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The Effect of Student Agency in a Kindergarten Classroom

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The Effect of Fostering Student Agency in a Kindergarten Classroom

A Mixed Methods Research Methods Proposal

Presented to the Graduate Faculty of Minnesota State University Moorhead

By

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Requirements for the Degree of

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ABSTRACT

With an emphasis on standardization in the public-school education system, educators are losing opportunities for students to take ownership in their learning and develop meaningful skills to implement into their own personal lives. By allowing agency in the learning environment, students can make decisions and choices in their learning that will allow them to be motivated and successful. This mixed methods research study examined the effectiveness of fostering student agency in a kindergarten classroom by comparing the surveys, interviews, and performance results of two groups of students within one classroom. The first group of students were given a choice in what literacy activities they completed and the length of time it took to complete them. The second group of students were given explicit directions from the teacher on which activities needed to be completed and the order to complete them in. At the beginning and end of the study, all students completed a survey and interview used to examine their lived experiences. In addition, they were individually assessed in naming letter sounds to show their growth in literacy skills throughout the study. This data was analyzed to determine whether providing students with choice in their learning can increase student motivation and success.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The last several decades have shown great changes in the education system, with an increased emphasis in public schools that focuses on standardization and test-driven instruction (Ravitch, 2010). This change has led to a shift in the pedagogical beliefs and practices of educators in public education showing the importance of student-centered instruction to ensure student motivation and success in their learning (Jones, 2015). Educators must shift their practices to highlight student agency in the classroom to ensure a rich learning environment (Vaughn et al., 2020). By fostering a learning environment that supports student agency, educators can ensure that students are provided with ample opportunities to become lifelong learners.

Student agency is student-centered instruction, allowing for opportunities for students to make decisions and take control of their learning. Vaughn et al. (2020) defines student agency as “the ability of individual students to influence and to create opportunities in the learning context through intentions, decisions, and actions” (p. 427). Student agency is a relatively new practice that still has much room for research to analyze its’ implications and practice. It is a very complex and growing process that requires critical reflection of the role of a teacher and student in the classroom (Robertson, 2017).

This study will explore ways in which student agency can allow for meaningful choice in the classroom to increase student motivation and success. The researcher will be conducting a mixed methods study that utilizes quantitative methods in conducting student interviews and surveys, while also utilizing qualitative methods by using a phenomenological analysis of

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student interviews to identify ways in which student agency influences the learning environment as well as an analysis of student performance scores.

Brief Literature Review

The term “student agency” is relatively a new term used to describe the way that students are acting independently with their learning environment and taking control of their learning to become active learners. McGregor and Frodsham (2022) explain how agency is a term that can be difficult to define due to its complexity within the sociocultural environment that is dependent on both the individuals and the way they engage within their surroundings. However, over the last decade, there has been a great amount of research beginning to surface regarding student agency in the classroom. This research involves the impact that academic choice, student voice and agency can have on student learning as well as pedagogical beliefs.

While research about student agency has been primarily released over the last five to ten years, there are references to literature that began to explore this complex topic dating back several decades. Albert Bandura’s research that led to the development of the social learning theory set the groundwork for the current research regarding student agency. Bandura’s theory dates to the 1970’s where he noted the how “both environmental and cognitive factors interact to influence human learning and behavior” (McLeod, 2016). Researchers have used his work to further identify the way that the learning environment can impact student achievement.

Statement of the Problem

There are many ways that educators can ensure student-centered instruction, that is, allowing opportunities for students to create meaningful connections to their learning. Fostering a classroom that promotes choice and voice from students in their learning in a critical way to

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ensure instruction meets the needs of individual students. It allows for opportunities for students to “question, express their opinions and ideas, and engage in meaningful... experiences” (Vaughn et al., 2019, p. 427). It allows students to problem solve and collaborate with their peers to engage in meaningful discussions.

When educators limit the opportunities available to students to make choices in the classroom and practice student agency, they are limiting the opportunities to develop life-long learners (Jones, 2015). There is great value to supporting student agency as it enables students to be self-guided learners and can have positive impacts on student learning and motivation (Manyukhina & Wyse, 2019).

Purpose of the Study

This study will be conducted because it is of high importance and relevance to the researcher. She completed her student teaching experience abroad in New Zealand where she spent twelve weeks in a classroom that utilized the play-based learning approach. Play-based learning is a relatively new philosophy and style of teaching that has been researched primarily in New Zealand and beginning to find root in the United States. However, because of its novelty, many are hesitant and reluctant to embrace this approach to learning. There is a great amount of independence and control given to the students which can feel like too much of a release of power from educators. The classroom the researcher was placed in was a pilot classroom for the school district. She worked with two teachers with a combined class of fifty-two first and second graders. The students were encouraged to interact with tools and spaces that were relevant to them to allow them to explore their own interests. The students were guided and encouraged to practice student agency by taking control of their learning. They navigated spaces that were both familiar and unfamiliar to them and were encouraged to collaborate with their peers in their

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explorations. The students were supported by their teachers in their learning by having visual check-ins for the students to indicate how they felt about their learning. This was truly a unique experience that opened a world of endless possibilities to establish student-centered instruction. The purpose of this study is to explore how allowing students to have choice and agency in their learning can impact their achievement and motivation.

Research Question

The research question for this study is: How does supporting student agency as a pedagogical framework affect student motivation and performance in the classroom and inform one's practice?

Definition of Variables.

The following are the variables of study:

- **Independent Variable:** The independent variable for this study is the opportunities for students to have choice in the completion of their activities during literacy centers. Students will be allowed to have several options of activities to complete with no requirement to complete all of them or in a particular order. By providing them with a choice in their activities, students will be motivated to complete activities that are of interest to them and appropriate for their abilities.
- **Dependent Variable:** The dependent variable for this study is the change in student motivation and success of completing their work through fostering student agency.

