Give Them Voice! The Power of Choice

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May 7, 2005

Abstract

The purpose of this inquiry project was two-fold: to investigate the effects of using student feedback in the elementary school setting, as well as to use the feedback to change the students' perceptions of their least favorite part of the school day. Twenty-one students in a second grade classroom responded to surveys that elicited their feelings about school subjects and the classroom climate. The findings from the survey were presented to the class, and they voted to change their least favorite subject, Writer's Workshop. Two interventions, choice writing and choice publishing, were developed in order to enhance the students' perceptions of Writer's Workshop. Data was collected from student and parent surveys, student artifacts, field notes, a personal teaching journal, and photographs to determine the effect of the interventions. The evidence indicated that the children perceived Writer's Workshop more positively after being offered choice in writing topics and publishing. Furthermore, the children indicated more positive feelings about teachers and school as a result of having a voice in the classroom.

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BEGINNINGS

A Dissonance Between Philosophy and Practice

I remember the heat radiating from my skin as I stood among my fellow camp counselors in the summer of 2001. My face felt flush as my supervisor announced the awards that she had prepared for each counselor. As a first-year counselor, and a recent high school graduate about to embark on my journey to becoming an elementary educator at the Pennsylvania State University, I wondered what my more experienced peers thought about my performance with the children. When my name was called, I felt both surprised and delighted to learn that I had earned the "Camper's Advocate" Award. My peers commented on the appropriateness of this title, as I had frequently garnered support for the kids to have more sports equipment, better camp-out food, and more interaction with counselors during lunch time. At the time, I did not fully understand the importance of speaking on the children's behalf. Interestingly, I had not been aware of my passion for advocating for children before I received recognition for doing so.

Three years later during my student teaching, I lost touch with my belief in thinking from the children's perspective. I was confronted with a gregarious classroom of second grade children who were easily distracted during my lessons. Some children would play with pieces of paper inside their desks, others would continue talking to their neighbors after nonverbal and verbal reminders. During math, I would hear comments such as, "Ughhhhhh, I don't want to solve the story problem in more than one way…" The remarks were not much better during stations: "How much time is left in Language Arts Stations? Five minutes elapsed. "How about now?" In order to gain more control in the classroom, I felt I had to replace my empathy for the students with more teacher-directed practices. I noticed that my mentor made many decisions for the students in advance. For example, the classroom rules were posted before the doors

opened on the first day of school, in addition to a traffic light to monitor the students' behavior. Because the children regularly complied with her directions, I assumed that I should adopt this methodology and philosophy. Eventually, as I planned and implemented more lessons in light of my mentor's style, I began to sense an internal struggle. I was not listening to the children the way I used to, and the children were still not complying with my directions. I found myself frustrated after each lesson. It was obvious that the children were not motivated during certain times of our school day—behaviorally and academically. I decided that I wanted to use my inquiry project to increase my students' motivation during the school day, but my mentor and I had different ideas about when the children lacked motivation. It seemed pointless to ponder this question when the source of accurate information was sitting with us in the classroom. Therefore, I began shifting back to my advocate frame of thought—what did our students think about the school day? At this point, I became curious about using student feedback and about what the children would say when given the opportunity to voice their opinions. I also wondered whether using student feedback would cause a positive change the students' perceptions of school in some way. These curiosities led me to this particular inquiry.

The Importance of Student Voice

As an adult, it is difficult to imagine what elementary school students must feel like. I cannot remember the last time that I walked into a room and was told exactly where to sit, what to work on, and when I could go to the bathroom. I appreciate having the opportunity to make my own decisions. Much like adults, children desire autonomy—"the experience of oneself as the origin of decisions rather than as the victim of things outside one's control" (Kohn, 1996, p.9). In fact, researchers Edward Deci and Richard Ryan (1990) believe that autonomy is one of three universal human needs that people require to function optimally (Kohn, 1996, p.9). As an

educator, I wanted my students to function at the highest level possible, and I decided that utilizing their feedback (giving them voice) was a way to empower their decisions in our classroom.

Research supports the notion that student feedback is important and beneficial to students and teachers alike. Although Rando and Lenze (1994) explored the effect of collecting feedback with college students, they determined that the process is "…a therapeutic intervention in its own right… It provided students with an opportunity to be heard—and to be told that they were heard" (Rando and Lenze, 1994, p.112). The researchers went on to describe the benefit of eliciting students' feedback in order for teachers to become students of their own practice. Instead of making assumptions about how students perceive a specific subject or instructional technique, teachers can elicit students' feedback and then make justified decisions about their effectiveness (Rando and Lenze, 1994). On the same hand, students become more reflective of their learning as a result of providing feedback to teachers. In asking students to comment about a lesson, they will be engaged in the kind of metacognition that is necessary to monitor their own learning (Lewis, 2001).

Learning More

In my quest to learn more about student voice and choice in practice, I consulted a Responsive Classroom article, *The Power to Choose: A Teacher Reflects on Learning to Share Control in the Classroom*, by Jean Riordan (1998). As a Kindergarten teacher who felt a great need to be in control, Riordan described the insight she gained from thinking about herself as a child. She shared her childhood memories as the source of two important personal insights, "The first is that I have a strong need to feel in control…The second insight is that children need to feel in control of their own lives…My struggle as a teacher has been how to balance my need to

be in control with the students' need to be in control" (Riordan, 1998). Reading this article provided me with a sense of relief; Riordan validated both the teacher's and the students' right to feel empowered in the classroom, and she described this negotiation of power as a lengthy process. She provided students with small choices at first, and then broadened the choices to include the products of major lessons. She found that if she established a clear objective for the children, they became "more invested" in their learning when they could choose among a variety of options to demonstrate their skills and understanding. Riordan's (1998) article not only identified and labeled my internal struggle with my philosophy, it allowed me to visualize this inquiry project as the first step in a professional journey.

