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# The Impact of Student Choice on Motivation for Struggling Readers to Complete Reading Activities

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by

Rachael Parlett

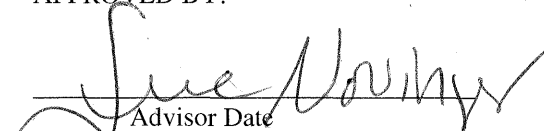
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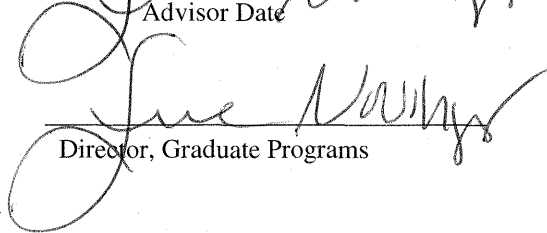
The Impact of Student Choice on Motivation  
for Fourth Grade Struggling Readers to Complete Reading Activities

by  
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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

It's 10:00 on a Monday morning in March. Students are spread throughout the room working on reading activities at different centers. At one center, a group of four students are at the listening center following along to a story that they read in their guided reading group. The story lasts about 12 minutes. Following the end of the story, the students quickly whip off their head phones and look in the listening center basket for the activity that they have been asked to do in response to the story; a character map of the main character. One student groans, obviously annoyed at what to him appears to be a boring activity. The other three just take out the character map and begin working. They most likely get right to work so that they will not have to take the rest home for homework. The groaning student pouts for a few minutes and also realizes that he would rather do it now than for homework and begrudgingly gets to work.

Across the room are three other students at the word work center. Here they are assigned an activity where they work with specific word chunks such as -ack, ick, and -ock. They are matching words to the correct chunk and pasting them onto a chart. The students are finishing the work, but are talking loudly about other topics concerning what happened on the bus that morning or the playground. It would seem to an outsider that the students aren't really concentrating on the words, but more so on their typical fourth grade conversation.

At the last center, the fluency center, students are reading poems about animals. The directions ask the students to work in partners reading the poems using a variety of expression voices. For example, the first time through, students are asked to read in a scary voice. The second time through, students are asked to read in an excited voice, and so on. The idea behind this center is to give students practice reading the same poem several times to increase their sight word vocabulary, to help with phrasing and to increase their reading rate. Students seem to be getting silly at this center with the different expression voices. They are more distracted by the reader's voice, that they are having a difficult time focusing on the poem itself.

At all three centers, students seem to be getting the work done, but it seems that they aren't really getting the point of the whole activity. Maybe it's because they have done these types of activities over and over so that they are growing tired of them. Maybe it's because they don't find them meaningful. Whatever it is, students do not seem motivated in a positive way to complete the activity. Aside from the fact that they would rather get it done in class than have to take it home for homework, there doesn't seem to be a lot of internal drive to complete the task for their own benefit.

I have found that student motivation in the classroom is key to academic success. There are mainly two types of motivation; intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation refers to the inner push to learn. Students with intrinsic motivation are goal-oriented and motivate themselves in their desire to learn. They have a thirst for knowledge that will make them into life-long learners. These students mostly likely have this inner drive because they have had positive learning experiences through which through which that they have found success in (Guthrie & Huei-Yu, 2004).

On the other hand, extrinsic motivation is a focus on the external factors that motivate the students. Students who are externally motivated are those who are looking for rewards and acknowledgment to be a reason for completing a task or assignment. These students are often harder to reach because many of them have not found very much success in their learning. Therefore, they are beginning to lose their belief that they can be successful. To motivate these students, often teachers have to appeal to their external interests, using rewards to make them want to complete the task (Guthrie & Huei-Yu, 2004). Finding these rewards can be challenging because mostly likely, their interests will quickly change when they grow tired of the same reward over and over. The real challenge that teachers should focus on should be finding how to create an inner drive for those students to help them find success and want to learn.

Furthermore, motivating struggling students poses another challenge in the classroom. Students who struggle in one or more areas in their academics are those who need to find success in their learning in order to be motivated to continue on (Baker & Dreher, 2003). In my own experiences in working in an urban school, I have tried a variety of ways to motivate students, often finding little success in doing so. One way that I have attempted to motivate students in the past using an external

reward is to invite students up for “Friday Fun Lunch.” If students have completed their work throughout the week, they are invited up for lunch on Fridays to play games and eat in a quieter atmosphere with their friends. However, some students don’t find this to be a good enough reward to do their work, therefore, they continue on in their habits of not completing work. Finding something that works for a long period of time has been a challenge that with which with which I have struggled with. Many times it seems that what was once a motivating factor for students has lost its appeal and I am left again looking for new ways to motivate my students. As a classroom teacher, I am always looking for ways that will sustain motivation in my students.

One area that many of my students struggle in is reading. My students can quickly fall behind if they are not exposed to rich literature that will grab their attention and hook them on reading. Many of the students in my classroom may not be exposed to this type of literature at home, therefore it is crucial that I provide exciting texts for them in the classroom. In addition, when reading becomes more of a chore, rather than an exploration of knowledge, there too, students may fall behind (Bowman, 2007). One way to instill motivation in children when it comes to reading, is to provide students with a variety of activities from which to choose (Guthrie, Wigfield, Humenick, Perencevich, Taboada, & Barbosa, 2006). Simply giving students a choice in their learning gives students a sense of pride, making them feel more in control of their learning, and hopefully results in an increase of motivation to learn (Fisher & Frey, 2008).

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to explore different forms of motivation and to look into the ways student choice has an impact as a motivational tool in the classroom, particularly for struggling readers. The study will look at one fourth-grade classroom during a reader’s workshop to see how student choice might motivate struggling readers to begin and sustain an activity. The study will investigate if and how giving students a choice will have an impact on their desire to learn.

### **Significance of Research**

It is important for teachers and others involved in a child’s education to know how to teach him/her in the most effective way. Part of doing that is to know what motivating tools can be used to

make the student successful. Without knowing how a student is best motivated, that student may be turned off to learning and could fall far below grade level as he/she progresses through school.

### **Research Question**

Throughout the study, the following question is to be addressed:

How does giving struggling readers a choice in literacy activities impact their motivation to read and participate in literacy activities?

### **Definitions**

Motivation: Motivation is the external or internal drive one feels to complete a task (Guthrie & Huei-Yu, 2004).

Extrinsic Motivation: Extrinsic motivation refers to the external factors that might contribute to a child wanting to learn. The motivation is based on external values and demands as well as rewards that will come as a result to completing a task (Wang & Guthrie, 2004).

Intrinsic Motivation: Intrinsic motivation can be defined as the inner drive that students feel to succeed by challenging themselves (Guthrie & Wang, 2004).

Student Choice – Student choice is allowing students to have some say in their learning process. This may include letting them choose a particular topic they would like to study, allowing them to choose from a list of activities, or allowing them to choose what other students they would like to work with (Bowman, 2007; Fisher & Frey, 2008; Guthrie et al., 2006).

### **Study Approach**

The following study is primarily a qualitative study that focuses on struggling readers and ways to motivate them through student choice. The study will take place in a fourth-grade classroom with an in depth look at four focus students during reader's workshop. The use of surveys, interviews and observations will help me to explore possible connections between student choice and motivation. I have chosen to use these methods of research to gather data in a variety of ways. To start off, I will be looking for how the conversations I have during my interviews with my focus students will line up with how motivated they seem to be during the reading activity times. Also, I will be looking at the observation notes that I will be taking and comparing them over time to see how behaviors change, if



at all, based on the choices that they will be given. I am hoping to see trends and patterns that will lead me to a conclusion about student choice and its impact of motivation.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

Motivation is crucial to a student's success in education. A child must see the value in a task in order for that child to truly invest his/her effort and time to complete the task correctly and to be motivated to further seek his/her own understanding. Much research has been done regarding different kinds of motivation and how it affects students in the classroom. This literature review is divided into four focused parts. First, there will be a discussion of the two main types of motivation. In this portion, the definitions and the implications of each type of motivation will be addressed. Secondly, there will be a section devoted to looking at the role of motivation on reading comprehension and the student's engagement in an activity. Following, a section will be devoted to discussing how giving students a choice in their learning can play a large role in motivation. The literature review will conclude with a section addressing motivation needs specifically of struggling readers.

#### **Types of Motivation**

Researchers conclude that there are two main types of motivation; intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. Both types play a role in motivating a child to read. I will first begin by discussing intrinsic motivation.

**Intrinsic motivation.** Intrinsic motivation can be defined as the inner drive that students feel to succeed by challenging themselves (Guthrie & Wang, 2004). The motivation for these students stems from a personal desire to pursue an activity based on their own interest in the topic. They are self-determined to explore their own curiosity (Unrau & Schlackman, 2006). Students who are intrinsically motivated find themselves seeking their own learning beyond what is required in the classroom. Crow (2007) shares the idea that interest is to be sparked by classroom instruction and through classroom activities. These engaging activities will then encourage students to develop a long-term interest in reading. Joyce (2003, p.39) explains that "while [reading] programs that use rewards produce temporary gains in reading achievement, research shows that intrinsic motivation turns children into lifelong readers."

Intrinsic motivation relies on three components: autonomy, perceived competence, and relatedness. Autonomy refers to the natural desire a child has to do the task. The student finds the activity exciting and worth doing. If a student feels forced to do a task or is threatened with consequences if the task is not complete, he/she will no longer feel a natural desire to complete the task. Choice also plays a large role in autonomy. If children feel a sense of responsibility for choosing how they design a project, are allowed to give input in the topic they choose to learn about, or are encouraged to seek their own answers to the questions, they feel more willing and interested to learn (Crow, 2007).

