

BYRAM HILLS CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT  
ARMONK, NEW YORK

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SUMMARY OF *INVESTIGATORS OF PRACTICE* ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

**Context:**

As sixth grade special educators involved in *Investigators of Practice*, we have found that students have great difficulty sustaining attention during lessons and independent work time. We have tried many strategies over the years but wanted to explore best practices for helping our students improve attention. In addition, we want to teach children how to monitor their own attention span. We eventually intend to implement some of these best practices to see which ones are most beneficial to our population.

**Action Plan:**

Our research question led us to think outside of the box as we began to explore the best practices to improve the attention span of our students. Clearly, children's attention and class participation improve as the class structure and lessons are adjusted to meet the emotional needs or learning style of the child. Our action during this investigation would be to teach students to monitor their own attention span. In our quest for professional development we were fortunate to attend *Very Best Treatments for ADHD & Processing Disorders* facilitated by Susan Fralick-Ball, Psy.D., MSN. This seminar provided tools and strategies to better understand ADHD and other processing disorders. Our inquiries were also supported by the work of Jim Wright. Specifically, we examined his work, *Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder: A School-Based Evaluation Manual* (2002). Wright's website: Intervention Central ([www.interventioncentral.org](http://www.interventioncentral.org)) also provided a strong reference for our research.

It is important to note that Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a syndrome first appearing in early childhood that is characterized by abnormal levels of inattention, hyperactivity, or both (Barkley, 1990). Estimates of the prevalence of the disorder in the general childhood-age population run from 3 to 5% (APA, 1994; Barkley, 1990), suggesting that most classrooms may very well have at least one child with ADHD. It is our goal to study and implement the best practices to reach all children experiencing difficulty maintaining focus during the long school day.

In order to prepare for the data collection stage of investigation we created a Daily Behavior Report Card in addition to a well-defined off-task behavior checklist. These teacher

documentation tools recorded the frequency of observable behaviors of select students with special needs.

## **Results:**

Special education, by definition, is a setting that demands that an educator be reflective, effective, and efficient. *Investigators of Practice* allowed us to explore instructional choices and options to formulate meaningful objectives and deliver them effectively. Our foundational question has led us to conclude that sustaining attention is critically important to understand concepts in various disciplines. A variety of refocusing movement related techniques strengthened student attention. The traditional classroom should be continuously pressed to meet the changing needs of our population.

Our action research inquiry revealed that many students lose focus because they are unbearably restless when required to be still for any length of time. Teachers would benefit by recognizing the need for higher activity. Students should not suffer with a fidgety body when the ultimate goal is to open and clear the mind to provide a pathway for new information. In essence, movement activities are designed to engage students in their own learning. It is understood that the results of these findings should be used to make recommendations into appropriate teaching plans.

In an overview of ADHD and other processing disorders it was noted that ADHD often co-occurs with conduct, mood, anxiety, and learning disorders (Fralick-Ball, 2012). We reviewed these disorders and the types of problems that children with them exhibit. Diagnosis and communication with doctors, parents, teachers, and the student is of utmost importance. Several skills and strategies for children and adolescents that we found helpful are as follows:

- Self-talk to build self-esteem-internal monologue that has a positive influence upon the individual  
(I am attentive. I am confident. I can do it!)
- Movement-see Sensory Diet
- Identify the target behavior and select the self-monitoring system (chart, graph...)  
Behavior checklists and rating scales help report the student's behavior in a systematic manner. Students provide valuable insights into their own learning and are provided with tools that help them to reflect on their own learning.
- Choose a reinforcer or reward system
- Teach the child to use this system
- Gradually fade prompts and reinforcers

“Sensory Diet,” coined by OT Patricia Wilbarger, is a carefully designed personalized activity plan that provides the sensory input needed to remain focused and organized throughout the day. Some activities utilized are chair push-ups, leaning on upper extremities-wall push-ups, trampoline, jumping jacks, finger fidget activities, self-imposed body hugs, pencil grippers. (Adapted from *Sensory Diet Applications and Environmental Modifications: A Winning Combination*.) “Self-regulation is basic to emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence matters as much as IQ when it comes to success in school” (Logan, Synatschk, & Tollison, 2011).

**Implications:**

This action research has taught us the importance of self-regulation for our students to help them sustain attention. This self-regulation can be useful for all students, not just special education students. We have also found some important tools to help monitor attention through Jim Wright's website, [interventioncentral.org](http://interventioncentral.org). This year we worked at a foundational level by conducting research and reflecting on our learning. Next year, we hope to move to action-oriented research where we implement strategies and analyze student responses. We know that sustaining attention in the classroom is critical for our students. We would like to teach them how to be able to monitor their own attention as a life-long strategy.

Our new question is: How can I teach students to monitor their own attention span? We recommend continued action based research in this area to give our students the tools they need to be life-long learners.

Thank you for attending.