Although there are many benefits associated with student feedback, several concerns exist. If feedback is regarded as an instrument of change in the classroom, can students provide reliable feedback? Can students effectively evaluate teachers? Research has shown that "…students are not particularly skilled in evaluating teaching…rather, students can be expected to report their perceptions of teachers' knowledge, organization, enthusiasm, clarity, and so forth" (Rando and Lenze, 1994, p. 2). Therefore, some researchers believe that teachers can expect students to reliably report their experiences and perceptions. I utilized this research and these premises in my second grade classroom despite the higher education context of the research. While there was an abundance of research regarding the use of student feedback in postsecondary education, I was unable to find similar research pertaining to the elementary setting. This speaks to an assumption that our society likely has about elementary students: that they are either unable to provide reliable feedback, or that teachers do not view their young students as sources of feedback.

Aside from educators, students also have concerns about whether their feedback will be used, and how it will be used. In *Techniques and Strategies for Interpreting Student Evaluations*, Lewis (2001) commented that individuals are often unmotivated to make an effort towards something if they do not expect a change to result from their effort. In terms of collecting feedback, this means that teachers must be extremely timely and careful in their response to the students' ideas. Making statements or gestures that invalidate the students' concerns will negatively affect the quality of feedback collected. Students also need to be assured the condition of anonymity in order to provide honest feedback, such that they do not fear retribution for critical comments. Lastly, Lewis (2001) stated that students need practice and instruction in the skill of providing feedback. Teachers should not assume that students know how to do so. Lewis also suggested providing specific examples of written feedback (i.e. detailed comments rather than general statements) so that students have a model of useful and honest feedback.

Wonderings

My research prompted me to consider the effects of utilizing student voice and choice in my own classroom. I wanted to use my inquiry project to improve my students' perceptions of school in some way, and I also sought consistency between my beliefs and my teaching practice. Therefore, my project began with the following wonderings:

> *How can I utilize student voice and choice to improve my instruction and/or the classroom environment?*
>
> *Is there a specific subject during which my students are the least motivated to learn?*
>
> *Are my perceptions of the school day the same as my students' perceptions?*
>
> *What are the effects of utilizing student voice in the elementary setting?*
>
> *How will examining my philosophy enable me to align my beliefs with my methodology?*

THE DESIGN OF MY INQUIRY

Eliciting Students' Feedback

I initiated my student-centered inquiry by inviting my students to provide feedback about our school day. Before eliciting their responses, I decided that the information I received would determine a secondary wondering for my inquiry project, aside from my original wondering about the effect of utilizing student voice. This secondary wondering would specifically address the students' least favorite part of our school day, so that I could develop interventions in attempt to change the students' perceptions.

I developed a survey (refer to Appendix A1) that prompted the children to indicate their most and least favorite subjects, as well as why they were perceived as good or bad. The survey also asked students to consider whether they made different behavioral choices during their least favorite parts of the day, and whether the classroom environment was appealing and conducive to their comfort. At the same time, I developed a similar survey for my students' parents (refer to Appendix A4), which asked them to comment on their child's perceptions of school based on conversations that may have transpired at home. My purpose for issuing a parent survey was to gain more information about the students' feelings about school, as well as to cross-reference the students' and parents' responses. I represented the data from each student survey question as a pie graph and analyzed the results for each question (refer to Appendix B1). The majority of my class communicated a dislike for Writer's Workshop, followed by spelling and mathematics. The majority of the children also indicated dissatisfaction with sitting in desk groups and using a traffic light system to monitor behavior. When I compared the students' survey responses with the comments their parents submitted, I discovered that the students' responses were extremely reliable (consistently accurate).

Originally, I thought that I would be able to determine the topic of my secondary wondering based on the survey. However, because a variety of concerns were voiced, I decided that it was pertinent to share the results of my survey with the students in order to validate their feedback and to request their help in selecting a secondary wondering. As a part of the sharing, I presented the students with all of the options for improvement and asked them to anonymously vote on one thing to change. The majority chose Writer's Workshop, and thus my secondary wondering was born: How can I improve my students' perception of Writer's Workshop?

The Prevalence of Using Student Voice

Before proceeding with my secondary wondering, I needed to collect more data related to my original inquiry wondering. How were my students feeling about this opportunity to convey their voice in our classroom? How often had other teachers asked for their feedback? I developed a second brief survey in order to gather information about my students' experiences with providing feedback in school (refer to Appendix A2). I wrote the survey in multiple-choice format to make it easier for my reluctant writers to communicate honestly with me. I sought data regarding how many times the students' previous teachers had elicited their feedback, whether they thought talking to teachers about their concerns would help, and whether they liked talking about their favorite and least favorite parts of the school day. Once again, pie charts and graphs were used to represent the data so that individual responses were clearly visualized in relationship to the whole class (refer to Appendix B2). When I analyzed the data, I noted patterns in the students' comfort level with voicing their perceptions to teachers, as well as their motivation for doing so.

Identifying Writing Woes

After taking a detour to collect data about student voice, I returned to thinking about my students' least favorite subject, writing. Although the students' surveys provided me with invaluable insight, I needed more information about why they disliked Writer's Workshop. Knowing that my students were already dissatisfied with writing, I surmised that asking them to record detailed ideas about Writer's Workshop would stifle our chances of honest, quality communication. Instead, I chose to collect detailed data and establish greater rapport with my students by interviewing them during lunch time. Usually, the teachers in our school eat lunch in the faculty room while the children are supervised by Paraprofessionals in the classrooms. Thus, a teacher's company is coveted during this time. I surprised the children by bringing my lunch down to our classroom each day for one week, and I allocated my time fairly between each of the four desk groups in our room. They appeared enthused merely by my presence. I spoke honestly with the children and let them know that I wanted to listen to their ideas about writing and how we could work together to make some positive changes. After this brief introduction, the children were more than happy to initiate the conversation. During this time, I used eye contact and summarized their ideas to show them that I was listening carefully. Despite the fact that I conducted these group interviews in isolation from one another, the same theme emerged from all four conversations: the students desired choice in their writing topics. Additionally, many students expressed the motivation to publish stories as they had done in previous years. After reviewing my notes and considering the two themes at the core of the children's writing woes, I decided to hold another class meeting. Together, we would decide how to address these concerns and make feasible changes in our classroom.