Significance of the Study

By conducting this research and study, the researcher will obtain a more in depth understanding of student agency and how to create explicit and accessible opportunities that

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allow students to take ownership in their own learning (Manyukhina & Wyse, 2019). It is important for all participants because it meets the differentiated learning needs of students.

Bandura set the foundational work for this study as researchers continue to explore how learning environments and cognitive factors can impact student learning (Bandura, 2001). The rationale for this research is to not only improve one's own practice but also to contribute to a topic that is seen to be growing in literature. Pedagogical belief and philosophies within education are constantly evolving, requiring educators to continuously be searching for better practice.

Research Ethics

Permission and IRB Approval.

In order to conduct this study, the researcher will seek MSUM's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to ensure the ethical conduct of research involving human subjects (Mills & Gay, 2019). Likewise, authorization to conduct this study will be sought from the school district where the research project will take place (See Appendix A & B).

Informed Consent.

Protection of human subjects participating in research will be assured. Participant minors will be informed of the purpose of the study via the Method of Assent that the researcher will read to participants before the beginning of the study (See Appendix C). Participants will be aware that this study is conducted as part of the researcher's Master Degree Program and that it will benefit her teaching practice. Informed consent means that the parents of participants have been fully informed of the purpose and procedures of the study for which consent is sought and that parents understand and agree, in writing, to their child participating in the study (Rothstein & Johnson, 2014) (See Appendix D). Confidentiality will be protected using pseudonyms (e.g.,

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Student 1) without the utilization of any identifying information. The choice to participate or withdraw at any time will be outlined both verbally and in writing.

Limitations.

There are some limitations to this study that need to be noted. First, because this research is being conducted in the researcher's kindergarten classroom, the participants of the study will only be the students in her classroom. There will not be a comparison to other learning environments and classrooms. This may limit the validity and reliability of the research. Secondly, surveys and written student data will need to be conducted orally to ensure that the students understand what is being asked of them. Because of their academic abilities, not all students will be able to read directions or prompts for this study. Another limitation is the attendance of students at school. Inconsistent attendance can limit the results of this study. Outside factors affecting the students and researcher can also limit this study as these limitations are outside of the researcher's control.

Conclusions

Student agency is a growing complex approach in education that supports students to be active learners in making their own choices and taking ownership in their learning. When focused on standardization and test-driven instruction, educators are limiting the opportunities available to students to create meaningful connections and application of their learning (Moses et al., 2020). By fostering student agency in the classroom, educators can provide opportunities for students to apply critical thinking and problem-solving skills by focusing on the student learning process that will increase student motivation and achievement (McGregor & Frodsham, 2022). The next chapter will review literature that sets the groundwork for this study.

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CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Over the last several decades, there has been an increased emphasis in public education that focuses on standardization and test-driven instruction rather than supporting the practice of having various instructional strategies modified to student learning preferences (Ravitch, 2010). This has caused a drastic change in the pedagogical beliefs and practices of teachers in public education (Jones, 2015). With a focus on vigorous test-driven instruction, students are not involved in the classroom decisions nor are they engaging in meaningful ideas that develop higher level thinking (Haberman, 1991; Vaughn et al., 2020). When educators limit the opportunities available to students to make choices in the classroom and practice student agency, we are limiting the opportunities to develop life-long learners (Jones, 2015). However, there is currently a gradual shift from teacher-centered education to student-centered education and one aspect of this change is fostering student agency.

By shifting to practices that highlight student agency in the classroom, educators allow for opportunities to foster rich learning environments (Vaughn et al., 2020). Student agency is student-centered instruction, allowing for opportunities for students to make decisions and take control of their learning. Student agency is a rising practice that still has much room for research to analyze its' implications and practice. However, it is not simply a theoretical concept that should be left to researchers and theorists. Student agency can be fostered in the classroom and applied in various and practical ways. "Supporting student agency is a complex and evolving process, involving reflection and restructuring of traditional roles between teachers and students

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to share power and control over learning” (Moses et al., 2017, p. 219). Instruction must be centered around the student to develop self-efficacy as well as gain teacher agency.

Denton (2005) argues that there are two primary ways that students benefit from academic choice. The first is the increase seen in student motivation and performance. The second is the development of critical thinking skills and creativity. The purpose of my research is to examine how student agency can allow me to differentiate my instruction to meet the needs of my students to increase student motivation and see positive increase in their performance. I hope to explore meaningful ways to incorporate and support student agency in academic activities that positively influence student engagement and performance. I will be focused on the critical components that affect agency and the theoretical foundation for supporting student agency in the classroom.

Defining Student Agency

Student agency is a very complex concept and can be a challenging task to define as it is incapable of having a standardized unit to be measured and assessed (Vaughn et al., 2020). Tsai et al. (2020) defines agency as “the capacity of individuals to control and compose their behavior for a determined end, and to anticipate how others would interpret their behavior” (p. 561).

When considering this regarding students in the classroom, it can be explained as the opportunities provided to students to make decisions and then act upon those decisions to act in their own learning (Vaughn et al., 2020). “Agency is a somewhat elusive phenomena to evidence because it involves capturing signs and indications of thinking involved in negotiating meaning, the capacity for initiating, and constructional decision-making” (McGregor & Frodsham, 2022, p. 1). Agency can be seen in the classroom by choice-making in learning, taking responsibility and engaging in learning relationships.

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Student agency is connected to student motivation, self-efficacy, and engagement. However, agency is a very complex concept because it not only combines those various aspects, but it also focuses on how students are operating within a social environment (Vaughn et al., 2020). By sharing authority with students, they are being offered autonomy in the classroom. Learner autonomy should never be assumed to have taken place and requires explicit modeling and practice (Moses et al., 2020; Tsai et al., 2020). Autonomy and agency can reveal itself differently depending upon contexts of learning and the environment.

