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# Student Centered Curriculum: Elementary School

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Student Centered Curriculum: Elementary School

A Thesis Presented in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements of the Degree of

Bachelor of Arts

in

Liberal Studies

Dominican University of California  
San Rafael, CA

by

Atria Rondone

May 2014

**SIGNATURE PAGE**

This Capstone Thesis has been presented to and approved by the chair of the Humanities Department in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In thinking about my schooling over the years, there are several people I wish to acknowledge and thank. My fourth grade teacher, Mr. Riddle, let students experience freedom and incorporated differentiated instruction in his class. One of his assignments, “Make A Claymation Movie” is an example, where several students would work together on the projects with minimal teacher interruption. My eighth grade teacher, Mr. Young, was the teacher who showed me how my education could relate to my life. He reinforced the importance of taking a personal responsibility for my education. At Dominican, Robert Bradford, showed me that I can achieve my goals. He was realistic about my strengths and weaknesses, which helped me think more realistically. I also want to thank Madalienne Peters, my liberal studies teacher and advisor. In a time when I felt lost and confused, she picked me up and showed me the path. Through talking with her, I feel confident about my research and place in the education field. I would like to thank Luba Roniss, my dearest friend, for lifting my spirits through this difficult process. There were many times when I wanted to quit, but she reminded me how worthwhile the sacrifices would be in the end. She and I have talked for hours about controversial topics brought up in my classes. My grandparents, Curt and Sylvia Sperling, have been an amazing support system during my schooling. Not only were they financially supportive, but they also babysat when I needed and gave me time to complete my schoolwork. My spouse, Dominik Mosur, has also been vital in the process of me completing school. He has become an amazing father while taking care of our son during my class-time. I am incredibly lucky to have these people in my life and would not be finishing my bachelor’s degree without them.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Student-centered learning has an important place in education because it fosters student engagement and allows the traditional micromanaging teacher to transform into a guide. The current education model emphasizes teacher control and curriculum based on standardized testing, which stunts students' natural learning processes. This study investigates the positive outcomes of student-centered learning and how these practices can be included in mainstream, elementary classrooms.

A review of the literature found that student-driven curriculum uses experiential knowledge and student choice to increase student responsibility and retention, while establishing effective techniques for self-regulation. It also exposes the difficulties in creating a student-centered environment for contemporary teachers due to the many political, financial and creative factors that affect decisions about classroom organization and lesson planning.

This study follows a mixed method design using qualitative and quantitative data. Participants include four, female teachers between the ages 20 to 40 from an elementary setting. In addition, a pilot study was conducted in a mock classroom using selected students to participate and provide feedback about direct-instructional approach versus a student-motivated lesson.

Results indicated that students prefer having a choice in the classroom. It was also shown that there are multiple ways to integrate student choice into a mainstream classroom.



## **CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION**

Student-centered curriculum proved an effective teaching method for me, after tirelessly trying to teach my son to read. Once I let him start picking the books, he showed an interest in finding the title, names of characters and how to recognize certain words. Eventually, led him to asking me to write words on his “world wall” so that he would know how to spell things and read books to himself. I relinquished forcible instruction, and his curiosity motivated him to learn to read. By allowing him to dictate what and how to learn, he was able to retain pertinent information.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Student-centered curriculum shows promise as an effective way to increase student engagement, retention and critical thinking. In a student-centered classroom, teachers organize lessons utilizing students’ inherent motivation to increase engagement and relate subject matter using experiential learning techniques. A student-centered classroom is manageable for both teacher and student because the teacher leads by creating an implicit structure while monitoring students personalize learning.

Despite research that documents the success of student-centered learning, student-centered curriculum has not been incorporated into mainstream public classrooms. Legislation such as, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), constrains teachers to limit their teaching styles to direct-instructional approaches that follow a standardized testing structure. Teachers are often motivated by STAR (California Department of Education, (CDE), 2014b) testing prep books when creating lessons because they must ensure their students are prepared to score high on standardized tests.