To my delight, the children were extremely engaged in our meeting about writing. Our class is typically gregarious, but in this instance they channeled their energy into constructive ideas. We spoke about two different ideas: choice of writing topics and publishing. I addressed writing topics first. Foremost, I acknowledged the students' need for choosing their own topics in writing; however, I explained that my mentor needed to follow a certain set of Writer's Workshop procedures for a class that she was taking about teaching writing. That said, I offered a compromise to our students, "It sounds like being able to choose your own topic is very important to many of you, but that many of you have trouble thinking of topics at the same time. When I thought about the time we have to write in our classroom, I thought about journal writing time. Did you know that you can write whatever you want in your journals? In order to help you see this as a time that you can create your own stories, I could make a "Choice Writing" display board for you to use during Language Arts Stations. It will have different kinds of paper for you to use, as well as a daily Wacky Writing Prompt and several other Unit-related ideas for you to consider (refer to Appendix C1). This way, you will be able to choose your own writing topics even if it is not during Writer's Workshop. What do you think?" The children agreed to give Choice Writing during Language Arts Stations a try.

During the same meeting, I also addressed the students' concern about publishing their work. They had been working hard since the beginning of the school year to write and revise stories about small moments in their lives. "What ideas do you have for publishing your stories?" I inquired. I turned the conversation over to my students and recorded their ideas on paper. Different students spoke aloud, "We could make books with hard covers and draw our own pictures." "We could use Kid Pix and make pictures, too!" One student exclaimed, "We could bring in the SMARTBoard and have all of our parents sit on the floor to see our Kid Pix pictures!

Or maybe, we could hire Eric Carle to draw our pictures for us!" (Wilson, Field Notes 3/2/05). I

acknowledged all of their ideas and let them know that I would think about the feasibility of each

publishing option. I also made it clear that each student would have a choice about how he or

she wanted to publish. As a side idea, some of the students wanted to try sitting in different

places during Writer's Workshop while they published. The class voted and chose to find their

own seats during Writer's Workshop time, as well as listening to soft music in the background.

Our First Intervention: Choice Writing

Eventually, when I introduced the Choice Writing display board to the class, I decided to

collect evidence from four reluctant writers in our classroom (refer to Appendices C2-C5). I

spoke with these children often during Language Arts stations about writing in their journals.

Upon flipping though their journals, I noticed that many times only a date was written during a

twenty-minute writing period. Would Choice Writing motivate these students to write more, or

at least to focus on writing for the full twenty minute time period? In order to gauge these

students' reactions to the Choice Writing station, I photocopied evidence from their journals

before Choice Writing was instituted. Then, I carefully read and copied each of their Choice

Writing pieces for approximately three weeks after I implemented the station. In order to

analyze the evidence, I compared the Choice Writing pieces to the journal entries that the

children wrote before the intervention. I noted patterns in the length of their pieces, as well as

their topic choice—the trends in the data will be presented in a subsequent section of this report.

I recorded informal anecdotal notes whenever possible detailing the students' engagement during

the writing station. Lastly, in order to monitor the effects of Choice Writing on our class as a

whole, I kept a checklist for three weeks in order to record whom participated in Choice Writing

(as the students still had the option to simply write in their journals). I analyzed the checklist to

learn about the rates of participation in our classroom (refer to Appendix C6).

Our Second Intervention: Choice Publishing

To gather data regarding student choice and publishing, I noted the children's reactions to

the class meeting as evidence of motivation, including their facial expressions, comments, and

voice tone. After the meeting, I decided to gather more information about teaching Writer's

Workshop. I wondered what other variables existed in creating and maintaining an inspirational

writing time. An opportunity arose to observe another second grade teacher in a different school.

In fact, the children in her class loved Writer's Workshop so much that they nicknamed it

W.W.W.W., "Wild and Wonderful Writer's Workshop". The students actually groaned when

they had no time to write after the mini-lesson concluded. The teacher rearranged the daily

schedule to give the children time to write, and cheers erupted from the room. This opportunity

was vital because it helped me learn about this teacher's motivational structure for Writer's

Workshop. Specifically, in Mrs. B's classroom, the children chose their most esteemed, finished

pieces—which came at varying times for different children—and were able to sign up to publish

as soon as they completed a final draft. Therefore, children were always writing under the

premise that if they produced a quality piece of writing, they would be able to share this

cherished product with the world as a published piece.

Shortly after our class meeting and my observation, I developed a Publishing Ticket that

listed all of our classroom publishing options (refer to Appendix D1). Each option was

represented with a picture so that students could easily circle the way they wanted their finished

product to look. Honoring my promise to consider each publishing idea, I also contacted the

State College Area High School to inquire about the possibility of inviting student artists into our

classroom. Although the children had specifically requested Eric Carle, I opted to explore the most feasible resource available. As it turned out, eleven student artists from the high school planned a trip to work with our students during their publishing. I documented the children's reactions to this special publishing session with video footage, field notes, and pictures (refer to Appendix D2). Upon comparing my notes about the comments different children were making, I was able to make inferences about their perception of writing while working with high school buddies.

Furthermore, I recorded anecdotal notes whenever possible regarding the impact of students choosing their own seats and listening to music during our actual Writer's Workshop time. Later, I reviewed the notes to look for patterns in how often the children were on-task, as well as the kinds of comments they were making about writing.