Though there is no standard assessment that can be used to measure student agency, agency can be loosely measured by the Student Agency Profile (StAP) that allows analyzers to determine if students are aligned with the expectations of performance based on patterns seen in previous research. Teachers can use the assessment to identify students' self-perceptions, persistence, and engagement in their academic learning. It is an important tool because it provides valuable information regarding students' agency that can be used in planning daily instruction and learning activities. (Vaughn et al., 2020).

Student Choice

Offering choice is an important aspect in cultivating student agency and developing a sense of ownership. By making choices, individuals can determine their preferences and practice self-determination (Barry & Celiberti, 2009). Choice making occurs when students willingly choose to make their own decisions on their learning environment (Moses et al., 2020).

Paula Denton (2005) has done a great amount of research regarding student choice and has created a model called Academic Choice. In her designed model, students are given academic choice in the academic content and the teacher simply directs the students through

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three phases which are planning their own activities, completing their work, and guiding them to reflect on their work.

The term “student voice” is often used in conjunction with student choice to indicate the active role and perspective of students that shape the decisions of policymakers, leaders, teachers, and researcher regarding complex school structures (Bahou, 2012). To develop student voice, schools must develop spaces that are inclusive to allow all students to participate in student voice. “Before we can learn to talk with students... we must first genuinely listen to them” (Bahou, 2012, p. 235). School leaders must be willing to truly listen and respond to student voices to cultivate student empowerment, student choice and ultimately student agency.

The positive impact that offering academic choice has on children can improve many skills, including self-motivation, decision making and problem solving (Jones, 2015). Researchers have also found a connection between increased performance and enjoyment for struggling readers when provided opportunities to practice choice (Wong, 2010). Choice allows for students to take ownership in their learning and develop student agency.

Supporting Student Agency

Student agency can present itself in various ways in the classroom as it is a very complex concept. Teachers can find a variety of strategies and resources to implement in their classroom to allow students to take ownership of their learning.

Firstly, students should play a critical role in their learning, and this can be done by bringing in the student’s funds of knowledge (Laboskey, 2005; Moses et al., 2020). This term is defined by Gonzales et al. (2005) as the “types of knowledge that students bring to the classroom from their personal and cultural experience outside of school” (p.6). By considering the students’ funds of knowledge, teachers can connect students’ schema to the classroom curriculum and

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connect academic content to students' interests and personal lives. Educators can foster student agency by allowing for opportunities where students must problem solve issues and content related to their lives.

Secondly, by constructing an environment with problem-solving opportunities, students become less reliant on the teacher and engage in their own process of solving problems. By introducing problem solving activities in the classroom, students can engage in opportunities to develop a sense of efficacy and identity in developing their own solutions (Ryerson, 2017). Problem solving is developed by having high expectations and explicit modeling of how to respond to mistakes.

Another strategy to support student agency is to allow opportunities for students to collaborate with their peers in group projects or discussions. This allows for deeper engagement because the students are synthesizing with their peers. It also allows for a development of social skills as they learn to respect the perspectives of others.

Several other strategies that Vaughn et. al. (2020) recommends promoting student agency in the classroom to allow students to choose their own books to read, encouraging them to practice independence and gradually releasing them to take control of their own learning. Through all these strategies, educators should model student agency by finding ways to incorporate self-perception, intentionality, choice making, persistence and interacting in the classroom.

Teacher Agency

Teacher and learner agency are two distinct processes (McGregor & Frodsham, 2022). Theorists have begun to explore the connection between student agency and performance in the classroom; however, little research has been done focusing on the perspectives of teachers that

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must teach it. Jones (2015) states that there is an “underrepresented niche in the literature concerning the benefits of implementing choice from the teacher’s perspective” (p. 147). There is a need for more research that uses the teacher’s perspective to support agency development in both students and teachers (Robertson, 2017).

Bayou (2012) argues that allowing student voices comes at the expense of the teacher’s voice. Teachers should not feel that they are giving up power but rather sharing power with students and developing a balance of respect in the student-teacher relationship. Teachers must also consider the costs and benefits of including authorship and autonomy in the classroom. They must consider participation, safety, and inclusivity of how agency is affecting the learning environment (Cavagnetto et al., 2020).

Moses et al. (2020) explores the various obstacles that teachers face in supporting student agency and identify various tools and strategies to utilize in supporting student agency. Teachers must be flexible and willing to adapt to allow for student agency to occur. They must create an environment that invites perspectives and ideas that are different than their own. Reflection is a critical tool in assessing experiences, success, and challenges in practice. Learning environments may feel rigid and teacher-focused at times while also feeling too liberal with independence at others.

Theoretical Framework

Student agency is a framework that is newly being used to reform educational policies to ensure students are engaged in critical thinking skills as life-long learners (Moses et al., 2020). This progressive view is changing the pedagogical stance of educators to ensure there is collaboration with students in developing learning opportunities.

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Student agency has been approached by different theorists and have included multiple variables such as motivation, self-efficacy, discipline, and more. There have been several motions to develop a theory of learner agency, or agency for learning (AFL) (Code, 2020).

Theorists that have loosely looked at the influence of agency in the educational context include John Dewey, Lev Vygotsky, Jean Piaget, and Rudolf Steiner (Manyukhina & Wyse, 2019). The theory that will be used in my research to better understand student agency is the social cognitive theory, focused on observing humans and how they take ownership of their learning. The social cognitive theory is a blend of both behaviorism and cognitive psychology as it analyzes cognitive process as an explanation of behaviors and learning (Ormrod, 2014). Albert Bandura has done great research in the development of the social cognitive theory. His research has focused on self-efficacy, modeling of behaviors, self-regulated learning and how cognitive processes affect learning. Social cognitive theorists have explored how student agency is founded upon the concepts of human agency (Moses et al., 2020).