A second component of intrinsic motivation is perceived competence. This refers to the belief that a child has about his/her ability to complete the task. Bouffard, Marcoux, M., Vezeau, and Bordeleau's (2003) study (2003) has shown that perceived competence has a direct link to intrinsic motivation. Furthermore, this link has led to the thought that teachers must help develop a child's sense of competence in order to maintain the child's intrinsic motivation. This development is not an inborn trait, but rather something that develops over time with plenty of opportunities provided by the teacher. This theory suggests that when faced with challenges and difficulties, a child who possesses a positive sense of self-competence will persevere and most likely have success, whereas children who struggle and do not feel capable of the task, will be prone to give up and fail. When students feel overwhelmed and are asked to do something they find is impossible, they will lose their intrinsic motivation. In order to decrease the level of this anxiety, teachers must scaffold learning, or model and break down a whole task into smaller parts, to make the task conceivable (Crow, 2007).

Finally, the last component of intrinsic motivation is relatedness. This term is defined as feeling "securely connected to the social surrounding" and "to experience oneself as worthy and capable of love and respect" (Crow, 2007, p. 51). Teachers have found that motivational conditions rely on the teacher-student behavior and the friendly and supporting learning atmosphere. Students who do not feel supported in their learning will not be motivated in the classroom (Bernaus & Gardner, 2008). One way to do this, as Fisher and Frey have suggested (2008), is to let students work together. This way, if a student is struggling, there are other students there to support him or her in the activity

that they are working on. Working together helps to promote good relationships between students. This creates an environment where students feel that their input is important. They also begin to see themselves taking on the teacher role as they help one other. When students feel in control, they are more motivated to continue learning. In addition, students need to feel accepted in their classroom and have positive relationships with their teachers and peers in order to keep their level of intrinsic motivation high. Teachers who make students feel appreciated as individuals will help develop students who take pride in their work and who are willing to put forth effort in the classroom. Students who feel lost in the classroom are not going to be those students who feel as though they have anything to offer. Therefore, these students may have little motivation to stand out in a classroom full of other children. With the interplay of all three components of intrinsic motivation, the components work to directly contribute to a student's motivation on a subject. Furthermore, academic performance, particularly reading comprehension, increases if students are intrinsically motivated to learn. Also, the more a child is motivated to read, the more the child will continually develop a wealth of background knowledge that will aid them in reading unfamiliar texts in content areas or on standardized tests (Crow, 2007).

Intrinsic motivation can also prove to be more difficult to achieve in older students. When comparing primary students with intermediate students, Crow (2007), Unrau and Schlackman (2006), and Bouffard et al. (2003) said that children seem to gradually lose their intrinsic motivation as they progressed through school. Additionally, both Unrau and Schlackman and Bouffard et al. found intrinsic motivation to decrease at different rates for boys and girls. The results for this study showed that boys' intrinsic motivation toward reading decreased at a quicker rate than girls. All three studies agreed that boys tend to lose more interest in reading because they are often not exposed to material that is appealing to them. Bouffard et al. (2003) particularly mentioned that so much of the literature children are exposed to are fiction stories such as folk tales, fairy tales and poetry. However, boys tend to be drawn more toward non-fiction topics such as animals and other science related topics. In addition, boys tend to be more captivated by science fiction stories and graphic novels. These genres are relatively new in the classroom and aren't as readily available for students. Girls, on the other

hand, can relate more to fiction stories because they tend to like make-believe longer in their developing years than boys.

The studies concluded that girls' intrinsic motivation was sustained longer than boys. In addition, students who fall below grade level in reading have often long lost the desire to learn how to read (Crow, 2007; Unrau & Schlackman, 2006; and Bouffard et al., 2003). Therefore, it is crucial to provide these students with positive experiences that will begin to make them feel like a successful reader. Many times these experiences will come from high-engaging activities that interest the reader and intrinsically make them motivated to learn more.

**Extrinsic motivation.** The second type of motivation, extrinsic motivation, is a more common type of motivation found in the classroom. Extrinsic motivation refers to the external factors that might contribute to a child wanting to learn. Their motivation comes from the reward that will be received if the task is completed successfully (Wang & Guthrie, 2004; Unrau & Schlackman, 2006). For example, a teacher might have a sticker chart where students earn a sticker for each book they read. After a student reaches a pre-determined number of stars, that child earns a reward such as extra free time or a class party. The students know what they will receive (or not receive) based on the sticker requirement. However, when students are extrinsically motivated, they are not driven by their own interest, but rather the students' sights are set on the reward following the task, and not the task itself (Wang & Guthrie, 2004).

In addition, often times, these types of extrinsic rewards begin to lose their grip on the students and the students no longer care about earning the reward. Once the student has experienced that extra free time or that class party more than once, the excitement is no longer there. In some cases, students might feel that the reward was not worth it to them to put forth the effort to earn it (Wang & Guthrie, 2004). This forces the teacher to have to constantly come up with new types of rewards to keep their students motivated. The constant turn-over of new rewards can become exhausting for the teacher *and* the students. This frustration may play out in different ways in the classroom, which may lead to a classroom environment that is not beneficial for student learning (Unrau & Schlackman, 2006). Even more, some classrooms have so many extrinsic rewards for

different subjects and behavior goals, that students are often found in reward over-load. Students are being conditioned to work only for the reward and it hinders them from being allowed to find excitement in the topic alone.

Extrinsic motivation may work for some students, but these studies (Wang & Guthrie, 2004; Unrau & Schlackman, 2006) show that this type of motivation often runs out of steam before the goal is accomplished; that goal being, the love for reading and the ability to comprehend. Even more, one study suggests that relying on extrinsic motivation can sometimes undermine intrinsic motivation. If students aren't taught to develop an inner desire to learn, they will only learn to look for rewards to complete a task instead of their own interests (Unrau & Schlackman, 2006).

Researcher Alfie Kohn said in one article (2008, pg.4) that "it's not what we teach, it's what they learn." If students are only ever offered reward after reward they will learn that that is what learning is all about. Instead of seeing learning as a means for living and obtaining life skills, they will see it as a way of obtaining toys and free time. Furthermore, Kohn suggests that whether students are given punishments or rewards, kids learn the lesson of "conditionality." The child either feels that he/she succeeded or failed. Instead of teaching children that there is gain through mistakes and misconceptions in learning, teachers paint a black and white picture. The child is either right or wrong; did the task correctly, or incorrectly based on whether they received the reward or not. Instead, Kohn believes, teachers should be focusing on the message that they are sending to the students. Although teachers may think that they are sending the message that reading is important, the student may not always see it in that way. The teacher's intent to "uphold high standards to motivate students to do their best is irrelevant if a reward (or the lack there of) is perceived differently by the student" (Kohn, 2008, p. 6).

Vansteenkiste and Deci (2003) made a powerful observation in their study on motivation. The study pointed out that giving rewards for an activity automatically creates a competition. They point out that a competition has one major goal; winning. This further creates two roles in the competition; winners and losers. Students may perceive themselves as "losers" in a reading competition if they can't read enough books so that they can earn all their stars. After several

experiences of “losing,” what student would still feel motivated to continue? This study connects well with Kohn’s (2008) argument with sending the correct message to students. Teachers who use an extrinsic reward system might be sending out the message that a student either wins or loses in their classroom. Again, this creates a very tense and pressured learning environment.

### **The Role of Motivation in Literacy Activities**

One study on motivation addresses the relationship between providing stimulating tasks for reading and their effect on reading comprehension and motivation (Guthrie, Wigfield, Humenick, Perencevich, Taboada, & Barbosa, 2006). The purpose of this study was to look at how instructional practices increased motivation in reading. This included looking at the student’s choice of an activity, teacher involvement, extrinsic rewards, setting individual student goals, and social learning environment. The study was done to show how teachers working in elementary classes are able to motivate students to learn by providing hands-on activities that directly relate to a student’s reading. Through these engaging activities, teachers can spark an interest in a specific topic and the student will be more intrinsically motivated to want to read more about that topic on their own. In addition, they found that by being more interested and involved in their own reading, students comprehended the text better (Guthrie et al., 2006).

The study used a population of 98 students in grade 3 in a mid-Atlantic state (Guthrie, et al., 2006). The students were spread out among four different classrooms. The students were put into two different study groups. One group was provided with several high stimulating tasks that directly related to reading, while the other group had a low number of stimulating activities. Both of the groups shared similar demographic variables. The teachers in the four different classrooms were all teaching the same material and were working to relate fiction and non-fiction reading to science content.

Primarily, the researchers recorded the difference in the number of high stimulating activities provided for each group. In all categories the high stimulating groups performed the highest in all areas such as comprehension on the reading material (Guthrie et al., 2006). The high stimulating group was also more actively involved in their learning and used manipulatives to cover the science

content. During the study, students created portfolios to show what they had been learning through different activities. When looking at the portfolios created by the students, the activities were graded by using a rubric, rewarding points for different features in the activities found in the portfolio. There was a different rubric used for each of the different kinds of activities. These rubrics were used to show the difference in quality of work for the high stimulated group vs. the low stimulated group. Another data analysis was to show the reading comprehension difference of the two groups. To assess the reading comprehension, the students were assigned a 1,000 word passage about the content that they were learning and were asked to answer questions about the text in relation to what they had previously learned. Again, in all areas, the high stimulated group performed higher than the low stimulated group (Guthrie et al., 2006). To assess the reading motivation of the students, students were given the Motivation for Reading Questionnaire (Guthrie et al., 2006). The students were first given the questionnaire as a pre-test before the study and then as a post-test following the study. The questionnaire measured intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

Looking at the data analysis, the researchers concluded that the high-stimulated group had more effective conditions for learning based on the performance of the students in that learning group. The researchers also found that, as expected, the comprehension level of the high stimulated group was significantly higher than that of the low stimulated group. Furthermore, that same high stimulated group showed to be more motivated to learn as well (Guthrie et al., 2006).

Finally, the discussion of the study shows that the researchers believe that when students study a specific concept through a high stimulating activity in a content area that it should be immediately followed by a text that poses the same topic. They believe that this would best keep the students' interest and make them more motivated read. In order to sustain motivation, students must continually engage themselves in hands-on activities that will help them to enjoy different kinds of literature. It is natural for students to want to extend their learning into their own choices of books (Guthrie et al., 2006).

Fisher and Frey (2008) share a similar view with Guthrie et al. (2006). They believe that students are not going to be motivated if the kind of thinking that is expected of them has not been



modeled. So many teachers skip the step of modeling the thinking. Even in the intermediate grades, modeling is key to set students up for success. Often times, students are not taught how to think about their reading. Students need to go into the reading activity feeling confident in their ability to complete and understand it. Not giving students the basic reading strategies to comprehend and think in depth about their reading will only increase frustration levels leaving students in a position that will make it hard to be motivated.