The Final Survey

Approximately two months after the initiation of my inquiry project, I administered a final survey to my students (refer to Appendix A3). Although I had collected field notes, video footage, and student artifacts related to the interventions, I still needed the students' anonymous feedback. How did my students perceive the changes that were made as a result of their original feedback? Were they presently more comfortable with Writer's Workshop and writing in general? I designed questions to elicit the students' thinking, once again being cognizant of the fact that too much writing on the survey would likely deter thoughtful answers. The students were assured anonymity, and the survey data for each question was represented by a pie graph in order to facilitate its comparison to the original survey data (refer to Appendix B3). As I examined the abundance of data collected over time, I was able to generate claims about utilizing student voice and choice based on the evidence.

NEW CLAIMS

Category 1: Effects of Student Choice

Claim 1: Providing students with the opportunity to choose their own writing topic and style of writing paper increased their motivation to write.

Claim 2: Giving students the opportunity to choose their seating and listen to soft music during Writer's Workshop increased their time-on-task. Giving students a choice about publishing and letting them know in advance also motivated their writing during Writer's Workshop time.

Category 2: Effects of Student Voice

Claim 3: Young elementary students enjoy having a voice in the classroom, and they are capable of providing this feedback reliably.

Claim 4: Inviting student voice my classroom and following through with the students' ideas enhanced their perceptions of me as a teacher.

Category 3: Effects on Teachers

Claim 5: I grew more confident as a teacher after I began taking my students' feedback into account.

Claim 6: Upon collecting feedback, I became more adept to making spontaneous changes in my instruction and/or the classroom environment to enhance students' perception of the activity.

Claim 7: Utilizing parent surveys can promote open communication about school among parents, their children, and teachers.

Effects of Student Choice

Providing students with the opportunity to choose their own writing topic and style of writing paper increased their motivation to write.

My early field notes captured the essence of journal writing time during our morning

stations: "Some of our least motivated writers were on-task for approximately *two* out of twenty

minutes." "Stashons [stations] will be dun soon…." was scribbled across the page of one

student's journal for the day, the five-word product of twenty minutes of journal writing time.

For approximately four reluctant writers in our classroom, this statement made a common

appearance, whether overtly or implied. Picking just the right amount of grapes for snack,

staying hydrated at the water fountain, and then requesting bathroom breaks comprised most of their time. As I documented the trends that occurred in our class, I specifically noted the behaviors of these four writers in our classroom as I implemented my Choice Writing intervention.

Foremost, the lure of using journal writing time as Choice Writing time was highly successful in engaging children in writing for twenty minutes. Although the children have always been afforded the opportunity to "free write" in their journals about anything of their choosing, many of them still had ill perceptions of writing in our classroom because of a lack of choice. I implemented the aforementioned Choice Writing display board, and as it turned out, an average of 17 out of 21 students used my Choice Writing papers and writing prompt ideas each day that it was available over the course of three weeks. The fact that my students kept returning to the display board over an extended amount of time indicates their renewed interest in writing during journal time due to having choice.

One of our reluctant writers, "Nelson", improved the length, quality, and duration of his writing through the use of Choice Writing (refer to Appendix C2). Nelson has a strong personality in our classroom. He is very cognizant of authority, yet he often becomes impassioned about ideas that challenge his way of thinking. Although he is very well spoken, Nelson often lacks the motivation to record his ideas on paper. On January 11, 2005, he wrote nothing but the date in his journal during the twenty minute writing station. On January 24 and 25, 2005, he wrote a total of one sentence each day, both of which merely stating that he did not have an idea for his journal. In February, when we began studying dinosaurs, the length and quality of Nelson's writing improved; he engaged in non-fiction writing about dinosaurs. Lastly, upon the initiation of Choice Writing, Nelson used my creative writing prompts each day during

stations. He became accustomed to filling up the dinosaur border paper that I provided, and he used more vivid language; for example, he described earthlings as having "tentacles" in a science fiction piece. His mother once commented during fall conferences that she was concerned about his recent dejection for writing. My evidence suggests that Choice Writing, in combination with studying dinosaurs, has now sparked his interest and passion for writing once again.

Along the same lines, "Danielle" often did not write anything during our journal writing time (refer to Appendix C3). On February 8, 2005, she wrote just the date during her twenty-minute journal writing time. I often had to speak with her about using her time wisely, and eventually I asked her stay in from recess in order to complete the writing that she did not even begin during station time. As a result of Choice Writing, Danielle began using bordered and shape paper, and she expanded the genres of her writing. I began noticing that she was writing letters to teachers and classmates more often than filling up her paper with facts about her day. She also began experimenting with creative writing after the initiation of Choice Writing, as evidenced by her March 28, 2005 journal entry about a girl named Amy. Although Danielle has yet to fill one page with writing, she is actively engaged in writing for the duration of the twenty minute station, as I noted on March 23, 2005 in my field notes, "She was on-task the whole time—began writing right away!" Although other factors may be involved in Danielle's change in attitude and work ethic, the evidence suggests that Choice Writing inspired positive changes in her motivation to write.

Much like Danielle, reluctant writer "Lilly" preferred not to write much in her journal during stations (refer to Appendix C4). Lilly is a student who experiences significant difficulty decoding words while reading, and thus, her struggles extend into her writing. Although sounding words out has been challenging, Lilly has never indicated decreased self-esteem or

frustration with completing a task that may be difficult. Instead, she simply seems to be

distracted easily from assignments at hand. Lilly's journal confirmed the pattern occurring

among all of our reluctant writers; on January 19, 2005 she wrote nothing in her journal but the

date in a twenty minute time period. On February 2, 2005 she wrote one sentence, "I read hafe

of the Lizzie goes wild book." By the end of February, she became interested in writing letters

to the teachers, but the journals were not written legibly. After the implementation of Choice

Writing, I noticed that Lilly always chose to use the special paper for her writing. On March 30,

2005, she experimented with her writing by using the character from an American Girl book.

