days, but some individuals may take longer.

Thinking Skills	Sample Questions
Generating a basic hypothesis	<i>Why do you think ... ?</i>
Interpreting data	<i>What do you think ... means?</i>
Identifying criteria for making judgments	<i>How do you know ...?</i>
Applying principles to new situations	<i>What would happen if ...?</i>
Explaining how a theory may be tested	<i>What other ideas do you have for...?</i>
Creating new and imaginative plans	<i>How else could this be used?</i>