Fisher and Frey also explain that the responsibility of a reading activity that is given to the students should be in the form of meaningful and engaging activities (Fisher & Frey, 2008). This idea supports the theories behind Guthrie, et al. (2006) in that Fisher and Frey also found that high-stimulating reading activities further motivated students to learn. Engaging students in activities that allow them to work with others, have higher level discussions, and explore texts in authentic ways guides students to see the content in new and exciting ways. These types of activities provide students with experiences that push them to seek further knowledge on a particular topic.

Another point of interest that Fisher and Frey (2008) found to increase student motivation is to allow the students to first work collaboratively and then gradually move to independent practice. When working collaboratively and discussing their learning from a particular text immediately with each other, students proved to remember more and enjoy the experience more, thus motivating them further to be able to do a similar activity independently.

### **The Impact of Student Choice on Motivation**

Student choice plays a large role in motivation. If children feel a sense of responsibility for choosing how they design a project, have input in the topic they choose to learn about, or are encouraged to seek their own answers to their questions, they feel more willing and interested to learn (Crow, 2007). Research done by Saurez was compiled in an article entitled "When Student's Choose" (2007). Saurez recognized that students have different interests and abilities in their learning. He found it difficult to set one standard for his students to reach because of the diversity he found in his classroom. Instead, Saurez designed a tiered instruction format that let his students choose an activity that was on their level. For each unit that was done in the classroom there were three options students

could choose from to meet their needs. Each of the options met the goal that the teacher had in mind for his students. One option was simply an activity that met the grade level standard with support from other peers as well as the teacher. A second option extended the standard to higher level thinking, and finally, the third option was designed for the most advanced students that required extra skills to work through complex problems. Each of the options were presented in the same exciting way as to not make one look better than the other.

Saurez found three main roles of student choice. Primarily, he believed that giving students a choice in their learning was highly motivating and taught children how to challenge themselves and seek their own understanding. Secondly, he concluded that giving students a choice is beneficial in developing their decision making skills. When first starting out a tiered instruction format, there needs to be support in helping students choose appropriate activities, however, with practice, students begin to see what they are capable of and what they can challenge themselves with. Finally, students are able to conclude from the experience that the choices teach students to take responsibility for their work and accept the ending product (Saurez, 2007).

Not only were the students allowed to choose their activity, but they were also allowed to choose their assessment. Similar to classroom practice activities, there would also be three choices from which the students could pick, all differing in format (Saurez, 2007). This type of assessment supports the idea that all students learn differently and therefore show their learning in different ways. Providing choice in assessment alleviates the anxiety some students feel when it comes time for assessment.

Agreeing with Saurez's ideas is Richard Bowman Jr. In his article, Bowman (2007) explains that choice deepens students' perceived self-determination and competence. Students will choose activities that they believe they can do. As they find success in those choices that they make, they may begin to challenge themselves and find further success. It also teaches students to begin to determine what they are capable of doing. They may surprise themselves in what they can accomplish. This thinking aligns with Crow's (2007) theory on intrinsic motivation; that students need to believe that that they can complete a task. As students become skilled choice makers, they will see themselves as

competent students who can achieve greater things thus increasing their intrinsic motivation. Students who are constantly told what activity to do are never taught how to make their own choices. Choice is an important life skill that applies to all aspects of our lives, even reading (Bowman 2007).

### **Motivating Struggling Readers During Literacy Activities**

Not only is motivation vital to all learners, but more specifically, motivation is essential to learners who are already struggling with reading. Dreher and Baker (2003) have found that when struggling readers are not motivated, their opportunities to learn decrease. Their research has shown that a lack of motivation for reading peaks during the middle school years and that surveys have shown that these readers do little to no reading at home.

Margois and McCabe (2006) offer a solution to teaching specifically to struggling readers. In their research they discuss that many teachers use scripted learning curricula mandated by the school. Unfortunately, these scripted lessons do not cater to what a struggling learner needs in order to be successful. To teach struggling readers, teachers must take a different approach. The research outlines the principles of motivation. The first principle behind motivation is using the correct materials and activities to teach curricula in order to engage the students. Margois and McCabe found that inviting materials and tools used for activities will automatically set the tone that the activity will be fun and engaging. Books with colorful illustrations and inviting titles will catch the eyes of reluctant readers. Secondly, teachers need to equip students with the correct vocabulary and background knowledge in order to prepare the students for reading. This theory supports Fisher and Frey's (2008) that modeling and setting up expectations will help students to feel equipped for the task at hand. Teaching vocabulary and background knowledge keeps students from hitting any road blocks along the way in their reading. Principle three states that temporary extrinsic rewards should be set in place to create the initial value for the activity. It is important to note here that these rewards are only for a short time and are not necessarily materialistic rewards. For example, one reward may be re-reading the book to a younger student. Not only will the second reading help students become more fluent, but it will help them to feel more confident as a reader. They will begin to see themselves as readers. Finally, teachers must provide acknowledgment and recognition for work that the students are already doing.

Struggling readers in particular need to hear that their efforts are not going unnoticed. Even the slightest accomplishment can be monumental for students who struggle. The researchers conclude that if a teacher follows the five main principles, they are more likely to increase the success of their students by increasing their motivation (Margolis & McCabe, 2006). Dreher, in another study (2003) offers a second way to increase motivation among struggling readers. Dreher suggests using informational text as a way to engage students in reading. So much of the reading instruction in an elementary classroom uses fictional stories to teach reading, but little non-fiction material. Dreher found through a survey of fourth graders that those students who read fiction *and* non-fiction material proved to enjoy reading more than those students who strictly read fiction stories. Even more, the students reading both genres also performed higher in reading comprehension assessments. Dreher believes that richer vocabulary is learned through reading informational texts. This vocabulary usually includes words that students find more meaningful to their daily lives. Non-fiction stories often tap students' interests and motivate them to read more on a particular topic. In addition, as other studies have shown, the more students read, the more they increase their reading abilities (Hidi, 1991).

Dreher also suggests that reading informational texts aloud to the whole class is another way to promote reading, particularly for struggling readers. Using read-alouds increases the chances that students will read those same stories on their own. If the child re-reading a story that was introduced in class is a struggling reader, that child will already have some background knowledge of that story. This will help the student to tackle the book on his/her own and the child will be more successful. Success for struggling readers is key to increase their motivation. Furthermore, often read-alouds are on a higher grade level. Using more challenging books introduces students to advanced vocabulary and allows for high level discussion. Any kind of high level discussion will benefit all students to stretch their thinking (Dreher, 2003).

Finally, Dreher has found that in order for this method of using informational texts to be successful, the classroom library must be filled with a variety of topics and reading levels that will meet the needs of the students in the classroom. These libraries must be inviting, especially to the struggling readers.

If libraries are intimidating, unorganized, and do not have books on a variety of levels, struggling readers in particular will not benefit from these classroom libraries (Dreher, 2003).

### **Implication for Proposed Study**

Learning about how students are motivated can benefit students in the classroom.

Understanding the different types of motivation and their roles in the classroom allows teachers to create learning environments that will motivate their students to become independent thinkers and learners. Particularly, the following study is designed to investigate the possible impact student choice can have in increasing motivation for students who struggle with reading. The study that follows looks specifically at how giving students a choice in reading activities will increase students' motivation to be a part of reading activities in a center-based workshop.

## Chapter 3 Methods

### Research Question

The goal of this study was to answer the following question:

How does giving struggling readers a choice in literacy activities impact their motivation to read and participate in literacy activities?

### Participants

The participants in the study were students in a fourth grade classroom in an urban school in western New York. The total population of the city is about 1,000,000 residents. The population consists of approximately 84% white residents, 10% African Americans, 4% Hispanic and less than 2% of Asian/Pacific Islander and American Indian. The average household income is about \$55,256. The employment rate is approximately 94% ([www.rochesterbiz.com](http://www.rochesterbiz.com)).

The school district consists of about 34,000 students enrolled from preschool to twelfth grade with an additional 10,000 adult students. The student population consists of 65% African American, 21% Hispanic, 12% White and 2% Asian/Native American/East Indian/Other. There are about 35 different language groups within the district. This district has the highest poverty rate among New York State's Big 5 districts with 50% of the schools remaining at 90% poverty or higher. 88% of the students are eligible for free or reduce-priced lunch ([rcsdk12.org](http://rcsdk12.org)).

The district offers a variety of programs and specialty schools. There are 55 Pre-K sites, 39 elementary schools, and 19 secondary schools. In addition, there is a program designed for young mothers as well as a learning center for adult learners. Dispersed throughout these programs and specialty schools there are approximately 5,300 employees including teachers, administrators, and support personnel ([rcsdk12.org](http://rcsdk12.org)).

The school within this large urban district where I conducted my study also has a variety of programs and services. The school consists of 31 teachers dispersed throughout the grade levels from kindergarten through sixth grade. Grades four through six also offer a Major Achievement Program

(MAP) for students who accelerate in their learning standards. This school also provides services for students learning English as a second language. A special education committee is comprised of specialists including an Academic Intervention Specialist (AIS), a speech pathologist, a school psychologist, the vice principal and others to provide students with special needs.

Another program the school provides is the Alternative to Suspension Program (ATS). Students who have behavioral issues are referred to ATS to receive counseling sessions as an alternative to being suspended from school. The school psychologist also has pull-out services to provide counseling sessions for students with a variety of needs. Furthermore, the school provides a program called Primary Project to work with primary students typically with emotional issues.

In my classroom where the participants attended, desks are clumped in groups of three and four. My desk was located in the front of the room with an overhead screen and chalk board behind it. In one corner of the room was a guided reading bean-shaped table where small reading groups met daily. Opposite of the guided reading table was a gathering area where students sat on carpet squares during whole group instruction. Throughout the classroom were small tables used for centers in reader's workshop. Each table seated three or four students. Also used in the classroom on a daily basis were the listening center and the classroom library which consists of leveled baskets as well as genre-specific baskets. Students spend most of their day in the classroom with the exception of music, gym, art, library and lunch, which took place mainly in the afternoons.