"Josefina is a city gril. She has papa who shes allway call him dad. Josefina 9 year age." When

I first read this piece of writing, I temporarily overlooked the academic implications that it has

for this young writer. Instead, I saw it as a piece that represents Lilly's best efforts of being

engaged in writing to date. It is a mark of improvement for a writer who had not been motivated

to write more than one legible sentence previously. By April 4, 2005, Lilly had written me a

letter during Choice Time that I could read. She wrote a collection of sentences about herself,

mimicking a piece that she was working on in Writer's Workshop. Although Lilly is still

making progress, I believe the evidence indicates that Lilly is more motivated to write now that

she has access to Choice Writing.

Although I observed some degree of success with Nelson, Danielle, and Lilly, "Mike" did

not progress as well with Choice Writing (refer to Appendix C5). Mike is a very bright and

talented student in many subjects; he reads fluently, writes sophisticated ideas at times, and has a

strong conceptual understanding of math. However, his dramatic and often defiant behavior

interferes with his ability to apply his many talents. On January 3, 2005, he wrote two sentences

about his New Year's resolutions, "I hope to make friends. I hope I can sell things." By the end

of January, his journal writing had not improved, "I liked the game station." I do not have evidence of Mike's writing in February because he did not create any new journal entries during that time; in fact, my mentor and I had noticed his lack of writing and we constantly spoke with him about it. In the midst of our unit on dinosaurs, and on the first day of Choice Writing, Mike went over to the display board and chose dinosaur-bordered paper to begin writing. He also appeared intrigued by a dinosaur poem that I posted as inspiration on the board, as he frequently brought his paper over to the display. Afterwards, I realized that he had written a two-page letter to Dr. Arnold, a recent paleontologist guest speaker in our school. Mike copied the poem that was on the Choice Writing board because he wanted to return the favor to Dr. Arnold for sharing his fossils. At first, I was delighted by Mike's response to Choice Writing. However, as time passed, Mike's journal writing returned to one or two sentence pieces. I wondered how to reach a student such as Mike. Why was Choice Writing failing for this student? It was then that my mentor suggested I speak with Mike about some work he had done at home. As a result of the traffic light tickets that Mike was bringing home for inappropriate behavior in our classroom, one of Mike's parents was using writing as a consequence for his actions. Mike showed me a college-ruled piece of notebook paper covered with 50 neat sentences: "I will pay attention in class at all times" (refer to Appendix C7). I cannot expect Mike to embrace writing while it is being used as a punishment at home; therefore, my data collection regarding Mike is inconclusive.

In summary, three of the four students that I chose to closely monitor during Choice Writing demonstrated improvement in their motivation to write. The one student who did not show evidence of improvement is being asked to write sentences at home as a consequence for misbehavior. Furthermore, the vast majority of the students in my class participate in Choice

Writing each day that it is available, and several of those students have produced varying genres

of writing as a result of the ideas presented on our Choice Writing board. Most notably, on my

final survey, 95% of the children indicated that they like Choice Writing all of the time or some

of the time for reasons such as, "You can write anything," "I can write a make-believe story,"

"The creative ideas," and "Because you get to have make believe stories and just whatever you

want to happen, happen." The children have made it clear that they appreciate choice, and that it

motivates them to write.

Giving students the opportunity to choose their seating and listen to soft music during Writer's Workshop increased their time-on-task. Giving students a choice about publishing and letting them know in advance also motivated their writing during Writer's Workshop time.

Before making any changes in Writer's Workshop, I decided to record my observations

of the children's behavior during that time. My notes on February 23, 2005 summarize the

occurrences in our classroom: "Nelson is not on-task. After one warning, he is still standing and

talking, but not writing…there are only five minutes left in Writer's Workshop now." "How

many minutes do we have left?" one student whispered to a neighbor. "One entire set of girls is

standing and talking instead of writing." It can be expected that young children find writing to

be a daunting task at the end of the school day, especially primary children who typically have

limited attention spans. However, I wondered why our children were not embracing Writer's

Workshop the way Mrs. B's students had in the other second grade classroom that I observed.

During my lunch- time interviews, students talked about trying some of the interventions I had

suggested, "Music—that's good! But only without words," one student commented. "Using

lapboards would be nice because you can still sit at your seat, or you can sit somewhere else,"

another student offered (Wilson, Field Notes 2/21/05). When I mentioned publishing a piece of

writing, many of the children were excited, "We did that last year!" The comments from the children were all positive.

The positive tone of these informal interviews transpired into a growing enthusiasm for Writer's Workshop. As I taught my first mini-lesson on the publishing process, one student asked me, "Will we be doing this during Writer's Workshop time?" When I nodded, I recorded his reaction for my field notes: "His face lit up with a smile, and he excitedly turned to his neighbor and whispered, Yessss!" Soon after the mini-lesson was complete, I sent the children off to write with background music and the choice of sitting anywhere in the classroom with lapboards. A supervisor recorded notes about the children's on-task behavior during the process of publishing, with the added benefits of music and seating choice. "Lilly moved to a quiet place and was very on task," she noted. This comment provides evidence that one of our more reluctant writers was embracing the change. "Danielle moved—on task—editing story" (Wheland, Data Collection Notes 3/23/05). Again, I was encouraged that Danielle had made a smart choice and was actively engaged in writing. Upon analyzing the supervisor's notes, I realized approximately nine out of the eleven children she observed were on-task that day.