Limiting methods present two problems: some teachers feel unmotivated because they are stuck teaching “to the test”, and students may feel bombarded by facts without context and pressured to retain them. Teachers also feel trapped because some school funding is directly related to STAR test scores (CDE, 2014b), so teachers have no choice but to teach limited content. The teachers and students are severely limited because of NCLB and STAR test stress.

In mainstream education, students are expected to learn information in the same way as everyone in the classroom, which may not be effective for each child. Standardized teaching does not meet the needs of the various learning styles in the classroom. Offering a multitude of activities may help students reach their full potential and save them from feeling alienated if they are not able to grasp concepts in the same way as their classmates.

What if there was a way to teach the Common Core Standards (CDE, 2014a) and standardized test information while allowing students to control their education? Student-centered curriculum allows teachers and students to participate in the classroom through collaborative practices. This researcher aims to support implementing student-centered techniques as a way for teachers to meet Common Core Standards while empowering students to create an enjoyable, effective learning environment.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study addresses a major problem of mainstream education by creating responsible critical thinkers, and deemphasizes test competence. This study describes whether student-centered curriculum allows for problem solving through concrete and abstract modalities, which will help students succeed in the current workforce. The research aims to help teachers modify curriculum to cater to different learning styles.

This study suggests that using student-centered techniques creates an engaging environment wherein teachers are relieved from constantly addressing behavior problems. In addition, this study provides tips for making students responsible for their behavior and helping them to collaborate to create a calm environment. This research illustrates how student centered education uses student choice to engage students in their own learning.

This study offers examples of classroom activities that may help increase retention and active participation during class-time. This study give examples of ways teachers can use internal motivation or curiosity to drive learning. It lists ideas for direct experience activities using manipulatives or research methods for elementary grades.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Consequently, the purpose of this paper is to explain the benefits and reasoning behind student-centered education. This paper also documents how schoolteachers can implement student-centered curriculum to accommodate all learning styles and curiosities, while still meeting the Common Core Standards in accordance with standardized testing requirements.

### **Background Information**

The problems presented in the study have been researched extensively. The research begins with perspectives from Jean Jacques Rousseau, Reggio Emilia, Maria Montessori and Magda Gerber. One study by Widger and Schofield (2012), explains teachers' perspectives about their place in the classroom. The teachers reflect on whether their participation is a positive interaction or a negative interruption. This suggests that teacher interruption may stunt students' learning processes.

Jean Jacques Rousseau (as cited in Forbes, 2012) was one of the first psychologists to study outcomes of a student-centered approach. Rousseau helps show that asking a student what they want to learn is a way to engage them in a lesson.

A study by Phillips (2011) explores how students feel about education when they have experience both direct-instruction and student-centered approaches. Her study helps reinforce that students appreciate a teacher who acknowledges their individuality and learning styles. Phillips' (2011) study makes it clear that the student-centered approach helps students because they can see a direct connection to their lives.

Kaplan, Kaplan, Madsen and Gould (1975), give concrete examples for how to include experiential learning into a classroom, including tips for classroom management and for lesson planning. The author's provide a starting place for this researcher to address implementing student-centered techniques.

### **Research Questions**

This study addresses the following research questions: What are teachers' perceptions of student-centered education? How can teachers create opportunity for choice in an environment of conflicting demands? What types of activities keep elementary school students highly engaged and retaining information? What are students' perceptions of student-centered learning?

### **Definition of Terms**

“No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) – A 2001 act that requires schools to meet specific educational goals in order to receive funding from the government. (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001)

Student-Centered Curriculum – curriculum that takes into account how/what/when the student wants to learn.

STAR testing (CDE, 2014b) – Standardized testing and reporting. Testing used in public schools to assess student proficiency.

Common Core Content Standards (CCCS) (CDE, 2014B) – a set of high-quality academic standards in mathematics and English language arts/literacy that outline what a student should know and be able to do at the end of each grade.

## CHAPTER II REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This section explains previous research that has been conducted about student-centered techniques. These studies include information about teacher interaction; studies about finding inherent motivation, the benefits of experiential learning and some techniques that teachers can implement to create a student-centered environment.