The fourth-grade class that I taught had 16 students who were invited to participate in the study. A letter was sent home to all parents about the study being conducted informing them of the purpose of the study as well as the outline of how it would be conducted. In addition, each student in the class was asked to give me his/her assent to participate in the study by also using a form in which the student signed showing his/her willingness to participate. Parents were informed that if their child decided to participate in the study their names would be referred to using their pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

Within the fourth-grade class, I looked primarily at four students who struggled in reading with comprehension and fluency. I first received an additional consent letter from these four

students. All four of the students were given permission to participate as a focus student as well as gave their own personal assent. I chose to look specifically at struggling readers because I wanted to see if these students who typically struggle and had negative attitudes, became more motivated when given a choice. The selection of students was based on reading assessments. Two assessments that were used were the Diagnostic Reading Assessment (DRA) and informal running reading records. These running reading records were taken during guided reading groups. These assessments, particularly the informal running reading records, were used on a daily basis to inform my reading instruction.

One of the focus students chosen was a boy named Henry. He comes from a two-parent home with an older brother. Both parents are strong advocates for his education and are involved in his schooling. Henry is a hard-worker, however often struggles to comprehend the text that he is reading. He is currently reading at a 3rd grade level. He receives AIS for both reading and math. Henry has a difficult time putting into writing his thinking about a book he is reading. His writing often lacks basic conventions and important details that are needed to properly express key ideas.

Another focus student was Tiffany. Tiffany is an extremely shy girl. She speaks very softly, especially when asked to speak in front of a group. She also receives AIS services for both reading and math. Tiffany is reading slightly below grade level but has difficulty orally retelling main ideas from her reading. She most often is found working independently and lacks some major social skills. She is more talkative when she is in a small group or working one-on-one with another person. Just recently Tiffany has begun taking medication for ADD.

The third focus student was Sarah. Sarah is an extremely vocal young lady. She has a sociable personality and takes any opportunity to work with others. Sarah is excited about learning, but like the other focus students, misses important details of a story. Sarah has been in my class for two-consecutive years and has made large progress in reading. She improved from a first grade reading level when she arrived in 3rd grade and left 4th grade reading on an ending 3rd grade reading level. Although she is still reading below grade level, she has the drive to want to keep learning.



The final focus student was Robert. Although Robert is a very fluent reader, he has difficulty comprehending what he has read. Often times he will miss the important elements of a story. Robert works quickly to finish activities, but doesn't also always include important details. Often times he has to be asked to go back in and fill in missing key points. Robert is with diagnosed with ADHD and takes medication each morning. The medication makes a monumental difference in his behavior, helping him focus in class.

### **Instruments**

The first instrument that was used was a survey (Appendix A) that all students in the class took as long as they were given permission from their parents, as well as had given assent themselves. The survey asked questions about the students' feelings toward reading activities such as the kinds of activities they enjoy doing. This survey helped me to get an over-all grasp of the students' attitudes toward reading in the classroom as it is was previously set up. The survey was designed based on my research question.

Prior to the implementing choice in reading activities, I interviewed (Appendix B) the students in the focus group about their feelings toward reading. This informed me of their attitudes prior to the study. I also asked them questions regarding what they like to read and what kinds of reading activities they like to participate in. Lastly, the students were asked about their feelings toward choosing activities rather than having a teacher assign them an activity to do. The questions for the interview were based on my research question.

Data were also collected through observational field notes for a span of four weeks. An observational notes sheet (Appendix C) was created to keep clear track of the activities the students were engaged in, the actions and conversation of the students, as well as my interpretation of the observations. The purpose of the instrument was to keep a record of how students showed their participation in their reading activities as well as whether or not their reading habits changed based on their ability to choose their reading activity. It was also the hope that the observational notes sheet would show trends of student's reading behaviors over the course of the study. This instrument proved

to be valid and reliable because of the repeating trends that were seen throughout the study. I used the notes to show how student choice impacted motivation to read and participate in literacy activities.

### **Procedure**

After receiving consent and assent forms, I began collecting data through the administering of surveys. The students were given the survey in the classroom all at the same time. I read the directions and questions carefully to them and asked if there were any questions before allowing them to complete the survey individually. The students were given as much time as they needed to complete the survey. The survey did not ask the students to record their name; therefore, their confidentiality was secured.

Following the survey, I interviewed the students chosen to be in my focus group with questions discussed above. For the interview, one student at a time was asked to come to my classroom during their lunch period. Only the student being interviewed and I were in the classroom at this time. I used the interview questions as a base for the interview session, however I asked follow up questions as needed to get more information. The interview took approximately 30 minutes. I recorded the student's responses on the notes sheet with the interview questions.

In order to observe choice during reading activities, reader's workshop was set up as following. During reading activities students chose a literacy center to attend. Four students were allowed at each center. Once there were four people at a center, no more students could join on. At each center, there were several choices that they could choose to do. For example, at the listening centers, students could choose to draw a picture of what they were visualizing in their heads while listening. Students could also choose to pick a response stick with a prompt on it and respond to the story they were listening to. Or, students could choose to do a book recommendation in response to the story to share with other students. This type of choice was true for all the centers that the students were attending.

During this choice time, I began field note observations using the observation notes sheet also described above. The observational notes sheets were used one to two times a week during reading activities. At the beginning of the observation time, the child's pseudonym and the date were recorded

as well as the activity the student had chosen to do at his or her center (each center had between four to eight choices that went along with that center). During the observation time, I included the conversations that students were having, as well as noted any other kind of behavior that took place during the activity. I was not doing any guided reading instruction during the choice time, so I was able to fully devote my time to observing a group of students (including a focus student) at their center.

### **Limitations**

As true for any study, there were some limitations that exist in the study. One limitation was that often times the students were interrupted by visitors who came into the room on a frequent basis. This took them away from their focus and distracted them from finishing the activity. In addition, as it was in the nature of the workshop, students worked with each other at each center. One student in the group could have changed the attitude of the others. For example, if one student was not focused, they easily brought others out of focus, too. One negative attitude could bring down others in the group. Also, when working with others, occasionally a group member, often a focus group member, was absent. This restricted the amount of times that student could be observed.

### **Data Analysis**

After the observations were completed, I reviewed the data from the class and the focus group using the notes taken from surveys, interviews, and the written observational notes. Primarily, I looked at the surveys given to the whole class. I looked at each question from the survey separately. Looking at each individual question, I grouped similar responses together. For example, the first question of the survey asked if the student would prefer to read independently or with a buddy. I divided that question into two groups; buddy reading and independent reading. I did this same categorizing for each question. After looking at the questions separately, I looked for links between the questions. For instance, question four on the survey gave the students several options of activity choices they could choose from. Some of the activities were individual activities; others were activities that involved multiple students. I looked to see if the students who chose activities involving other students also chose to buddy read in question one, as described above. This helped me to see

whether children viewed reading as a social or individual activity. These responses shed some light onto what types of reading activities children are motivated to do.

Secondly I analyzed the focus group interviews. This time I looked at each student separately, searching to see any patterns of attitudes toward reading. I looked at the survey as a whole and compared their responses of each question. By doing this, I wanted to see if their responses stayed consistent throughout the survey. I also wanted to see if their responses were supported by their actions at the centers during observations. I referred back to their interviews as I watched them interact at their center.

Finally, I analyzed the observations in light of the surveys and interviews. I grouped together different sections of the observations from all four focus students that seemed to show the same pattern. For example, I noticed that each focus student at one time or another was seen helping other students. I made note of this from each observation to see if this pattern continued throughout the observations. I also focused on the conversations that the students were having. I was looking to see if what students said in their surveys and interviews held true for their actual reading behaviors.

Looking across the data and making comparisons was helpful to see what patterns were beginning to appear. For example, in the focus group interviews students expressed their interest in working with others because they liked to help each other. This behavior was exhibited in their actual observations as well, proving to be consistent with their individual responses. I also looked back at their surveys and there too students noted their desire to work with others. This reoccurring theme, as well as others that appeared, then guided my observations in what to look for.

## Chapter 4 Findings

The findings for this study are broken up into several parts. I have taken each instrument that was used to collect data and explained the findings from each. I then focused in on the patterns that were emerging from each instrument. Also included in each section is a summary that points out overarching themes found from the focus students. I first explain the findings from the choice survey taken from the whole class. I then narrow in on the focus student interviews; showing the attitudes these students have toward reading and choice in the classroom. Next, I describe in detail what the observation data show for each individual student. Finally, I depict what themes have surfaced as a result of the observation data.

### **Findings from the Choice Survey**

A five item survey was given out to 16 fourth grade students to ask about their feelings toward choice given in the classroom. The survey asked questions specific to choice during reading time ranging from the choice of the reading environment to choice of reading activities given to students. To understand the survey best and to see the trends that begin to form, it is easiest to look at the survey item by item and then point out any connections between items.

**Item One: “If I am given a choice to read independently or to read with a buddy, I would choose to \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.”** In response to this question, 10 students chose to read with a buddy, while the remaining 6 chose to read independently. Out of the students who chose to read independently, the students stated that they would choose to read independently because they could focus on their own book and they wouldn’t get in trouble for being off task. One student wrote “I excel at reading when I’m by myself.” It would seem that these students are easily distracted by other students and find it easier to read when they’re alone.

Out of the students who chose to read with a buddy, the answers can be grouped in three categories. One response that was given by students who chose to read with a buddy was that they could help each other if they got stuck. Four out of the ten students chose this first response. The second response that was given by five out of the ten students was that they chose to read with a buddy

so that they could discuss the book together. One student even added that it was more fun to read with friends. Only one student said that he would choose to read with a buddy so that they could get done faster.

**Item Two: “On a scale of 1-5, how would you rate reading?”** When divided out into individual ratings the students responded in the following way; 1 being the lowest score, 5 being the highest

Table 1

<b>Rating 1-5</b>	<b>Number of students who chose each rating</b>
1	1
2	0
3	2
4	2
5	11

When looking at the chart, the majority of the students rated reading 5 out of 5. The one student who rated reading a 1 was the same student who responded to item one by choosing to read with a buddy so that the book could get done faster.