In the same way, letting the children know ahead of time about publishing appeared to be motivational. The students were especially excited when I told them that we were able to "hire" some high school artists for a day to come help illustrate stories. I noted the children's enthusiasm for Writer's Workshop the day that the high school artists were coming. Several students had set up chairs for their high school illustrators before they even arrived. While the high school artists were present, I noted, "Every child in our classroom is on-task, working to his or her fullest potential. They seem to be interacting well with the high school students, asking them questions about drawing and reading their pieces" (Wilson, Field Notes 3/29/05). After the

experience, the children asked me if the high school artists could come back again. Although this was a one-time deal for our publishing session, I was happy to note the motivation that the children exhibited when they had illustrators to look forward to. The children's thank you notes also reflected their appreciation and excitement during this Writer's Workshop time. One student wrote, "Dear Ralitza, Thanks for hellping me draw. I'm drawing in my free time even. Thanks for coming!!!!!!!! I hope I don't run out of paper before I run out of pensles. From, 'Shannon'." Aside from the enthusiasm that was sparked by inviting some "experts" into our Writer's Workshop time, many of the students were happily anticipating the day their final product was complete. They looked forward to showing off their work off in our class Revising and Publishing Museum (refer to Appendix D3). One student who chose to record his story on video came into our classroom excitedly on his filming day. The first thing that he said to me that morning was, "I can't wait until Writer's Workshop!"

Perhaps one of the most exciting observations that I made occurred after the majority of the children finished publishing. Because I was still helping a few children publish their stories, I provided the children who were finished with two days of Writer's Workshop in which they could write about anything of their choosing. Although I could not record notes on the students' behavior and motivation during this time, the end result of these catch-up days surprised me. At the conclusion of the second day when I finally announced to the class that everyone in room B-3 was a published author, and that we could now move on, groans erupted from our classroom! At first, I was confused by their reaction. They did not want to pack up their Writer's Workshop folders for the day because many of them were actively writing stories of their choice. In fact, Nelson and two of his friends were collaboratively writing a play script about animals. He was dismayed to learn that we did not have more Writer's Workshop time for his play, but he

excitedly handed me a flier that he created (refer to Appendix D4). "Would it be okay if we acted out our play for the class one day, Miss Wilson?" he inquired. "Absolutely, once you finish writing it." For approximately two weeks after that day, Nelson kept his play script on top of his desk at all times, writing when he had the time.

After witnessing a change in the students' on-task behavior and comments, I believe that there is sufficient evidence to suggest the students' perceptions of Writer's Workshop were enhanced due to the music, choice seating, and various choice publishing events. The results of my final survey verified these sentiments, as 60% of our students indicated that they originally had negative feelings about Writer's Workshop, while 65% of them now feel happier about writer's workshop. With the exception of two students, every student's perception of Writer's Workshop changed positively as a result of our interventions. In conclusion, the evidence supports the claim that our music, seating, and publishing choice interventions improved the students' perceptions of their least favorite part of the school day.

Effects of Student Voice

Young elementary students enjoy having a voice in the classroom, and they are capable of providing this feedback reliably.

Personally, I had always appreciated the opportunity to provide feedback to my high school and college instructors in hopes that some frustrating aspects of my learning could be ameliorated. My second grade students indicated the same sentiments on my initial survey, as 80% of them said they liked being able to tell their teacher what they like and do not like about school. At the conclusion of my project, 80% of the students reported feeling happier to be in our classroom when the teachers asked how they felt about school. Several students wrote comments that explained their contented feelings as a result of the teachers asking how they feel

about school. One student remarked that it made him feel happier "because it's more fair". Other

comments included, "Because [the teachers] help out with [how you feel]," "Because it makes

school better," "Because the teachers are trustworthy and I would be fine with telling them," and

"I get to say what I would like." Moreover, 90% of my students indicated on my second survey

that they like class meetings in which they are able to talk about issues and vote on changes.

Therefore, the evidence from my first and second surveys suggests that young elementary

students enjoy giving feedback about how they perceive school.

Secondly, my evidence implies that young elementary students are capable of providing

teachers with reliable feedback. As Rando and Lenze (1994) noted, although it is not appropriate

to expect students to evaluate teaching, they are able to accurately report their perceptions of

teaching and the classroom environment. When I compared each student's responses for my first

survey to his or her parent's survey, I found that 79% of the students and their parents reported

the same answers, with one or fewer discrepancies, for the student's least and most favorite

subjects. Essentially, the majority of my students were telling their parents the same thing that

they indicated on my original survey. Therefore, my second graders had few reservations about

telling me the same ideas about school that they entrusted to their families. Regarding our

classroom environment, 87% of the students' surveys matched their parents' surveys with fewer

than two discrepancies. Once again, the children were exhibiting reliability in their feedback;

their answers were remarkably consistent across time and in different settings.

Inviting student voice my classroom and following through with the students' ideas enhanced their perceptions of me as a teacher.

Among the questions on my second survey, I asked my students, "Do you think Miss

Wilson and [her mentor] will make changes now that they know what your least favorite part of

the day is?" Needless to say, I was struck by the honesty of my students' responses to this question. 95% of our second grade students were either not confident or unsure that we would do anything as a result of learning about their dislikes. As I noted in my journal, "Younger students may feel less inclined to believe in the pertinence of their feedback, partly because teachers do not think to ask young children how they perceive such things as their learning in school" (Wilson, Journal 2/3/05). In fact, 76% of my students reported that a teacher had never asked them what they thought about school. My students' lack of confidence in my mentor and me was quite dismaying; their survey responses told me that they were unhappy at certain times of the day, and yet, they did not believe anything would change as a result of making that known. In my mind, I returned to the many frustrating lessons that I had taught to my group of talkative second graders. In reality, they may have been as frustrated as me. Research suggests that "teachers who are available to students and who like, understand, and empathize with them, have learners who are more emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally engaged in classroom activities than those rated lower in these areas" (Eggen & Kauchak, 2001). In order to improve my students' perceptions of me as a teacher who is invested in them at a personal level, I utilized Rando and Lenze's (1994) idea that collecting and using student feedback would initiate a therapeutic process in the student-teacher relationship. Essentially, my surveys and especially my lunch time interviews with students helped establish relatedness (a social connection marked by feelings of worthiness and respect). Not only did I elicit their ideas about writing, I acted on a multitude of them. My students noticed that I was attempting to listen and make changes for the sake of their comfort and attitude toward school. As a result, 90% of my students indicated on the final survey that they felt Miss Wilson and her mentor made a change after learning about their least favorite subject in school. Because of the marked change in the students' perceptions

at the conclusion of my project, I can confidently claim that utilizing student voice enhances students' perceptions of teachers.