Research Question

The research question for this study is: How does supporting student agency as a pedagogical framework affect student motivation and performance in the classroom and inform one's practice?

Conclusions

Student agency is an evolving approach to instruction that supports students to act independently, make their own choices and take ownership in their learning. Student agency is “multi-dimensional, dynamic, and contextualized entity” (Manyukhina & Wise, 2019, p. 224). It can be seen in the classroom in various ways, such as in the choice of activities, collaboration, problem solving and reflection. Student agency encompasses a large array of concepts such as

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student motivation, self-efficacy, and behaviors, rooted in the social cognitive theory largely developed by Bandura. “All of these experiences, purposeful choices, and opportunities for students to share their voices help develop student agency” (Moses et al., 2020). By allowing for opportunities for students to practice student agency, educators can foster critical thinking and problem-solving skills that ultimately will lead to developing lifelong learners. The next chapter will discuss the methodology for this study.

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CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to look at the impact student agency can have towards student motivation and achievement. A learning environment that fosters student agency supports students in taking ownership in their learning and provides opportunities for students to have choice and voice in the selection of learning activities. In this study, the researcher explored how providing opportunities for students to practice student agency compared to having student's complete activities that were chosen by the teacher. The school district in which this study was conducted prides itself on its' mission statement of "preparing today's learners for tomorrow's challenges". By supporting student agency, the researcher hopes to discover that students are receiving the proper scaffolding to allow them to think creatively, critically, and collaboratively both in the classroom and the world to empower lifelong learners. McGregor and Frodsham (2022) explain how student agency can be observed in the "form of the activity that learners actively engage in, as well as the ways in which they show initiative" (p. 394). The structure of this study was to gather data that compares students' motivation and achievement rate in completing activities that allow for choice and activities that are selected for them. In this chapter, there will be an explanation for how the research was conducted to appropriately analyze student agency and how to then apply those findings to future learning opportunities.

Research Question

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The research question for this study is: How does supporting student agency as a pedagogical framework affect student motivation and performance in the classroom and inform one's practice?

Research Design

The approach for this study was to use a mixed methods research design that utilizes student feedback, surveys, and interviews to collect qualitative data regarding student motivation and achievement, with a phenomenological analysis. The researcher took a phenomenological approach that utilizes the lived experiences of the participants to collect data using open ended questions that compares the practice of agency with practice that is not agency centered. This research design was selected due to the young age of the participants and the value of being actively engaged in the practice and methods being used.

Setting

This study took place in a rural school district in northern Minnesota. The town consists of approximately 4,500 people and is a bustling summer tourist destination. The public school district serves approximately 1,600 students. The district has recently passed a referendum that will shift the district buildings and grade realignment; this project will not be completed for another several years. For this study, the elementary school was defined as kindergarten through 4th grade, as has been the original setup prior to the referendum passing.

The percentage of student ethnicities in the district are as follows: Asian or Asian/Pacific Islander (0.2%), Black or African American (0.4%), American Indian or Alaska Native (1.9%), Hispanic (7.5%), and White (83.1%). In addition, approximately 7% of the student population identifies with two or more races. About 1.3% of students are English language learners. The school is divided evenly in half with 50% of students identifying as female and 50% identifying

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as male. Approximately 32.3% of the total student population are eligible to participate in the federal free or reduced lunch program in the district. The parents and community are very involved with the school, running a successful Parent Teacher Association (PTA) program with high involvement in school activities.

Participants

The population of this study was twelve kindergarten students between the ages of five and six. They were all completing their first year of kindergarten except for one student that has repeated kindergarten. The sample population was made up of six females (50%) and six males (50%). The percentage of student ethnicities are as follows: White (88.4%), American Indian or Alaska Native (5.8%) and one student that identifies with two or more ethnicities (5.8%). There is one student with an individualized education plan (IEP) for an Emotional Behavior Disorder (EBD) as well as an Individual Health Plan (5.8%). Most students come from a two-parent household, with a few coming from a single-parent household.

Sampling.

This study consisted of a purposive sample because they were currently the students of the researcher. All students were in the classroom of the researcher for most of the school day apart from lunch, recess, music, physical education, and designated time in the library. The students were assigned to the researcher's class and is not a random sampling.

Instrumentation

Because this study used a mixed methods design approach, the researcher was the primary instrument for data collection. The researcher used surveys and student interviews to collect data for this study (See Appendix E & F). She designed survey and interview questions that allowed her to engage with the participants to collect meaningful data. The survey asked

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specific questions of the students with a two-option answer while the interview questions were open-ended. The researcher recorded their findings using a Google Spreadsheet that will be used to store individual student scores, survey results, transcribe interviews and any other appropriate data collection. In addition to the researcher, FastBridge Learning was also used to collect academic data. This collection tool utilizes the earlyReading Letter Sounds screener to compare student scores from the Winter screening scores to the Spring screening scores (See Appendix G). This tool was used both as a screener and to progress monitor the students bi-weekly on their academic abilities.

Data Collection.

The researcher collected the data through interviews, and surveys with the students. Interviews were done with the students at the beginning and end of the study so that the researcher could be actively engaged in the student responses. The interview consisted of open-ended questions that allowed students to explain and elaborate on how they have practiced student agency and motivation levels. In addition to the interviews, the researcher also administered a survey to the participants that was used as a self-reflection tool where students were told a statement and asked to choose an appropriate response based on their opinion of their behavior. These methods were done orally due to the abilities of the age level and to ensure all students could participate. The researcher gathered and stored data digitally on a Google Spreadsheet.

Data Analysis.