### Motivation

Forbes (2012) describes “Ultimacy” as, “the highest state of being a human can aspire” and, “a concern or engagement that is the greatest that a person can aspire to” (p. 12). This explains the goal and the process of achieving it as one concept. Forbes (2012), and others, agree that this trait is the maximum development of a human being. “Ultimacy is seen more as an end point on a continuum of qualities along which humans live” (p. 15).

Ultimacy is one of the most important things in education because it is, “seen as central to human nature...” which means, “ignoring it is to ignore a major (perhaps *the* major) and integral part of ourselves” (Forbes, 2012, p. 14). Not only does the individual need to reach Ultimacy for internal fulfillment, and society also requires higher development in order to function best, which is why teachers should foster Ultimacy.

Forbes (2012) also stresses experiential knowledge as a factor in development and education. Experiential knowledge is also called “authentic learning” (p. 20). Forbes’ explains that personal experience is vital because certain concepts can only be learned experientially, such as love. He connects experiential learning with inherent motivation relating to *why* knowledge is learned. “An impulse to learn arising from within the learner...was seen by the Authors as resulting in a fundamentally different kind of knowledge from that which is acquired due to a

secondary motivation” (p. 21). Curiosity is another term to describe inherent motivation.

Curiosity is how most people understand the natural human thirst for knowledge.

Pressley, Dolezal, Raphael, Mohan, Roehrig and Bogner (2003) study motivation in the primary grades, collecting data through three case studies. The research shows effective techniques in motivating students and techniques that deter student engagement. Pressley et al., (2003) show the following ways of implementing the components motivates students in the classroom. Some motivating components for primary grade students are: supportive environment, cooperative learning, connections, interesting content, choice, self-regulation and praise/reinforcement.

A supportive environment needs positive communication with students to create safety and understanding. Masters (as cited in Pressley et al., 2003) creates this environment by praising her students and instills confidence by recognizing effort as the biggest measure of learning. Shell (as cited in Pressley et al., 2003) creates a supportive environment through her positive temperament and interactions with students. For example, “a favorite phrase for Shell is ‘You accidentally got one wrong’ (p. 97).” She uses teasing as a way to lightly discipline, which is more tolerable and less alienating for students. When students “act out”, she finds time to talk with them about the occurrence. Shell cares very much about her students and supports patience and kindness.

Cooperative learning is suggested as a major motivator for elementary-aged students. Masters (as cited in Pressley et al., 2003) encourages cooperation by reducing competition and assigning group projects. She uses instructional time to reinforce the benefit of teamwork and learning from each other. Masters (as cited in Pressley et al., 2003) creates small groups or pairings during reading lessons to create a cooperative working environment. She tells the

students, “The point is...you should be helping your partner” (p. 87). Then students work together to create journal entries about the reading content. Shell (as cited in Pressley et al., 2003) promotes cooperative learning by suggesting, “Help him read, but don’t tell him. Have him sound it out” (p. 100).

Connections play an important role for Pressley et al., (2003). They demonstrate that when the outside world intersects with the classroom, information becomes more relevant and accessible to students. Important connections include cross-curricular, home-school, ethical, personal and future. “Nancy is always getting the students thinking, asking them questions that really they really have to ponder...She is always pointing out how something being covered or discussed in the moment relates to ideas encountered previously” (Pressley et al., 2003, p. 93).

In one classroom, the teacher uses interesting content to motivate her students. Shell Pressley et al., 2003) finds that creative writing engages her students the most, so she incorporates it on a daily basis through a scheduled creative writing exercise. Shell “encouraged a child’s interests and passions,” she also, “used these interests to stimulate broader learning” (as cited in Pressley et al., 2003, p. 133). She uses this creative writing activity to make science information more accessible as well.

Pressley et al. (2003) say that choice is one of the biggest motivators for children. Shell (as cited in Pressley et al., 2003) utilizes student choice every day by giving options such as, picking the order in which to complete late homework assignments. In the class, “students were free to choose the order in which they completed tasks, and they did” (as cited in Pressley et al., 2003, p. 109). Shell stimulates self-regulation, which allows the students to feel in control of their education. “Encourage the child’s autonomy, sending the message that is expected that the child be self-regulated. Resist taking over when a child experiences difficulties, in favor of



providing just enough support so the child can carry on (as cited in Pressley et al., 2003, p. 134).” Students assume a level role to the teacher. Self-regulation in the classroom aims toward life long self-control. One recommendation is, “Let kids take control of experiences. So, when a child plays restaurant, let him or her take the lead. Maybe the attentive parent slips in a little math lesson, perhaps when paying the bill” (as cited in Pressley et al., 2003, p. 133).