**Item Three: “On a scale of 1-5, how much choice do you feel you have in the classroom during reading time?”** When divided out into individual ratings the students responded in the following way; 1 being the lowest score, 5 being the highest

Table 2

<b>Rating 1-5</b>	<b>Number of students who chose each rating</b>
1	2
2	2
4	3
5	7

Out of the seven students who rated choice during reading a 5 in item three, all but one also rated reading a 5 from item two. There did not appear to be any relationship between those who chose to independently read over buddy reading to their perceptions toward choice during reading time.

**Item 4: “Out of the activities below, which would you most likely choose to do? Tell why you chose your activity.”** This item gave students a choice of five different activities that they could do at different reading centers. All of the activities that were listed were activities that students were familiar with and had participated in earlier in the school year. The following chart shows the activity choices as well as the number of students who chose that activity.

Table 3

Activity	Number of students who chose each activity
Pick a response stick to respond to a story you have listened to.	0
Draw a picture of what you were reading to show what you were visualizing in your head.	7
Create a crossword puzzle with spelling words	5
Do a “Critics Corner” (book talk)	4
Make a book recommendation	0

When looking at the responses students gave as to why they chose to draw a picture of what they were visualizing, the students mentioned they chose this activity because they enjoyed drawing, because it let them express themselves and it allowed them to show what they were seeing to others. Four out of five students who chose a cross-word puzzle said that they chose that activity because they could give the puzzle to a friend or family member to solve. These same students were also the same students who chose to read with a buddy from item one. Lastly, three out of the four students who chose to do a “Critic’s Corner” book talk with the whole class said that they chose this activity because they like sharing their book with everyone. One student added that she liked to encourage other students to read the same book. Again, these same students also chose to read with a buddy from item one.



**Item 5: “If you had the choice to work by yourself, or to work with others on a reading activity, what would you choose? Tell why.”** Thirteen students chose to work with others on a reading activity. Of those thirteen, nine of them also chose to read with a buddy from item one. These same students also explained that they would choose to work with others on an activity so that they could help each other and give them ideas. These responses were similar to those that they gave for why they wanted to read with a buddy.

Two of the three students who chose to work independently also chose to read independently from item one. Their reasons for wanting to work independently were all similar in saying that working independently helped them to focus. Again, these responses were similar to those that they gave for item one.

*The surveys as a whole.* When looking at all the surveys together, it appeared that most of the students stayed consistent with their responses. Most students who wrote that they would choose to read independently also wrote that they would work independently on reading activities. They gave similar reasons for both items. In the same manner, most students who wrote that they would choose to read with a buddy also wrote that they would choose to work with a buddy on reading activities.

Additionally, when looking at the choices of activities that the students chose, it appeared that the students opted for more nontraditional activities. The majority of the students picked activities that were more hands-on such as drawing a picture to show their thinking or creating a spelling game where they could work with others. They did not seem to be as drawn to the more standard reading activities such as a writing prompt activity that would required more writing and more individual work.

### **Findings from Focus Group Interviews**

I interviewed each student in the focus group individually prior to the implementation of choice in reading activities to gather their feelings about themselves as readers and their attitude toward reading in general. I asked each student the following six questions:

- How do you feel about yourself as a reader? Why?
- What do you like best about reading? What do you think is worst about reading? Why?
- When you're at a reading center, what types of activities do you like to do best? Why?

- Do you feel that you are able to choose your own activities in reading, or do you feel the choice has been made for you?
- Would you rather the teacher choose your activity, or would you rather choose your own activity? Why?
- Do you enjoy working with others or by yourself better? Why?

**Henry.** In my experience with Henry as a student, he was a hard worker, however struggled to comprehend grade level texts. He was able to comprehend texts that are on his level, typically fiction stories. Additionally, Henry sometimes had a difficult time articulating either orally or in written form what he had read when asked to discuss key concepts from the story. During the interview, however, Henry described himself as a “confident reader.” His confidence, though, was referring to his ability to make good choices during reading and not necessarily about his reading ability. For example, he explained that in the past he had chosen to sit next to his friends during reading time. This would tempt him to talk and become unfocused. However, recently he decided to sit by himself and “just read his own books” so he can be focused. As his teacher, I believe this explanation holds true for his actual reading behavior. Henry is easily distracted and was able to fix his own problem by choosing a better place to sit in the classroom. Because of this change, he was able to use his reading time appropriately.

It also became clear in his interview that Henry enjoys working with others. He referred to this three times during his interview. His answers paired up with his responses to the class survey he had previously taken. In his interview, Henry said that he liked working with others by filling in the blanks on the surveys with “*I like working with a buddy because if I get stuck, they can help you.”* Likewise, in his survey he also wrote “*I would choose to buddy read because you can help them.”*

When asked about choice in reading activities, Henry said he would rather choose his own activity so that he did not have to do something he did not like. Henry usually chose activities that were hands-on and did not include a lot of writing. For example, on his survey, out of five choices, Henry chose to create a cross-word puzzle out of his spelling words. His reasoning for why he chose this activity was because he said he liked to give his puzzle to a friend to try to solve. Henry also said that at reading centers another similar activity that he liked was creating word-searches. He explained

that he enjoyed trying to trick others in finding the hidden words. This explanation again affirms that he likes working with others.

**Tiffany.** Tiffany is an extremely quiet girl who does not tend to elaborate much when engaged in conversation. During the interview, she gave very short responses with little detail. She too struggles with reading and has a hard time expressing her thoughts about a particular book and in general. Tiffany described herself as a “good reader because [she] reads good.” It seemed as though Tiffany was not sure how to respond to this question. Perhaps she was responding in the way she felt that I wanted her to respond. She gave a similar answer when I asked her about whether or not she would rather choose her activity or have a teacher choose for her. In a similar manner, she answered “I would choose my activity because I like to choose my activities.” Again, it is probable that Tiffany was not exactly sure how to respond. Tiffany’s ability to communicate often gets in the way of her being able to show what she is learning. This is apparent throughout all content areas, not just reading. Although Tiffany claimed that she enjoyed working with others over working by herself, I have rarely observed Tiffany actively engaging herself in a group setting. This again leads me to believe that Tiffany may have been answering the interview questions in the way she thought I wanted her to answer.

**Sarah.** Sarah is an extremely out-going fourth grade student. She, no doubt, enjoys the company of others, although she does not always stay on task. She has a positive outlook about herself as a reader, and it shows through her work. She described herself as a good reader because she “can use chunks on words and can pick out interesting books.” Throughout the interview several times Sarah indicated that she liked making her own choices because she could choose to work with friends on the same activity and because they could give each other ideas. Sarah chose “Critic’s Corner” (a book talk activity) as her favorite reading activity because she liked sharing her thoughts with others. This comment supported her previous statement about liking to work with others. It appeared that Sarah liked choosing her activities because she saw reading as a social activity. She also pointed out that she liked to make her own choice for reading activities because she “makes a good choice and works very hard.” This shows that Sarah would pick

activities that she actually would want to do and would work hard to complete the activity. Through working with Sarah, this proved to be true. The biggest theme that was shown through Sarah's interview was that she liked reading best when she could choose to work with others.

**Robert.** Robert had a very different outlook about reading than the other three students. To Robert, reading fast and getting the reading activities done quickly were signs of a good reader. Throughout his interview, twice he referred to "getting the book done faster." When asked what he felt was worse about reading, Robert said that he did not like to come across new words because it slowed him down and he could not get through the book as quickly. He also mentioned in both his survey and interview that he would choose to work with others rather than by himself because he could get the activity done faster. For Robert, making a choice was a great option because he could choose the activity that will help him get done the quickest. In my class, Robert was a very fast reader who usually used expression, however because he was so focused on getting done quickly, he did not always comprehend what he read.

In reference to whether he'd rather have his teacher choose his activity, or choose the activity himself, Robert said he would rather choose his own activity so that he would not always have to do what others picked. Perhaps Robert would rather pick an activity he could get done the fastest rather than have a buddy or a group of people slow him down with a more involved activity.

**Summary of interview findings.** Looking across interviews, I noticed a theme of working with others. Each student at one point in his or her interview mentioned working with others; however they gave different reasons for wanting to do so. I also noticed that when asked in question four about their thinking toward choice in the classroom, students already felt that they had some choice in the classroom. None of the students, however, mentioned how or why they felt they already had choice in the classroom, or in what context they felt they had choice. They could have been referring to their book choice for their individual reading bags, or their ability to choose partners for reading at times. These are only speculations, however, and cannot be assumed.

## **Findings from the Focus Group Observations**

There were four observation sessions that I designed to watch each student at the centers. Because of absences, not every student was observed each day. Henry was observed all four times, Tiffany and Sarah were observed three times while Robert was only observed two times. Each student was given the choice of which center they would like to go to each day. At each of these centers they were able to choose the activities they wanted to do at each station. There were six centers to choose from and a minimum of 4 different choices for the students to pick from at each of the centers.

**Henry.** Henry was always very quick to pick the same center that his friends had already signed up for. Once he got to each of the centers, however, he got right to work and stayed focused for most of the time. During the entire 30 minutes of the centers, Henry was very interested in what everyone else was doing. He commented on other projects that were being done and very often gave suggestions to students who were working alongside him. Although he picked centers that his friends went to, he did not always choose the same activity that his friends chose.

**Observation 1: listening center (June 5, 2009).** When Henry arrived at the listening center, he took control in getting out all the equipment that they needed and told other students what they needed to do to help. He made comments such as “plug this in” and “I’ll pull out the headphones.” It seems that Henry enjoyed being a leader in the group and made sure things were set up correctly. The group was very quick to get set up. All students seemed engaged in their center. They talked together about what book they wanted to listen to. After about a minute of deciding, Henry directed the other students to a particular story “‘cause the cover [looked] funny.” The other students agreed. The story they chose was a fiction story about a boy who wrote a diary while staying at his grandma’s house for the summer. Occasionally, I heard the students laughing and pointing out funny pictures to each other. Henry was sharing a book with one of his friends and they were laughing together, but mostly stayed on task.