The researcher summarized the data by reflecting on student answers in their interviews and surveys to determine whether there was an increased level of motivation and success for

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students when given a choice in their learning activities. This analysis included several visual representations to represent the data results.

Research Question and System Alignment.

Table 3.1 (i.e., *Research Question Alignment*) provides a description of aligning the research question with the methods of this study to ensure all variables of the study are adequately accounted for.

Table 3.1

Research Question Alignment

Research Question	Variables	Design	Instrument	Validity & Reliability	Technique (e.g., interview)	Source
RQ1: How does supporting student agency as a pedagogical framework affect student motivation and performance in the classroom and inform one's practice?	DV: change in student and academic success. IV: providing choice in learning activities	Qualitative Correlation	Researcher FastBridge Learning Google Spreadsheet	Results of pre- and post-study surveys were compared. Student interviews validated survey score results.	Student interviews, and surveys.	Kindergarten Classroom Sample Size: 12 students

Procedures

Prior to beginning data collection, the researcher submitted for MSUM's IRB to receive approval for this study by the end of January 2022. After receiving approval, she sent an informed consent letter to the parents/guardians of all students in her classroom. This study took

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place over an eight-week period. Students were monitored over the eight weeks, with formal check-ins at the beginning and end of the study. This provided specific data points for each student. The researcher used this data to determine the impact that student agency has had on academic achievement. By the end of March, data collection was complete, followed by approximately one month of data analysis and completing the final study report.

Ethical Considerations

It was the highest priority that the students' wellbeing was protected in this study. Because all participants in this study are under the age of eighteen and require approval from a parent/guardian, the researcher sent an informed consent letter home with students to be reviewed and signed by their parent/guardian. This letter explained the study, the risks involved and ensured that all participants understood their ability to withdraw from the study at any point without prejudice. The researcher also had an open conversation with her students about the study. She ensured that students felt safe and supported through participation while also understanding that it was not a requirement for them to be involved in the study.

Student and parent/guardian names were protected by having no indication of their name on any document or data collection. All information of the location and specific identifiers of the school was not used in the study to ensure the safety and well-being of all participants.

Conclusions

This chapter explained how this study will collect, interpret, and analyze the data found. This study used a mixed methods research design to examine the impact that a learning environment that fosters student agency can have towards student motivation and achievement. Data was collected by comparing activities that allow for students to have choice with activities that are chosen by the teacher. Students were interviewed and completed a survey to express

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their opinion of the activities and their learning. This study took approximately eight weeks to collect data, followed by data analysis for several more weeks. Student names and information were protected by using pseudonyms. In the next chapter, the researcher will discuss the results of the data collection and findings of the study.

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CHAPTER 4

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRESTATION

Introduction

Throughout the eight weeks of the study, students were placed into two groups. One group was given a choice in which literacy activities they wanted to complete and were not given a requirement for how many to complete. The other group was given a checklist of activities that needed to be completed with a specific order to complete them in. This checklist was determined by the teacher and provided daily. At the end of the study, students completed both a survey and interview to express their experiences of the study. In addition, students were assessed in their ability to name letter sounds within a one-minute interval to reveal if their literacy abilities has increased over the course of the study. This data was analyzed to determine whether providing students with a choice in their activities increased student motivation and success.

Data Collection

Data was collected using a phenomenological approach in analyzing student interviews as well as with a quantitative approach by collecting student scores and survey results. The researcher summarized the lived experiences of the participants to make an analysis in understanding their how they were actively engaged in the environment. This data was collected and analyzed by the researcher as a single participant. The researcher used a balanced combination of qualitative findings and quantitative results to provide further insight of the data.

Results

The bar graphs below (i.e., Figure 4.1, *In Support of Student Choice* & Figure 4.2, *In Support of No Choice*) provide a visual representation of the results of the student surveys.

Figure 4.1 displays the answers to the first four questions of the survey regarding having choice

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in what activities are completed during literacy centers. The figure shows the answers of the survey by comparing the affirmative answers from the beginning and the end of the study. Figure 4.2 displays the answers to the last four questions of the survey regarding not having choice when completing their literacy activities, represented in the same way as Figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1