Encouragement and praise are described as integral parts of motivating primary grade students. “Promote a child’s competence by encouraging appropriately challenging activities, ones that are neither too easy nor too hard...Encourage reading and math activities...Promote children’s competence by providing positive feedback, letting them know they can do academic things” (as cited in Pressley et al., 2003, p. 133).

Pressley et al., (2003) conduct robust research inside classrooms, which assess motivation in the natural habitat of the classroom over a long period of time. The end of the book offers a list of helpful tools for performing motivating instruction, overcoming declines in motivation, praising well, starting the school year and changing/improving your teaching.

### **Experiential Learning**

In 1762, after years of studying the human condition in relation to society, Jean Jacques Rousseau published a controversial work titled, "The Social Contract", which Forbes (2012) includes in his book. Rousseau spends years testing his theories on a young boy, Emile, and his results were published in this work. Rousseau believes that all knowledge stems from direct experience. He ascertains that even abstract concepts can only be understood after a child has experienced events that relate to the concept. He gives strict theories about developmental stages and says that development should not be disrupted by outside influences; "I kept to the road of nature while waiting for it to show me the road of happiness. It turned out that they were the

same and that, by not thinking about it, I had followed the road of happiness” (Forbes, 2012, p. 67).

Rousseau (as cited in Forbes, 2012) explains that the first stages of learning are related to the five senses because those are the only relatable concepts for babies and young children. He says that they could only learn through using their senses to explore. Eventually, concrete sensations lead to feelings, and feelings develop into ideas.

The most vital aspect of Rousseau's beliefs revolves around letting children's minds naturally evolve. Rousseau believes that the teacher was meant to, "...feed his curiosity, never to hurry to satisfy it” (as cited in Forbes, 2012, p. 49). He means that teachers should only help students discover what matters to them and guide them in researching for more information, but never directly teaching things.

Rousseau believes in the natural evolution of the mind through "the law of necessity” (as cited in Forbes, 2012, p. 52) in a safe environment. For him, children should be exposed to the hardships of life at a young age in order to avoid disaster when they are blindsided later in life. He believes in letting children struggle, so they can experience things on their own, and cope with new feelings, creates well-balanced, self-regulating adults. For example, Rousseau comments on appropriate consequences for lying. He proposes that if a child lies, he should not be scolded for lying, but forced to deal with the mistrust from peers as a result of his wrongdoing. Rousseau thinks that children would appreciate this type of lesson because direct punishment only proves that children should manipulate their behavior when around certain adults. Instead, they need to be confronted with the consequences of their actions.

Rousseau (as cited in Forbes, 2012) advocates play-based learning; non-traditional play that includes rigor, toughness, endurance and exertion. "What will they play with that I cannot

turn into an object of instruction for them?" (as cited in Forbes, 2012, p. 66). He proposes the thought that every play experience can be transformed into a lesson.

Inherent motivation is another important aspect of Rousseau's ideas. He advises that, "...it is rarely up to you to suggest to him what he ought to learn. It is up to him to desire it, to seek it, to find it. It is up to you to put it within his reach...to furnish him with the means of satisfying it" (as cited in Forbes, 2012, p. 70). Teachers need to help students relate school and life, in order to ignite a natural curiosity. He thinks that the desire to learn is inherently instilled in all children, so they will strive to learn things on their own. Additionally, he preached "well-regulated freedom" (as cited in Forbes, 2012, p. 75) wherein students dictate the direction of a lesson while the teacher takes a hands-off back seat approach. He said that teachers should to instruct while giving the child freedom within "a context the teacher controls" (as cited in Forbes, 2012, p. 75). Rousseau criticized modern education for focusing on teaching the right opinions; he suggested teachers teach the facts and let students create their own opinions. He adequately provided tips for how to teach in a student-centered classroom while maintaining structure and discipline.