Effects on Teachers

I grew more confident as a teacher after I began taking students' feedback into account.

As described in Rando and Lenze's (1994) research, instructors can be burdened by negative assumptions about themselves when classes either misbehave or choose not to engage in lessons. My early journal writings report these sentiments. "Are my children bored? Am I fit to be a teacher? I find myself struggling between two philosophies [of teaching] as I am choosing classroom management techniques" (Wilson, Journal 2/3/05). I wondered, "Should I exercise authority over my students? Should I intervene in a more positive, responsive way? My indecisiveness regarding my philosophy manifested itself as hesitation, especially in terms of classroom management. Confidence remained a goal on my Individualized Intern Plan until February 3, 2005. By this time, I had been planning and teaching at least half of the lessons for each school day. Although I am sure that increased responsibility contributed to my newfound confidence, it also happened that my confidence became apparent to others once I pursued this inquiry project. On February 3, 2005, I wrote a note to myself about a post-lesson conversation I had with my mentor. She commented that my confidence had grown significantly, and that I no longer needed to consider it a goal. The language in my journal afterwards became significantly more assertive. On February 10, 2005, I wrote, "I no longer need to search for the words to describe my assumptions about children and their voice in my classroom…On Tuesday this past week, I came to the realization that I am not practicing the beliefs that I innately hold true about children." My ideas were more direct and they were written as statements, rather than as

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questions or passive ideas. My growth continued throughout the process of my inquiry, as

evidenced by my journal entries. I can attribute this change in confidence due to the connections

that I built with the students, listening to them throughout this inquiry process. My findings

about the positive impact of student choice affirmed my beliefs in a responsive philosophy, and

this translated to a lack of hesitation in matters of classroom management. As early as one week

into my inquiry interventions, I documented the solidification of my philosophy:

> Although it has only been one week, I am finding support for the claim that students
> flourish in an environment where they are given voice and choice. In actually sitting next
> to students and listening to them, I am also building the connections with them that allow
> me to use a referent power base. When students feel as though I care about them and that
> I am making an effort to make school as interesting as possible for them, it makes it
> easier for me to appeal to them using I-Messages and expectations (Wilson, Journal
> 2/19/05).

On April 3, 2005, I reflected upon my confidence as I concluded my inquiry project:

> I have now become a different person, in the sense that I can truly and clearly define who
> I am for the first time in my life. As I navigate through this time of growth and discover
> the new capabilities that I possess, I feel remarkably confident in the classroom…I can
> visualize myself teaching independently in my own classroom next year with relative
> ease (Wilson, Journal 4/3/05).

Because my journal entries consistently document the solidification of my philosophy in tandem

with the growth of my confidence, I conclude that the evidence supports the claim that utilizing

student voice and choice in the classroom has improved my confidence.

**Upon collecting feedback, I became more adept at making spontaneous changes in my
instruction and/or the classroom environment to enhance students' perception of the
activity.**

There have been several recent changes in the way curriculum is implemented in our

classroom due to the feedback that I collected during this project. They all serve as evidence of

the changes that can be made and justified based on student voice. For example, my mentor

changed the sequence of our Writer's Workshop units because she understood from my project that the children were bored of writing true, small moment stories. Instead of moving on to informational writing, we planned the poetry unit in order to change the genre of writing and to appeal to the students' creative energy. My mentor and I also began providing "Challenge Spelling Words" to students who spelled each of their words correctly on the previous week's spelling review. This change was made because Spelling was the third least favorite subject in our classroom, as indicated by my first survey. The children responded that the regular spelling words each week "are too easy". We implemented Challenge Words in response to the children's concerns, and each week the number of participants has increased. We began with five children, and we now have ten children participating. Thus, nearly half of our class has become more motivated to study for their spelling reviews because they know they have an opportunity to receive more difficult words.

In terms of the classroom environment, 9 out of 20 children indicated on my first survey that they were unhappy with sitting in desk groups because of the people they often had to sit next to. I initiated a class meeting to discuss these ideas, and the children voted for a change in the way that desk assignment were made. I let them know that I would be willing to accommodate this idea as long as smart choices were being made during lessons and quiet work times. I invited the children to write down the names of two classmates who they wanted to sit next to, and I promised that I would try my best to accommodate their wishes. Although fewer arguments occurred as a result of allowing students to sit next to their friends, the talkativeness increased in our classroom. As a result, we did not continue inviting the students to choose whom they wanted to sit next to in class.

Lastly, I recently planned a series of poetry lessons for Writer's Workshop, and during my instruction I changed my mind about how I wanted to implement the lesson. The lesson in the resource I was utilizing called for the teacher to place one object on each table for students to write about for twenty minutes. Just before I was about to give the children directions, I thought about how the children would feel if the object on their table was not intriguing to them. My inquiry project crossed my thoughts at this time, and I decided to let students know that there would be four tables set up in the room, each with a different object to write about. I invited them to choose one object that they found interesting, and then instructed them to practice writing from a poet's perspective for the remainder of Writer's Workshop time.

Once again, concrete proof was not collected in regards to these changes in our curriculum. I chose to focus on my data collection during Choice Writing and Writer's Workshop time in order to honor the class vote that established writing as the students' major concern. However, I submit these ideas as testaments to the changes in teaching decisions that have occurred as a result of the feedback that I collected for this project.