In Support of Student Choice

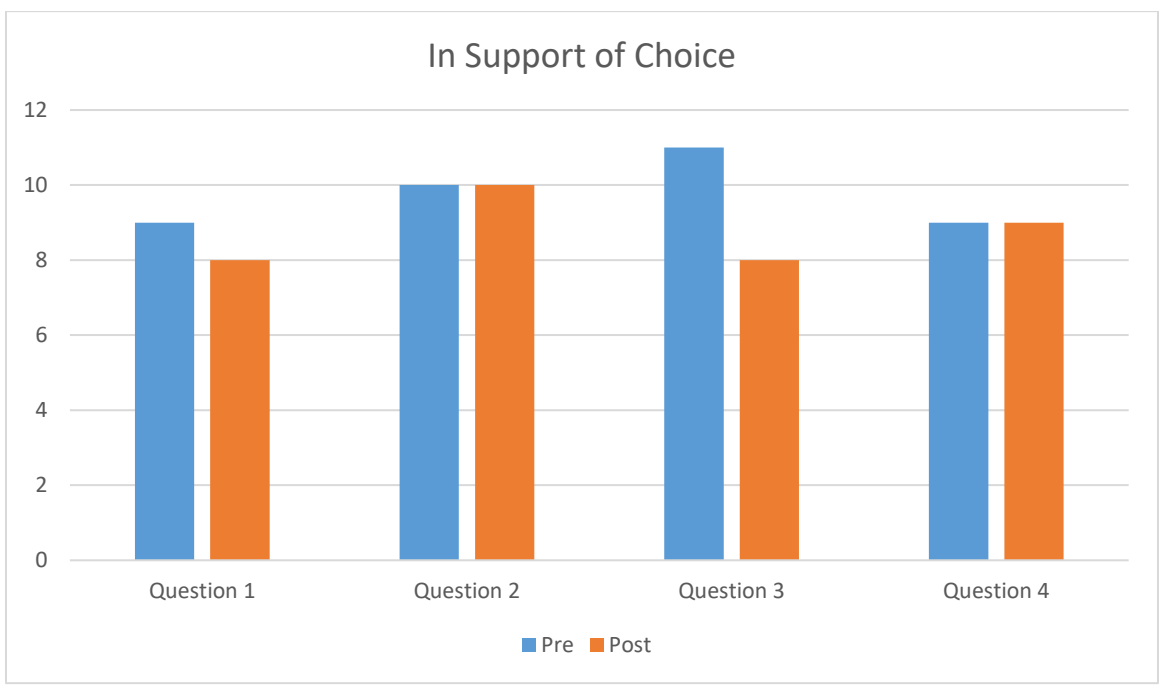
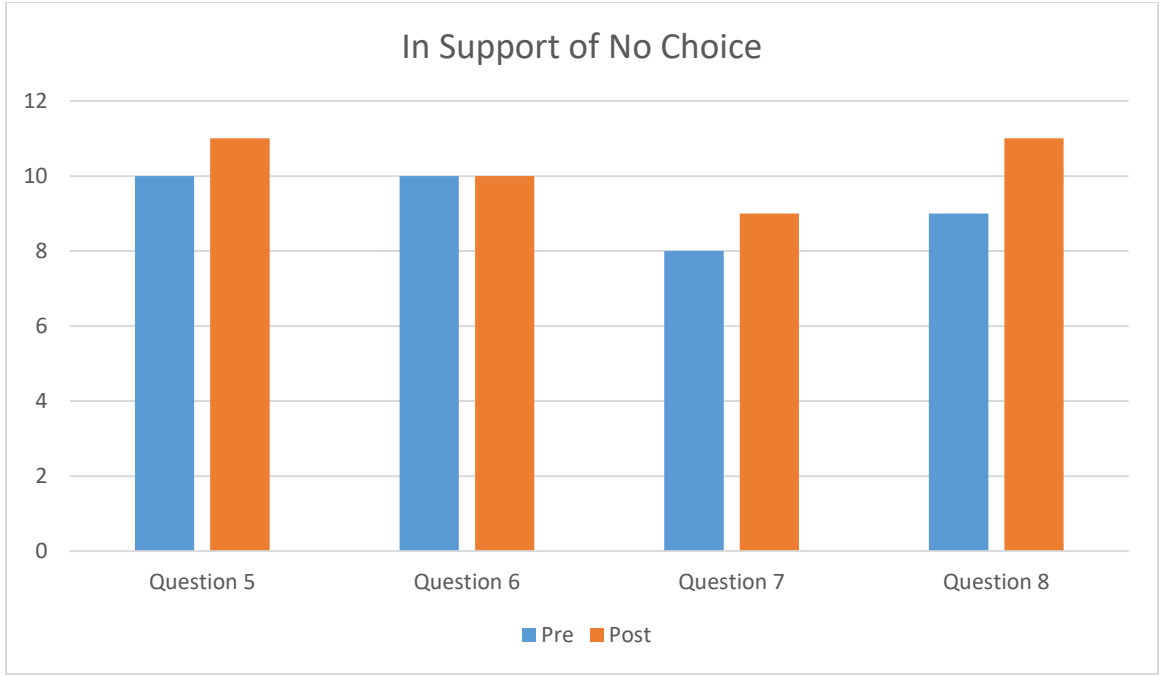


Figure 4.2

Not In Support of Student Choice

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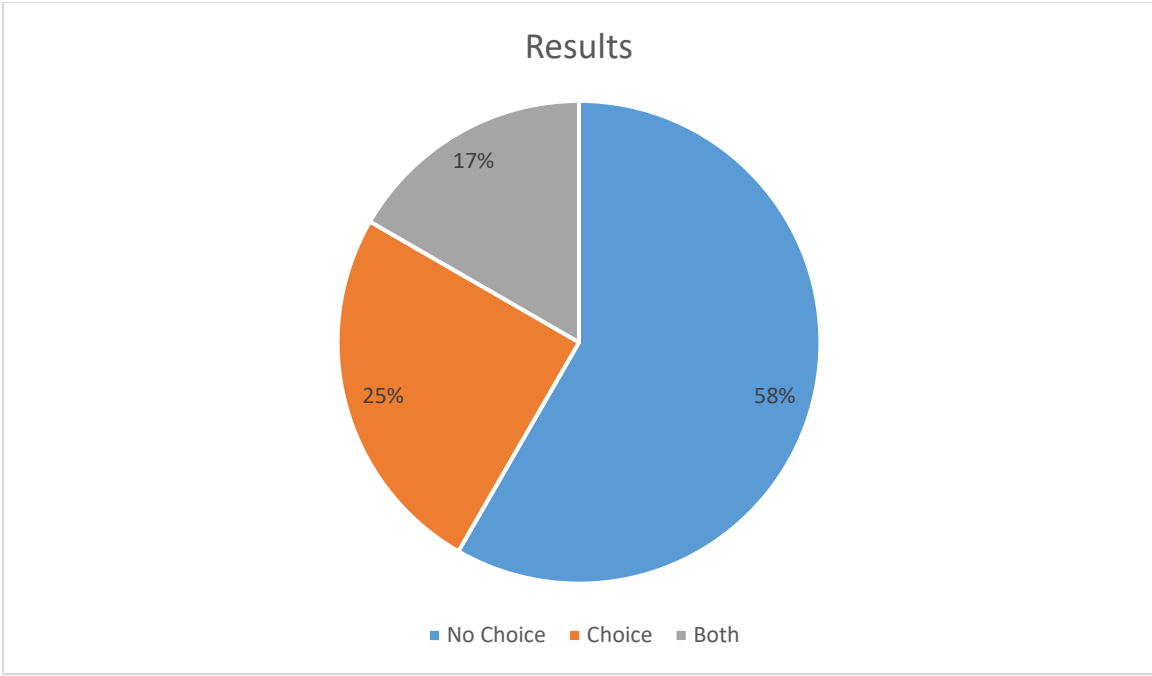


The pie graph below (i.e., Figure 4.3, *Student Interview Results*) provides a visual representation of the percent of student answers from the interview regarding their preference of having choice in which activities they complete during their literacy centers using the phenomenological approach.