### **Classroom Techniques**

Widger and Schofield (2012) investigate student-centered teacher's opinions regarding when and whether teachers should interact with children. Interviews establish teachers' feelings about interacting with student's during learning times. Each of the interviews follow a specific philosophical teaching approach, which include: Steiner, Montessori, Gerber, Playcentre and Reggio.

Widger and Schofield (2012) briefly explain the main ideas behind each school of thought: Rudolf Steiner describe that learning through student choice and discovery will create

free individuals; Maria Montessori believes that specific learning tools enable children to self-teach concepts; Magda Gerber suggests allowing children to engage in independent play to develop properly and emphasizes collaborative interactions for necessary care giving tasks such as, diaper changing and feeding; Playcentre is a parent run co-operative wherein child-initiated play is accompanied by parent teaching that proposes that children learn best while playing and that parents should assume the teaching role; Reggio Emilia approach sees children as competent learners who should help control their learning environment by collaborating with educators to create an appropriate structure.

The Widger and Schofield (2012) teacher interviews show no specific consensus about when or whether to interact with students because teachers' opinions are directly connected to the education philosophy they follow. For example, Rosemary (as cited in Widger & Schofield, 2012), who follows Steiner's theory, has no leader in her classroom. She structures activities, but allows the children to choose how they participate. The Montessori teacher, Amanda (as cited in Widger & Schofield, 2012), acknowledges that children still need guidance from the teacher, but the guidance should only be given when they are not actively engaged in learning. She only interacts when a child breaks concentration from a project. Anne (as cited in Widger & Schofield, 2012), who follows the Gerber theory, explains that she injects herself into situations without being invited. She feels that she is inadvertently squashing students' imagination, if the child is content playing solo. The Playcentre teacher, Vanessa (as cited in Widger & Schofield, 2012), believes that the educator should help to extend children's play while learning alongside them. Sandra (as cited in Widger & Schofield, 2012), the Reggio follower, guides her students as little as possible. She believes that her role is to provide ideas for children to build

from. Although the specific opinions differ, the teachers agree that injecting their assumptions into playtime, interrupts the child's mental process and imagination (Widger & Schofield, 2012).

Cubukcu (2012) evaluates teachers' opinions of their own techniques and effectiveness in student-centered classrooms. He uses specific questions attempting to, "elicit personal information related to the teachers" and the "Scale on Student-centered Learning Environments" (Cubukcu, 2012, p. 56). The scale evaluates 50 items to determine which strategies teachers label as being used the most often to effectively create the student-centered environment. Cubukcu (2012) measures "frequency" of four environmental dimensions: time, place, infrastructure-hardware and psychosocial.

Cubukcu (2012) documents that, "children need to be active learners within the context of their culture, community, and past experiences" (p. 50). He explains that if teachers use modern methods, they are able to instill internal motivation and contribute to creating a team spirit in the classroom. Cubukcu (2012) describes that a student-centered classroom should be based on developing problem solving skills through researching, inventing and critical thinking. He explains that teachers need to instill responsibility for organizing and analyzing their thoughts in order to increase self-confidence and self-control. In a student-centered classroom, teachers have the opportunity to help students transfer knowledge to other situations, trigger retention and adapt motivation for expanded learning.

Kolb (1984) claims that active learning is acquired through meta-cognition about thoughts, experiences, perceptions and emotions. He argues four stages of concrete experience: observation, reflection, forming new concepts and having new experiences.

In 1997, McCombs and Whisler suggest properties of a student-centered teaching program should: emphasize tasks that attract student's interests, consist of subjects meaningful to

the students, let all students develop personal learning skills, use activities to help students improve their own viewpoints, support challenging learning activities and contain activities that encourage students to work together.

McCombs and Whisler (1997) say that Time dimension in a student-centered classroom allows students ample time to reach their own conclusions, in a natural setting and within their personal timeframe. Time is listed as the second most important factor by teachers. The Place dimension includes all environmental factors such as school, schoolyard, neighborhood, home, etc. In the classroom, Place refers to creating a conducive classroom for accessibility to teacher-student and student-student communication, research tools and attainable opportunities. Place is ranked lowest (fourth) on the importance scale based on teachers' opinions. The Psychosocial dimension, which refers to internal motivation that is used to instill personal learning, ongoing interaction and awareness of responsibility, is ranked the most important factor in student-centered learning by teachers (McCombs & Whisler, 1997).