The majority of the center time was spent listening to the story. Henry and his group members were focused listening the entire time while they followed along with the story. Once the story was over, Henry again instructed the students to help him put the equipment away and they all

followed. Henry quickly chose the activity to find an interesting word or phrase. To complete the activity, students were asked to look back into the story that they read and search for important words or phrases that stood out to them in the story. Then, the students were to write the word or phrase on an index card explaining why they chose that particular word or phrase. No one else in his group chose to do an interesting word or phrase. However, when Henry began to work on this activity, it was clear that he did not have a word in mind prior to choosing the activity because he continued to scan through the book to find something to write on his word card. Eventually he decided to write down the phrase "best wishes." It was clear to me that Henry was just searching for a phrase to get the activity done. Another student working by him commented, "yeah, that's an interesting way to say good luck to someone." Henry agreed with the student's reasoning and wrote it down on his card next to the phrase.

**Observation 2: word work center (June 9, 2009).** When choosing this center, again Henry chose to work with one of his friends. There were a total of four people at this center. All four picked their activities and sat in a circle on the floor to work. Henry chose to do a word search. In this activity students were required to pick a theme, come up with 15 words that fit their theme, have a partner check their spelling and then create a word search. Two other students at this center also chose a word search for their activity. Together they decided on the theme "summer." As a small group, they came up with words and phrases such as *volleyball*, *beach*, and *sunglasses*. As they went through the activity, they discussed how to spell the different words. One phrase they came across for spelling was *Charlotte Beach*. The students struggled with how to spell *Charlotte*. One student suggested that he heard the -sh chunk at the beginning, the -ar chunk in the middle, the -l sound and the -ot chunk at the end. Henry agreed that it should be spelled s-h-a-r-l-o-t. The third student disagreed and said that it had a ch at the beginning that made the-sh sound because he had seen the word on TV before. The other students agreed claiming they had also seen the word on TV. They finally agreed upon the spelling of c-h-a-r-l-o-t. Although the students did not end up with the correct spelling, their discussion was important to show what they knew about chunks in words and exceptions to some spelling rules. Similar to the first center that Henry chose, once again he used others to help him complete the activity that he chose.

*Observation 3: classroom library center (June 15, 2009).* For the third time, Henry chose to work with a friend at this center. It was the same friend he chose to work with at the listening center. Prior to this center, Henry had been engaged in reading the “Diary of a Wimpy Kid” series. In fact, many of the boys in the class had gotten hooked and were sharing the books with each other. Because Henry had enjoyed the series, he wanted to express his enjoyment of the book by writing to the author. This choice showed that Henry was connecting his independent reading life with other aspects of literacy such as writing.

Henry, as a rule, did not always like to write and usually gave the bare minimum. However, when writing the letter to the author, he seemed very engaged. He even stopped to read his letter to his friend who was at the center with him. He also went back and added more to a section that did not make sense to him. In his letter he wrote “I have enjoyed your books a lot and I have told all my friends about you. I would like to meet you some day and read more of your books.” Henry was clearly excited about his letter and asked to read it to the whole class after reader’s workshop. When he read the letter, other students who had read the books as well made several comments about parts of the books they personally liked and why they liked the series. This activity was beneficial to the whole class because it not only gave Henry the satisfaction of completing a well written letter and sharing it with the class, but it also motivated the rest of the class to participate in a discussion about the author and his series.

*Observation 4: buddy reading (June 20, 2009).* As true for all the other centers, Henry again chose to work with his same friend from the other centers. At this center, the students were required to pick a book together from a specified “buddy reading” basket and sit in a circle taking turns reading the story. The students chose the story “How to Draw a Mouse.” Again, as Henry did at the listening center, he took charge of getting everyone set up. He took a hold of the bag the books were in and handed them out to each of the students in his group. Once they all sat down, Henry said “K, we’ll take turns, I’ll start.” No one in the group seemed to mind that Henry took charge. They all followed along and read when it was their turn. At one point a student was struggling on the word “sleek.” She

eventually pronounced it as "slick." Henry corrected her and the girl re-read the sentence pronouncing the word correctly.

After the group had finished buddy reading the story, Henry asked the group what activity they wanted to do. One of the students grabbed the activity binder for the buddy reading center, but Henry went off on his own and again chose to do an interesting word like he had at the listening center. This time, however, he knew which word he wanted to do because he told the group he didn't know what it meant. He chose the word *contrast*. Henry grabbed the Children's Dictionary. One of the students asked why he was getting a dictionary to look it up. Henry responded, "'cause I don't know what it means." All four students gathered around the dictionary to look it up. Once they had found the word, Henry read it out loud to the group. He began to write the definition word for word, but one student interjected saying, "You know Mrs. Parlett is going to make you put that in your own words." Henry erased what he had and re-wrote the definition in his own words. As his teacher I was excited to see him using outside resources to help him with his work. I was thrilled to see how the other students were following after Henry and got the dictionary themselves to look up other words found in the text they had read. Perhaps Henry's actions motivated the other students to do the same thing.

**Summary of observations of Henry.** Throughout the observations of Henry, one thing held true for all of his centers. Henry always chose to work with his friends. It did not appear that it was the choice of activity that motivated Henry, but instead the choice of group members that engaged Henry in his center. Once at his centers, Henry was mostly on task and completed all his activities. I did notice that Henry did not always choose activities that were challenging to him. At times it seemed to me that he wanted to choose an activity that he could complete with minimal effort. He did appear to be enjoying himself at the center, but was not always choosing activities that would stretch his thinking.

**Tiffany.** Tiffany did not seem to show a pattern with the people she chose to work with. She worked with a variety of students. However, when working with other students, she often faded into the background allowing others to take control of the situation. This did not seem to bother her because of her extremely introverted personality. When Tiffany arrived at her centers, she was very



slow in getting started. I often saw her following in on the activities that other students in her group had chosen.

**Observation 1: spelling center (June 5, 2009).** When Tiffany first arrived at the spelling center, the other students had already decided to play Scrabble, so Tiffany joined in. Scrabble was a popular choice at this center because of its hands-on approach. The students appeared to be very engaged in the game as they quickly got set up and cheered for themselves and each other as they created words. Tiffany was clearly participating, but was not very vocal throughout the game. As the game continued, students would question each other's spelling patterns. As problems arose, the students consulted the children's dictionary for help.

At one point, Tiffany put down the word "bot." One student quickly showed his disagreement for the spelling saying "that's not a real word!" Tiffany explained that "bot" was short for "robot." After the other students in the group also disagreed, Tiffany changed it to "bat." Tiffany's ability to change one letter to make a word into a new word showed her understanding of word chunks and spelling patterns.

A similar discussion was had at another point in the game. Again it was Tiffany's turn and she asked a student how to spell "soul." One student offered "s-o-o-l." However, another child disagreed and gave her the correct spelling. Once Tiffany had put down the correct letters, she counted her points and made sure that the score keeper added the point to her previous score. As other students were taking their turns, Tiffany looked at the word "been." She turned to another student and said "I just realized that if you take the second 'e' out of this word, it makes the word "Ben."

While playing the game, as the students earned points, the students, including Tiffany now, began cheering for themselves and each other. It was clear that they were enjoying their activity. The students had set up the game so that everyone had a job, such as the score keeper. That way, everyone was involved and stayed focused even when it was not their turn.

**Observation 2: buddy reading (June 15, 2009).** Because Tiffany was not a student who liked to be in charge or have control, she had no problem when the other students chose the story for their

buddy reading center. The students chose to read a non-fiction story about "Turtles." Tiffany followed along, but did not engage herself in the conversation that the other students stopped to have. She simply listened and then carried on with the story once the students had moved on. Tiffany became very uncomfortable when it was her turn to read. She read very quietly and got visibly nervous, which caused her to make mistakes. When Tiffany came across a word she did not know, the other students were very helpful. After this happened a couple of times, Tiffany became a little more at ease. Perhaps as she realized that the students were going to be helpful, she became more comfortable with reading out loud. It is evident that working in these small groups gave students a chance to share their strengths with another student's weakness. In fact, further on in the book, Tiffany was even able to help out another student with an unfamiliar word.

Once the story was completed, again Tiffany chose an activity that other students had chosen as well. She chose to do a "fact finder" ladder which was an activity sheet that required students find important facts from the story and write them down. At this point of the center time, it was obvious that Tiffany was much more comfortable with her group members. She began to share a story with them about a time that she found a turtle on a camping trip. This conversation illustrated that she was able to make connections from the story to her home life. As she shared, other students too had stories and connections of their own. Although the students were done with the story, they continued to have further conversation that was on the topic they read about. They stayed mostly focused in their discussion and had meaningful connections.

**Observation 3: listening center (June 20, 2009).** After observing Tiffany for the final time, some clear patterns about her began to show through. For example, just as at the other center, Tiffany was very shy at the beginning of the center and began to open up more as she became more comfortable with the students she was with. Also, another pattern that was clear was that Tiffany allowed the other students to make group decisions. The other group members chose a fiction story called "Get Me Out of Here!" Just as she had done with the buddy reading, she followed along, but did not stop to have conversations with the other students about the story. The other students giggled during funny parts; however, Tiffany was quieter throughout the whole story. While the other students

were sharing a book while listening and were sitting close together, Tiffany was sitting outside of the circle facing the other way. She continued to follow along with the story, but did not seem to be completely engaged with the plot. She did not show reactions of laughing and pointing to pictures as some of the other children had. Tiffany kept her interactions to a minimum.

Once the story was over, Tiffany again followed the other students in the activities that they had picked. Another student in her group chose to find an interesting word from the story. Tiffany had a very difficult time finding a word. She continued to glance through the story, but never was able to find a word before center time ran out. One of Tiffany's challenges was that she often picked an activity solely because others had chosen it, and not always based on what would work best for her. Tiffany may not feel confident enough to choose her own activities in fear that she would not choose an activity that she could complete on her own. I noticed this throughout her observations. By choosing activities that others also chose, it seemed that Tiffany was more confident because she could use others for assistance. Perhaps maybe with more practice with choosing activities, Tiffany could become more confident in her ability to choose and complete her own activity.