Figure 4.3

Student Interview Results

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The table below (i.e., Table 4.2, *FastBridge Scores*) provides a visual representation of student performance scores as monitored by FastBridge Screening tool. Students 1-6 did not have a choice while Students 7-12 did have a choice in their activities.

Table 4.2

FastBridge Scores

	Beginning Score	End Score	Growth	Choice
Student 1	27	30	+3	Yes
Student 2	27	30	+3	Yes
Student 3	26	29	+3	Yes
Student 4	18	49	+31	Yes
Student 5	31	46	+15	Yes
Student 6	15	24	+9	Yes
Student 7	29	41	+12	No

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Student 8	0	14	+15	No
Student 9	17	31	+14	No
Student 10	35	40	+5	No
Student 11	17	30	+13	No
Student 12	0	1	+1	No

Data Analysis

The data results shown above have been analyzed to understand the results of this mixed methods study. The results of the data revealed that there can be conclusions drawn that do not necessarily confirm the anticipated experiences prior to conducting the study.

Figure 4.1 and 4.2 provide visual representations that show student answers to their survey. Figure 4.1 shows that after the study concluded, not as many students preferred having choice in their literacy centers. Their responses either stayed the same or decreased indicating they no longer wished to have choice. Figure 4.2 shows that more students wanted the teacher to provide explicit directions on which centers to complete and less choice. Their responses either stayed the same or increased indicating that they want more teacher direction and less individual control. This data results in showing that students preferred to have more teacher direction on specific activities to complete and the order to complete them in.

Figure 4.3 is a visual representation of the student interviews. Over 50% of students preferred not to have their own choice in their learning while 25% said they did want choice and 17% saying they would prefer a combination of both having choice and no choice.

Table 4.2 shows the beginning and end scores of students when assessed on their ability to name letter sounds within a one-minute interval. All students showed growth by the end of the

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study. Students 1-6 did not have a choice in the learning activities they completed. The mean growth of their scores was 10.67 with a median of 7.5. Students 7-12 did have choice and control over their learning and had a growth mean average of 9.83 with a median of 12.5. This data shows that students who did not have choice in their literacy learning activities showed a higher growth average in naming letter sounds than those with choice. The overall growth mean of the entire population was 10.25 with a median of 10.5.

While the results of the study were not the anticipated result when beginning the research, there are revelations from this data collection that can be addressed. Because student agency has already been fostered in the classroom prior to beginning the action research, it can be expected that the students found interest in a change of routine. The students enjoyed having a new way of completing their literacy activities. It can be concluded that a balance of both student agency and teacher driven direction can be shown to be beneficial in the classroom. It can also be concluded that changing the routine and providing variations to the routine can be beneficial for student motivation. This provides confirmation that providing differentiated instruction that allows students to have the ability to choose between student driven and teacher driven instruction can be beneficial for student motivation and success.

Conclusion

Following the data collection and analysis, there was a great deal of uncertainty as to whether the results of the qualitative data were showing accurate results. Because the results were not anticipated, it can be tempting to conclude that students do not want to have choice in the activities that they complete and that the research did not prove to be beneficial. However, there are great revelations found in the results of this study. It can be concluded that while the students may not have preferred choice in their specific literacy activities, they may have choice

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in other aspects of their learning environment. Allowing for students to choose between teacher-driven instructions and student-driven ownership allows for students to have a choice in their learning.

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CHAPTER 5

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Action Plan

Before the research was conducted, I had hoped to demonstrate the effectiveness of fostering student agency in the kindergarten classroom by comparing the lived experiences of two groups of students given different choice in their literacy activities. The abundance of research and literature reviews conducted allowed me to see the value of student agency in multiple settings and environments that developed a broadened knowledge for me regarding student agency. While the results were not anticipated, they provided me with a better sense and understanding of student behavior in the classroom. I plan to find ways to improve my teaching practice that not only for students to practice agency but also provide students with the proper foundation to rely on teacher direction.

I have found from this research a greater outlook of my teaching practices as I continuously try to improve my practice. This confirmation has bult my desire to continue to be a lifelong learner as I continue to seek higher leverage practices as an educator. The results of this mixed methods study led me to better understand myself as a teacher as well as my students. Most importantly this research has directly impacted the development of my continuing teaching philosophy to be the best teacher for my students.

Plan for Sharing

The results and themes that I found from this study can be comparable to other teacher's experiences education navigates student-centered instruction. This experience has brought growth to myself that I am willing to share with my colleagues and others in the education profession. I want to share the anticipated results I had when beginning this research as well as

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my amazement when analyzing the results of my data collection that led me to expand my understanding.

I will be able to share these results in my professional learning community which consists of the six other teachers that I collaborate with in my grade level. Additionally, I look forward to sharing the results with the administration that has played an active role in this research as I have relied on their feedback and guidance as I explored this research. Finally, I want to share these results with any others in the educational field, whether they are teachers, paraprofessionals, or other support staff, that show interest in better understanding student agency.