The McCombs and Whisler (1997) study is an example of the necessary factors in a student-centered classroom. The researchers describe that the best way to create this type of environment is to allocate time for students to explore themselves, become responsible and learn on their own. Time is key in the implementation of student-centered learning because rushing stifles creativity and diminishes self-confidence.

Kaplan et al. (1975) suggest ways to get children actively engaged in the classroom by doing projects on their own. The book begins with suggestions for the teacher about classroom organization. Some of those suggestions include keeping a "treasure box" for each child. The child can put items in the box that they found throughout a specific period of time, and they can bring the box home every few weeks.

## Summary

The review of literature shows that inherent motivation is important in the classroom. Pressely et al. (2003) observe that a supportive environment, cooperative learning, connections, interesting content, choice, self-regulation and praise are effective ways of maximizing internal motivation. Pressely et al. (2003) state that choice is the strongest indicator of motivation in the classroom. Rousseau suggested that experiential learning stems from “the law of necessity” (as cited in Forbes, 2012, p. 52) and therefore, everything should be learned through direct personal experience. Widger and Schofield (2012) show that when teachers interact with students, they could be interrupting the learning process. Different teaching philosophies correlate with opinions about interactions versus interruption, but the teachers admitted that interacting with students might be intruding on students’ learning process.

Overall, the research indicates that a student-centered teaching program should include the option for student choice of activities that capture their interests, contain meaningful subject matter, consist of challenging activities and encourage cooperative learning. The literature shows that student choice is the key to optimizing inherent motivation and experiential learning while accommodating multiple learning styles.

## **CHAPTER III METHOD**

### **Research Design**

This research follows a mixed method design using qualitative data from interviews and quantitative information obtained through a quasi-experimental design. The quasi-experimental component involves teaching a mock classroom of kindergarten-aged children using two different instructional approaches and evaluating engagement, retention and organization. The review of the literature provided suggestions about the benefits of personal experience, student choice, self-regulation and utilizing inherent motivation.

### **Ethical Standards**

This study adheres to the ethical standards established by the American Psychological Association (2010) that safeguards participation of human subjects in research. Additionally, this study was reviewed by the Dominican University of California Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS), approved, and assigned number 10196.

### **Research Questions**

This research study addressed the following questions: what are teachers' perceptions of student-centered education, what types of activities keep elementary school students highly engaged, how can teachers organize activities that foster student curiosity, how can teachers motivate students using internal motivators, if/when teachers allow students to dictate the direction of the curriculum and how students feel about a direct-instruction versus student-centered lesson.



## **Participants**

The researcher conducted interviews with elementary school teachers. She also set up a quasi-experimental classroom with a small group of kindergarten-aged students participating in two types of lessons, and then evaluated after each. All participants signed a consent letter. The female teachers interviewed for this study are all teachers in San Francisco, between the ages of 25 to 35. Three of the teachers are Caucasian, and one is Asian. Three of teachers interviewed have taught early elementary grades for over 10 years; one of the teachers is in her second year. The grades associated with the interviewees are: kindergarten, kindergarten/first grade combination class, first grade and a second/third grade combination class. One of the teachers was chosen because she works at a school in which this researcher is doing her fieldwork, so it was an interview of convenience. Another was chosen because she is this researcher's son's teacher. The last two were chosen because they work at a school in which this researcher used to attend, and therefore, understands and respects their teaching techniques. For two of the teachers, I emailed the principal and secretary to obtain authorization for an interview. The other two teachers were asked directly via email. I explained to the participants that research was being conducted about their teaching styles and classroom observations.