Utilizing parent surveys can promote open communication about school among parents, their children, and teachers.

Among the many side effects of my project that I could not anticipate, I was pleasantly surprised to find that a survey could help bridge the gap between school and home. At the end of the parent survey, I allotted some space for additional comments. Two different families indicated in this space that the survey made them realize how out of touch they were with their child's learning in our class. One parent volunteered:

> My son doesn't talk much about school. We do hear about the traffic light (more so at the beginning of the year). After getting your survey, I realized that I don't know a

whole lot about what goes on day to day. Having a list of what they do actually got us talking more about the different subjects (Parent Survey 16).

In the same way, another parent unrelated to this family commented:

For many of these questions I had to ask "Ellie" directly. While she talks about her day, she tends to focus on issues of social interaction with a few stories about academic activities thrown in. Your questions made me realize how out of touch I am with her learning activities (Parent Survey 20).

Aside from the idea of families talking more about the learning activities in school as a result of this survey, another parent took the opportunity to bridge the school-home gap by providing us with extra information about her child's feelings: "My child strongly feels separated from the class by leaving for Title 1. He feels he misses many activities that his friends enjoy" (Parent Survey 3). Shortly after issuing this survey, this family chose to speak with the Title 1 teacher about arranging a different time for their son to leave for services.

Although teachers send home newsletters and discuss learning activities during Back-to-School events, there still seems to be interference in the communication that occurs between students, parents, and teachers. While many children may talk about certain aspects of school, they may not speak about the academics without being prompted by parents who are informed about the current events in the classroom. I believe that the evidence above supports the claim that a mid-year parent survey can help open the lines of communication among the three parties involved, with the most important dialogue being initiated between parents and their children.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

After completing this project, I found that I have soundly returned to my "child advocate" frame of thought, even though my educational philosophy will continue to change and grow. As I sit or stand at the front of my classroom, I no longer see twenty-one faces of students who may or may not be enjoying my lesson. Completing this project has made me aware that I must not rely on my assumptions about what children think about school; in reality, I need to ask them if I would like information about their perceptions. I assert that a lack of communication with our students creates a deficit in our ability to grow as elementary educators. After all, we need not operate under the personal assumptions that our students feel safe, comfortable, and challenged in our classrooms; true evidence for these statements can only be provided from the students themselves. Analyzing student work is not enough to make claims about the feelings and motivations of students. Although the students may be producing outstanding work, they may in fact dislike doing so. Whichever sentiments happen to be involved, it is pertinent to remember that these ideas are often concealed and masked, and an effective educator with a child-centered philosophy takes the time to delve into the children's true thoughts. I came to realize that it is not a mark of incompetence to ask the students for carefully selected items of feedback; rather, it demonstrates a commitment to providing each child in my classroom with an education and environment that meets their needs. However vulnerable we make ourselves in the process of collecting feedback, we must not sacrifice the promise of improvement for fear of constructive criticism.

Being that one of my goals as an educator is to cultivate my students' independence and self-efficacy, it seems illogical that I would provide few opportunities for them to exercise the decision-making necessary to meet this goal. For example, if children feel happier about writing

when they can choose where to sit or what to write, I can significantly impact students' attitudes simply by taking the time to listen to them. It is not enough for students to simply "get it" or merely participate in meeting the lesson's objectives. As a teacher, I am responsible for improving students' attitudes about the content I am teaching. In order to address these beliefs, I will find it necessary to provide early and mid-year surveys to my future students in order to elicit their voice, and subsequently act on their ideas. This practice should enhance their perceptions of school and of myself as a responsive teacher. Providing student choice will likely be a remedy to many of the children's concerns, as they desire autonomy. Therefore, naturally embedding student choice into lessons in each subject area, as well into classroom management, will serve as a preventative measure in addition to a method of best practice. In utilizing student voice and choice, I will need to remember the great balancing act that Riordan (1998) described: the balance of empowering children with choices that will foster feelings of autonomy, yet retaining some power to exercise the professional judgment that is vital to students' growth. Children may not be developmentally ready to handle choices in some domains of the classroom, but it is essential to seek to understand their perspective and make changes in accordance with their readiness.

Despite the conclusions that I was able to draw from the evidence I collected, new wonderings were raised in the process of incorporating student voice and choice in the classroom. Now that I have successfully embarked on my journey by instituting some "surface level" opportunities for student choice in my classroom, I wonder about the impact of incorporating student choice into major subject area lessons. For instance, if primary students were given choice in regard to demonstrating their knowledge of a particular lesson objective or concept, would they be more committed to completing their personal best work? Would they be

more engaged in learning? Would their learning deepen as a result of having the choice to

demonstrate knowledge in a way that is conducive to their understanding and learning

modalities? Next year, I plan to explore these wonderings as I spend time getting to know a

different group of students and a different curriculum.

My continuing challenge as an educator will remain empowering my students as well as

myself in the process of learning, as well as to improve my students' perceptions of the content

and processes they are learning. My beliefs fuel my desire to do so:

Although I do not know how the children will perceive my offering them a chance to
provide feedback, I do hope that they will come to understand that I appreciate their voice and
honesty. When they help me understand, I can begin to understand how to tailor my classroom
and/or instruction to meet their needs. I should not be afraid to put myself in this vulnerable
position; I believe that even primary aged students have extremely feasible ideas that may help
make their learning more enjoyable, while decreasing management issues. The idea of using
feedback from young students creates a new task for me as a teacher, eloquently described by St.
Francis de Assisi, "Seek first to understand, then to be understood" (Wilson, Journal 2/3/2005).

Our philosophy is inextricably connected to our students' motivation and their

perceptions of school. Thus, what do you believe? And are you making decisions in accordance?

The answers to these questions affect our students as much as ourselves.