Going forward, I hope to have the opportunity to inspire and guide other teachers that are interested in implementing student agency into their teaching practice. I want to discuss my initial expectations, data analysis and conclusions with fellow teachers who are exploring ways to provide opportunities for student to practice agency in their classroom.

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Appendix A

Institutional Review Board



DATE: January 20, 2023

TO: Kathy Enger, Principal Investigator
Rachel Bedel, Co-Investigator

FROM: Dr. Robert Nava, Chair
Minnesota State University Moorhead IRB

ACTION: **APPROVED**

PROJECT TITLE: [1958224-1] Action Research- Student Agency

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

APPROVAL DATE: January 20, 2023

EXPIRATION DATE:

REVIEW TYPE: Exempt Review

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The Minnesota State University Moorhead IRB has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Exempt Review based on the applicable federal regulation.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to the Minnesota State University Moorhead IRB. Please use the appropriate reporting forms for this procedure. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to the Minnesota State University Moorhead IRB.

This project has been determined to be a project. Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate forms for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of .

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APPENDIX B**Authorization from the School District**

To whom it may concern,

This letter is to grant permission for Rachel Bedel to conduct an action research study at our elementary school during the 2022-2023 school year. I understand that this study presents no risk to all persons involved or to the school district. I understand that all data and information from this study will remain confidential and will only be used for the purpose of this study.

Sincerely,

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Michael LeMier, Principal

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Appendix C

Method of Child Assent

I will explain to my students that “I am in school just like you are! I have to learn, study and practice different things so that I can be a better teacher. I am currently learning about how having different choices and activities can help students do better work and engage in what they’re doing. I am going to study how this affects you and the way you learn in our classroom. The principal has given me permission to do this. I have also asked your parents/guardians if it is alright for you to participate in this study. They have given me permission to learn and study you and the way that you learn. Even though the principal and your parents/guardians have given me permission, you also have a choice to participate or not. You will be expected to complete assigned activities as well as having your own choice to complete activities. I will ask you some questions about how you feel about what activities you are doing. Do you have any questions?”

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Appendix D**Informed Consent**

Dear Parent or Guardian,

Your child has been invited to participate in a study on how student agency can affect student motivation and achievement in the classroom. Your child was selected because he/she is in my general education classroom. This study is being used for me to complete my master's degree at Minnesota State University Moorhead. Although Principal LeMier has granted me permission to conduct this study, I must also have parental consent to use this information in my final paper that I am required to do as part of my degree.

Purpose: The purpose of this research is to determine whether providing students with choices in their learning activities and supporting students to take ownership in their learning helps to motivate them and increase academic success. This study will compare the progress that students make in literacy skills by providing them with choice in various activities. Regardless of needing this information to complete my master's degree, I would be conducting this same type of practice in my normal everyday lessons.

Time: This study will take place during the Spring of 2023.

Benefits: Participation in this study may help improve participant's ability to be more successful and motivated in the classroom. Your child will be doing learning activities that practice what we have already learned or are currently learning. By providing students with choice in their learning, students will have the opportunity to complete activities that are of interest to them in a learning environment that promotes student agency.

Confidentiality/Risks: Participation in this study involves minimal risk. Participant's identities will not be shared with anyone. All information will be recorded and tracked under an identification number and not the participant's name.

Participation/Withdrawal: Participation in this study is optional. Students can choose not to participate or choose to withdraw at any time without any negative effects on grades, relationship with the teacher, or relationship with their school. Students will be asked to complete surveys and interview with me to collect data for the study; these will have no effect on their grade.

Contact: Please contact me if you have any questions regarding this study (email: [REDACTED]). Any questions about your rights may be directed to the principal investigator of this study, Dr. Kathy Enger (email: kathy.enger@mnstate.edu), or to Dr. Robert Nava (email: robert.nava@mnstate.edu), Chair of the MSUM Institutional Review Board.

"I have been informed of the study details and understand what participating in this study means. I understand that my child's identity will be protected and that he/she can choose to stop participating at any time. By signing this form, I am indicating that I have read the information provided above and agree to allow my child to participate in the study."

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(Appendix D Continued)

Name of Child (Print)

Signature of Parent or Guardian

Date

Signature of Investigator

Date

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APPENDIX E

Student Surveys

Name: _____

Date: _____

Survey

	Yes	No
1. I prefer to choose what activity I do	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. I try my best when I choose an activity to do.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. I stay on task the entire time when I choose to do it.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. I find it easier to get my work done when I choose.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. I prefer my teacher to tell me what to do.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. I try my best when my teacher tells me to do an activity.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. I stay on task the entire time when my teacher tells me what to do.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. I find it easier to get my work done when my teacher tells me what to do.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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APPENDIX F**Student Interview Questions****Interview**

1. Do you enjoy completing your literacy activities?

2. Would you prefer to complete a different activity?

3. If you had the choice, what activity would you have chosen?

4. How do you feel you have improved in your literacy skills?

5. Do you feel you try your best?

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APPENDIX G

FastBridge Screening Assessment

« Cancel Clear All Hide Directions Submit »

Directions

Preparation

Student Practice

Begin Test

Timing, Scoring, Discontinue, and Notation (Timed Section)

Scoring Details

Optional: Administer all Unique and Dual Sounds

Dual Sound Administration (Conduct after 1-minute assessment of other letter sounds)

Remaining Dual Sound Test Items

Timing (optional)

Administration Type
 Real-Time Paper-Pencil

Test duration: 1 minute

Start Timer

Time Elapsed: 0 Seconds

Submit test »

Student completed inventory

Scoring

Mark Last Letter

Bulk errors

Show error tracking

Add note

Letter Sounds - Progress Monitoring Form 14

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e y n b h j

x w e qu

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	Total	Correct	Accuracy %	Correct per min.
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