The second group of participants is kindergarten-aged students. These students were chosen because their age is the primary interest for this researcher. Five children, between the ages of five and seven participated in a mock classroom. Three of the students are Caucasian, one is Latino and one is Asian. One student used was this researcher's child, so this was a participant of convenience. Two of the students attend kindergarten with this researcher's child. The other two students were chosen based on personal relationships of this researcher. An email was sent to all the parents asking for participation in this study. After parental consent was given,

the students were asked if they would feel comfortable participating in a classroom-like lesson with this researcher.

### **Procedures**

Research was conducted using elementary school teachers and kindergarten-aged students. To collect data from teachers, the researcher scheduled interviews with teachers consisting of interview questions revolving. The questions were designed to inquire about classroom management, observation about student engagement and use of student-centered techniques. The questions also measured teacher opinion about student-centered education. Teachers were first asked to describe their teaching style, so that any answers could be contextualized for proper analysis. The questions following were aimed to gauge possible correlations with specific activities and student engagement.

To collect data from students, the researcher contacted parents to obtain their consent for child participation in a quasi-experimental classroom. Students were placed in a classroom setting and participated in two lessons. The lesson plans were created to strictly mimic specific educational models. Both lessons were created using the Common Core Standards. The first lesson was taught using a direct instructional approach, with mandatory activities. The second used a student-centered experience, offering three different activities in which the students could chose to participate in. Each lesson took approximately 45 minutes. There was a 10-minute break between each lesson. Following each lesson the researcher took written notes regarding retention and engagement levels. After the second lesson, the researcher took notes and conducted a brief focus group, asking the children to compare their experiences with both types of instructional approaches. See Appendix E for descriptive lesson plans.

### **Data Analysis**

In order to analyze data, this researcher observed all notes from teacher interviews, mock classroom notes and student materials in order to map out questions and answers. The questions aimed to measure student engagement were then paired with answers from teachers and observations from the mock classroom. Materials from the mock classroom were organized by activity and titled with the categories listed in this paper.

## CHAPTER IV FINDINGS

Findings were observed in relation to research questions. Therefore, this section contains research questions and the corresponding findings from the teacher interviews and mock classroom study.

### **What are teachers' perceptions of student-centered education?**

As described by teachers, it was found that their perception of student-centered education is somewhat limited. One teacher admitted that she recently read an article about this topic, in relation to asking students what they wanted to learn. She admitted that it was exciting as a teacher to hear what students want to learn about, but traditional structure is more important. The other teachers described their opinion of student-centered education as listening to students' requested activities. Three out of the four teachers admitted that, despite knowing the types of activities their students like, they do not offer those activities very often.

### **What types of activities keep elementary school students highly engaged and retaining information?**

All the participants explained that their students most enjoyed hands-on activities. One teacher said that students were highly engaged during science experiments wherein they control the scientific process. Teachers commented that students liked to touch materials and mix them. Three teachers observed that students connected with music, and retained any information that had been taught musically. One teacher referred to the "Friend Song" that her students whisper to themselves as a way to remind them how to spell f-r-i-e-n-d.

The mock-classroom setting also supplied suggestions for activities that engage elementary students and promote retention. The three centers each focused on a different type of hands-on activity. One center activity involved directing students to build sentences with sticky

foam letters, another was a rhyming word matching game and the third was a story-sequencing drawing station. When the students were given the chance to go to a station, they verbally expressed their excitement. At the drawing station, the students remained calmly seated the whole time. Since examples of story sequencing were displayed on the wall near them, they did not need reminders to stay on task. Additionally at the creating sentences station, the students were engaged with finding letters and assembling them in the correct order.

### **How do students feel about direct-instruction versus student-centered?**

The teachers interviewed did not admit to using student-centered techniques, but some of their lessons do include aspects of student-centered education. The teachers said that when students are given a choice, their excitement is obvious through shouts, clapping and smiling faces.

During the focus group following the mock-classroom, the students were excited to reflect on the lessons. All the students commented that they enjoyed the lesson with the centers. Ironically, the majority of the students said that they enjoyed a hands-on activity that was not part of the centers. When asked what they liked the most, the students answered that they enjoyed recreating a story by cutting out pictures and creating their own book.