*Summary of observations of Tiffany.* When I reviewed Tiffany's observations, her shyness definitely stood out. I also noticed that her shyness decreased as the centers went on. She became more comfortable with the other students and became more vocal about her activities. When it came to choosing activities, as mentioned before, Tiffany was quick to follow others in their choices, not usually venturing out on her own. Sometimes she was successful with following others in their choices because she was able to complete the activity without additional help. However, as was the case with choosing an interesting word at the listening center, Tiffany struggled to complete the activity on her own and perhaps did not feel confident enough to ask for help from the others.

Furthermore, I also noticed that Tiffany was not as engaged as the others with the texts she came across at the centers. When other students were laughing and having discussions about the books, she did not usually interact with the others.

**Sarah.** Sarah always enjoyed going to centers because it was a time to be social. Working with others in small groups was very appealing to her. Sarah, like Henry, also took a leadership role

when she was at the centers with others. It appeared that Sarah enjoyed choosing her own activity because she was able to pick activities that she could work with friends on and have discussions.

**Observation 1: word work center (June 9, 2009).** When choosing her first activity, Sarah picked a center where her friends were. Whenever Sarah got an opportunity to work with friends she was quickly engaged in the activity. She arrived at the center and began looking through the choices to pick from. Sarah and her friends (Henry included) decided together which activity they would like to do. They decided on a word search. Once each child had a word search template, they settled on “summer” to be their theme. As evident in other groups as well, students chose themes that were directly related to their lives. Since summer vacation was soon approaching, they applied their excitement into their literacy activity.

Together the group came up with several themed words to fit with summer. They chose words such as *beach ball, sunscreen, ice cream, water, sand, and hot*. As they worked through their word search, Sarah suggested changing *hot* to *party* because she “always [had] a lot of parties to go to in the summer time.” This showed that Sarah was thinking about the activity that she was doing and was making it meaningful for her own life.

In addition, as Sarah completed her word search, she was spelling the letters out for each word. Sarah was staying focused on her activity and wanted to make sure everything was spelled correctly. Once she had completed her word search she walked over to a friend in another center and said “I want you to do my word search after we’re done.” Sarah seemed excited about her activity and wanted others to see it as well.

**Observation 2: buddy reading center (June 15, 2009).** Sarah again chose to work with her friends at the buddy reading center (including Tiffany). Immediately after coming to the buddy reading center, Sarah began to take charge telling the students what book they should choose. She chose a non-fiction story about turtles and the others agreed to read it. The students got started right away and Sarah began reading first. After her first page of reading she looked up from her book and said “I wonder how turtles survive in their environment.” Sarah was showing that she was thinking about what she was reading and was using strategies modeled previously in class. The students took turns

reading and one student came across the word “cold-blooded.” Sarah interjected and said “Oh! We just read about that in science.” The other students agreed and another student responded by saying “Yup, just like reptiles. And, a turtle is an amphibian.” Although Sarah’s information about turtles was incorrect, she was still trying to make connections to her schema and the students were having a discussion that was clearly on task and meaningful.

After finishing the story, Sarah picked a story map to complete. As she worked to complete the project, she continued to look back in the story to find the correct information. She was the only student who had chosen to do this activity. This showed that Sarah was also learning to be independent about her activity choices and wanted to choose an activity that *she* wanted to complete, not just based on what her friends were choosing. Sarah was able to find facts about the turtle for her story map such as “the turtle buries itself until spring.” Sarah was also surprised to find out that turtles are endangered because people pollute the waters. In response to this Sarah wrote (using student’s grammar) “The author tells us that there were a million turtles living but today there are a few because people keep polluting by the water and some turtles died. So from this day on STOP LITTERING!” Sarah was being an active reader through her response and gave her own personal opinion.

***Observation 3: classroom library center (June 20, 2009).*** Yet again, Sarah picked friends to work with at her center. Although once she arrived at the center, she again chose an activity independently from the others. She chose to do a character feelings chart with a story she had read during independent reading time. Sarah kept looking back in the story to find information for her chart. As she was doing so, she would start laughing at the different parts in the book she was remembering. Each time she came across a funny part, she shared the funny parts with her friend and explained what was going on in the story. Sarah was engaging others in her own activity.

As I was observing Sarah complete this activity, I noticed that she wasn’t doing it exactly correct. The activity called for her to tell how the character’s feelings changed from the beginning to the middle to the end of the book. Sarah, however, was just giving a summary of what happened at the beginning, middle, and end of the book. I told Sarah that she needed to go back and read the directions about what she was supposed to be putting down. When she did, she said “Ohhh!” However, it still

did not seem to me that she understood the directions. I read the directions with her and pointed out the key sentence “tell how the *character is feeling* at the beginning, middle, and end of the book.” I had Sarah orally tell me what she was going to write down and then let her begin working on her own again. This time, she started completing the activity correctly, although her descriptions of the character’s feelings were vague.

**Summary of observations of Sarah.** The biggest theme that I observed from Sarah was her social behavior with the other students in her group, even if she did not choose their same activity. She shared with other students what she was doing, like the word-search and the character feeling chart. She seemed interested in what others were doing as well, often commenting on their activities or offering suggestions.

**Robert.** In my class, Robert was known to read very fluently, but struggled to comprehend what he was reading. In addition, whenever Robert was asked to complete a literacy task, he was very quick to finish it, and did not always include important details. This fast-paced behavior was apparent at his centers as well.

**Observation 1: word work center (June 15, 2009).** Robert did not seem to care about who he was working with. It appeared that he was choosing centers based on his own decisions. One of his friends asked him to join their group but Robert declined saying “nah, I’m gonna go to word work.” At the word work center Robert first began working quietly without interacting with others at his center. He chose to do a word search, like many of the other students had. His word search theme was “laser quest,” a topic that appeared in many of his writing pieces. Through the word work activity, Robert was bringing in his own interests. Every few minutes or so Robert would look over at another student’s paper who also was doing a word search. He would look at her words, and then look back at his own. At one point he counted how many words he had and then looked over at his partner’s paper. It appeared that he was comparing how many words they each had. Taking into account Robert’s previous behavior, I felt he was making sure he was doing it correctly so that he would not have to go back and re-do it. Robert, as discussed earlier, worked to get an activity done quickly.

After about ten minutes of working quietly alone, Robert overheard another student asking a question about her activity, a word ladder. Robert walked over to that student to help her and then returned to his activity. Helping other students was something that Robert was often too shy to do unless he was really confident. Perhaps working in the small groups helped Robert to feel more comfortable and more willing to interact with others. Once Robert had completed his word search, he exchanged his search with another student in the group. It seemed that they both enjoyed figuring out each other's words. Both the boys were racing each other to find the words and called out how many they had left.

*Observation 2: spelling center (June 20, 2009).* Just as other students had picked, Robert and his center partners picked Scrabble as their activity. All students quickly set up their board game. Group members began placing words on the board, and just as other groups had done, challenged one another on the spellings of the words that were unfamiliar. When it became Robert's turn he struggled to find a word that he could place on the board. Finally another student suggested "put 'j-o' here (pointing to the 'e' in "deer") to make Joe." Robert agreed and counted up his points. I observed the students again helping one another when one student got stuck.

On Robert's second turn he added -ting to "bun" to make the word "bunting." One student looked up at me and argued saying "that ain't word." Robert responded by saying "yup, in baseball when you barely hit a ball and it just rolls a little, that's bunting." Another student in the group agreed with Robert and began talking about a time when he bunted the ball and got to first base. At this point, the group got a little off task as they started talking about other baseball and sports stories. I got them back on track by saying "Ok, let's get back to the game to see how many words we can make." The students returned to their game and agreed to give Robert the points. Robert had already awarded himself the points, anyway.

The next time it came to be Robert's turn, he spent several minutes trying to find a word and eventually had to pass. None of the other students could find any words either so Robert had to choose a letter from the pile. He frowned when he could not make a word. He responded with "Man!"

*Summary of observations of Robert.* Robert was only observed twice because of absences and it was difficult to see any clear patterns forming in Robert's reading behavior. His behaviors did, however, match up with themes being seen in other focus students. For example, I observed Robert helping other students (at the word work center), as well as other students helping him (finding words for his Scrabble letters).

### **Themes Shown Through the Observations**

When I looked through the observation data, I was not convinced that motivation was the biggest thing being impacted. Additionally, I did not necessarily feel that the giving choices in activities played the biggest role either. Instead I found two major themes that seemed to shine through the observation data. The first theme was that students picked activities that lent themselves to working with others to complete the activity together. Finally, the second theme showed that by working together, students were creating zones of proximal development.

**Theme 1: Students Picked Activities to Work Together With Others.** Most of the observations showed students picking activities that they could work together on with other students. Henry and Sarah particularly seemed to be drawn to the idea of being able to choose their own group members to work with. The observations showed them choosing to work with friends each time. Even the other students who did not show a pattern with the people they were choosing to working with, almost always chose to work with the people at their center, often choosing the same activity.

Tiffany, although very shy, appeared to feel more comfortable working with other students as the centers went on. At the beginnings of the centers, Tiffany was often more reserved, however, by the end she began to have more conversations with others she was working with. For example, when Tiffany was at the buddy reading center reading a book on turtles, she at first did not contribute to the conversation, however at the end, she found herself enjoying the story and began sharing her own experiences with others. Working with others seemed to encourage Tiffany to be more open. The small groups were not as overwhelming and intimidating as a whole class discussion could be, therefore, Tiffany perhaps felt more confident sharing in a small group once she realized that the students were helpful to her.



Robert, too, showed similar behavior to Tiffany. The small-group setting seemed to be more inviting for Robert to be willing to share his thinking and to be more engaged with others. For example, Robert began working independently on a word search but then eventually wanted to exchange the word search with another student when they were done. When working as a whole class, Robert often kept to himself, however, many times at the centers, Robert would choose activities that allowed him to work with others. Robert also picked to play a game of Scrabble with his partners instead of an individual activity. He was engaged in the activity the whole time and was able to have quality discussions about the spellings of different words.

Working with others tended to perk up students' interest in an activity. Working in groups gave students an opportunity to show their strengths as well as capitalize on what others know. Many times activities were more successful because students were able to collaborate. This taught students that giving and receiving ideas from one another helped to make the classroom stronger. It showed students that everyone had something to offer.

**Theme 2: Working Together Created Zones of Proximal Development.** I observed all four students helping each other in their centers. When students saw that others were working on the same activity, they were inclined to have conversations about what they were doing. This then led to discussions about *how* to complete the activity. Important research has shown (Vygotsky, 1978) that when working collaboratively, students can use others to stretch their thinking. The students working at each center were learning from each other when they stopped to make connections about things that they were reading at the buddy reading and listening centers, or when they discussed the spellings of different words providing their own rationale as to why they spelled it a certain way.

Specifically for the focus students, at one point or another each of the students were helping someone or being helped by another person in their group. For example, when Sarah was at the word work center completing a word search, she worked together with her partners to come up with a list of words. There were several discussions on how to spell a word and if a student misspelled a word, others would help them correct it. These types of discussions helped students to gain from each other.

Even if they did not come up with the correct answer at the end, they were learning about the process of communicating their thinking and problem solving.

This theme was also apparent at the buddy reading center. Students would collaborate with each other when they came across an unfamiliar word. For example, when Henry was at the buddy reading center, he helped a student with the word “sleek.” At that same center, the students were helping each other look up words in the dictionary to use for their activity. Again, when the students shared their thoughts, they were able to learn from each other.

Tiffany, especially, was a recipient of help from another student. She struggled many times at each of her centers and each time someone would help her out. At the Scrabble game, Tiffany was unsure of how to spell “soul” and other students talked her through it. At the buddy reading center she came across many unfamiliar words that she stopped at. Once again, someone came to her aid. As she became more comfortable in the group, she too began helping students with words that she knew.

Even Robert, who was usually too shy to help others, assisted another student on a word ladder. Working in small groups allowed an atmosphere where students could work closely with each other. Some students who were not usually inclined to speak up in a whole group, like Tiffany and Robert, may have felt more comfortable in a small group. Their zone of proximal development was cultivated as they learned from those around them.

### **Summary of the Findings**

Although this research study set out to find the impact that student choice had on the motivation of struggling readers, I found that it took a different turn. Instead of choice being the key element of this study, there was more of a focus on how centers allowed for more collaboration. This collaboration then allowed for students to work within their zones of proximal development and to learn from each other. Throughout the study there was evidence showing that it was not the activities themselves that students were choosing, but rather it was that students were choosing to work together to gain knowledge. Even when the activities were not the same, students had conversations about their own activity with each other. As students had conversations, they were learning from each other. This

created zones of proximal development. Students were able to make connections to the books they were reading together and to each other.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations**

#### **Summary and Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to look for the impact that student choice had on reading activities. Other themes and patterns, however, began to emerge as I observed the students and through the data analysis. The first theme showed that students were not so concerned about the specific activity that they chose, but rather they were interested in the activities that would allow them to work with their peers. All four focus students almost always chose to work with another student during their center time and engaged in conversations about their activities, and connections that they had with their tasks or the books that they were reading. Even the students who were more reserved at the beginning of the centers began to open up with their partners as time went on.

In an elementary classroom, allowing students to work with partners is a great way for teachers to facilitate positive student interaction. Many teachers are reluctant to do this for fear that students will quickly get off task and not take their assignments seriously. Although that may be true in some situations, it did not appear to be a major problem for this study. Fisher and Frey (2008) would agree that allowing students to work together promotes healthy peer relationships. I saw students developing positive relationships as they worked side-by-side on similar activities. This theme, as revealed earlier, was found throughout the study.

This study also found that working together in these choice centers created zones of proximal development. In the set-up that was present in the choice centers, learning was flowing from student to student. Bernaus and Gardner (2008) believe that in order for students to be successful, they must feel supported in their learning. Allowing students to work collaboratively is one way for students to support each other. In addition, creating a shared community helps students to feel more confident, enjoy the learning experience more, and retain information better (Fisher & Frey 2008). When students were able to work with each other, they share their thinking and challenged each other; creating opportunities for new learning. Many of the activities that students were given to choose from gave students the chance to develop and apply communication skills and practice problem solving with

each other. Because the students were allowed to pick their own partners, the groups were often made up of students with varying reading abilities. Again, this created zones of proximal development. Struggling students could gain from those who could model proficient reading behaviors; and students who were doing the modeling solidified their own understanding of different literacy concepts. Furthermore, the groups were small enough that everyone could participate, even those students who often fade into the background during whole group instruction.

## **Discussion**

In my own teaching, this study spoke volumes about the power of student collaboration. I have seen first-hand the benefits of allowing students to work with one another. In the centers that I observed I was able to witness how students were learning from each other and sharing insightful connections from the activities to their life. Fisher and Frey (2008) suggest that working collaboratively helps students to see their voice as a valuable tool in the classroom. By making connections with the activity and with each other, they are finding the relevance that reading has to their lives. The findings from the study encourage me, and hopefully other educators, to allow for more collaborative opportunities for the students in their classroom. These shared learning experiences promoted a positive view on learning; allowing students to see that understanding did not just come from the teacher, but also from their peers.

This study also pushed my thinking on the types of activities I want my students to choose from: If students of diverse abilities are going to be working together, choosing activities that will stretch everyone's thinking is crucial for the best learning experiences. Guthrie, Wigfield, Humenick, Perencevich, Taboada, and Barbosa (2006) noted in their study that high stimulating tasks are the types of activities that will spark new interests in the students. In addition, the researchers explain that teachers can use this opportunity to engage students in hands-on activities that will directly link the reading activities to content being taught in the classroom. Connecting different content areas to reading makes the activities more useful and meaningful to the students. Furthermore, selecting activities that help release responsibility to the students will guide them toward independent practice; giving them more confidence in their ability to complete certain activities. In the future, I want to

pick reading activities that students feel confident to accomplish individually, yet present opportunities for challenging one another in the process.

### **Recommendations for Future Researchers, Practitioners, and Schools**

In my study I allowed for students to choose their own groups, however, in future studies I would suggest that groups should be picked out ahead of time. Because my study led to a focus on building zones of proximal development, I believe it is important that group selections reflect combinations of students who can collaborate in the most meaningful ways. Making sure that students are a good match for each other will help ensure that students will be successful in their collaboration. Putting a group of all struggling students together will only create frustration for those students because they will not be receiving the support and modeling that they need. Likewise, putting all proficient or advanced students together will not provide them with opportunities to be challenged in helping other students using communication and problem solving skills. Having a mix of students will help them to stretch and balance out each other out.

Additionally, I would advise future researchers to pick carefully the activities that they are allowing the students to choose from. My study did not necessarily have activities that supported having students work together. The activities for future studies could focus more on having students engage in rich literature discussion by providing prompts to guide them. Also, the activities could be more geared towards literature themes and work as an extension to content that has already been discussed in a whole class setting. That way, there is somewhat of a scaffolding process for struggling readers.

Lastly, since the allotted time for this study did not allow for such conclusions to be made, I would suggest that researchers extend their study to look for direct links between student collaboration and motivation. It would be interesting to see, if when given the opportunity, students who chose to work together seemed more motivated to complete the reading activity. The purpose of my study was to find a link between student choice and motivation, but perhaps it is the student collaboration that motivated students. A more lengthy and extensive study might be able to explore this question more thoroughly.

I would also encourage other practitioners and schools to focus their curriculum on allowing for times of collaboration. These rich experiences open up the class for insightful conversation and positive relationship-building. It also switches the role of teaching to the students; boosting their ability to share their thinking and develop communication skills. Teachers can benefit from allowing their students to collaborate because it gives the teacher insight on students who are developing the appropriate skills to work in groups and those students who need more practice. It can also help the teacher to know what groups work well with each other and which groups need a different combination of students to promote positive collaboration. These opportunities can also teach students to be more accountable for their work and learn how to share responsibilities with their peers.

It is important to invite students to be active learners in their education (Crow, 2007). This study has shown the possibilities of allowing students to collaborate in literacy activities. Students were able to work within their zones of proximal development as they shared their thoughts, assisted each other on their reading tasks, and challenged one another. Our job as educators is to keep searching for the best ways to reach students and to continue supporting them in the learning process.

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## Appendix A

### Choice Survey

**Directions:** Today you will be taking a survey to show how you feel about reading. It is important that you are honest.

**To take the survey, here are some important things to know.**

- In some questions you will be asked to write a short answer.
- In some questions you will be asked to rate an activity from 1-5. If you rate it a 5, you are saying that you really like that activity. If you rate it a 1, you are saying that you strongly dislike that activity.

1. If I am given a choice to independently read, or to read with a buddy, I would choose to... \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_

2. On a scale of 1-5, how would you rate reading? (circle one)

1 2 3 4 5

3. On a scale of 1-5, how much choice do you feel you have in classroom during reading time. (circle one)

1 2 3 4 5

4. Out of the activities below, which would you most likely choose to do? Put a star next to the one you would choose.

1. Pick a response stick to respond to a story you have listened to. \_\_\_\_\_
2. Draw a picture of what you were reading to show what you were visualizing in your head. \_\_\_\_\_
3. Create a cross word puzzle with your spelling words. \_\_\_\_\_
4. Do a "Critics Corner." \_\_\_\_\_
5. Make a book recommendation.

5. Tell why you choose your activity from question 4.

6. If you had the choice to work by yourself, or to work with other on a reading activity, what would you choose? Tell Why.

## **Appendix B**

### **Interview Questions for Focus Group Students**

1. How do you feel about yourself as a reader? Why?
2. What do you like best about reading? What do you like worst about reading? Why?
3. When you're at a reading center, what types of activities do you like to do the best? Why?
4. Do you feel that you are able choose your own activity in reading, or do you feel the choice has been made for you?
5. Would you rather the teacher choose your activity, or would you rather choose your activity? Why?
6. Do you enjoy working with others or by yourself better? Why?

Appendix C

**Observation Notes Sheet**

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Activity Choices (Circle Activity Chosen):

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Observations (Dialogue and Actions)	Interpretations