### **If/when teachers allow students to dictate the direction of a lesson?**

Teacher responses in this area of research were divided. Two teachers felt unable to offer directional choice to their students, while the other two offered student choice. One teacher who teaches at a small, private school feared that allowing students to navigate lessons would diminish her goal toward challenging academics. In her experience, students took advantage of choice by asking for easy lessons based on topics they already know. The other teacher who felt like she was unable to let students modify lessons admitted that her concern was not resolved

around the students. She admitted to being under pressure from her superintendent to use specific curriculum tools and not stray far from those materials. These include items such as math videos and worksheets. She commented that when using the mandated math video, her students are mesmerized by the multimedia and “zone out”, so do not retain the information. This teacher has over 30 students, so she also has to factor in the varying wishes of her students. She fears that if she allowed for student choice, there would be too many different choices that she could not accommodate them all.

The two other teachers were excited to talk about student choice opportunities. One teacher, from the same small school as the hesitant teacher above, feels lucky that she is in a small environment wherein she can let the students take the lesson in a different direction. During a lesson about weather, she covered her required material quickly and was unsure what to do next. The students asked if they could go to the “drama corner”, so she collaborated with them to create a play about weather and climate. She admitted that in her previous job, she was not able to adjust the lesson in this way because her principal did not approve of variations.

### **How can teachers create opportunity for choice in an environment of conflicting demands?**

Three of the four teachers admitted that there is little room for student choice in their classrooms. They explain that they think young students are too distractible to handle such responsibility. One of the participants said that she uses visual aids and hands on activities when teaching more difficult curriculum and uses worksheets for reviewing topics. Another teacher finds “math with manipulatives” as a time in which her students were engaged and excited, so other educators could use this tactic when teaching math. Actually, manipulatives could be used to teach most topics. Results from the mock classroom study suggest that manipulatives can help students strengthen literacy skills.

The mock-classroom offered three different centers aiming toward similar Common Core Content Standards, from which the students could chose. The centers were organized based on activities that children enjoy such as, drawing, playing with foam stickers and matching games. The centers were related to with specific common core standards like story sequencing and phonetic awareness.

### **Summary of Findings**

Following the interviews and mock classroom, certain generalizations were identified. It was found that most teachers understand what student-centered education is and see the possible benefits, but fear that students cannot handle the freedom without the classroom becoming chaotic. That being said, teachers do allow some student-centered activities and noticed that students were motivated and engaged during these activities. Hands-on activities such as, science experiments were noted to be highly engaging and enjoyable for students. Additionally, lessons using music were engaging and helped increase retention of information. The mock classroom results showed that when students are actively engaged, they are more on task and composed.

## **CHAPTER V DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS**

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the benefits, effectiveness and implementation of student-centered curriculum through a review of past literature, interviews with teachers and a mock classroom experiment. Teacher perceptions of student-centered education are somewhat limited, but some teachers have always been aware of the benefits of student independence and choice. The article by Widger and Schofield (2012) proposed that interacting with students may actually be interrupting their development, and the interviewed teachers practiced techniques that allowed for student choice.

The research shows that there are many activities that keep students engaged. Some important factors of student-centered environments are cooperative learning, self-regulation, choice and interesting content connecting to students' outside lives. Whether activities are interesting or not, teachers noted that hands-on activities are effective in fostering student participating.

First hand experience is key to engaging students; being creators excites and captures their attention. Additionally, research shows that activities involving kinesthetic components often help students to retain information, while visibly enjoying the lesson. Since there are so many factors that create a student-centered environment, many activities can be transformed using these techniques. Examples of particularly engaging activities are science experiments, singing activities and drawing.

Not only do student-centered activities engage students, but students are also observed behaving differently. In the mock classroom, during the mandatory activities of the first lesson, the students were distracted, rolling around on the floor and needed constant behavioral



reminders. During the chosen activities portion of the second lesson, this researcher found she had more time to observe the student's progress because she spent less time keeping the students on task compared to the direct-instructional lesson.

Although young students may not understand the difference between direct-instruction and student-centered, during the mock classroom, they were vocal with their opinions. For example, the mock classroom students commented that their favorite lesson was creating their own storybook.

Research shows that teachers can create a student-centered environment by creating tailor made lessons for their students. By using the technique of centers, teachers are able to accommodate different learning styles. One teacher in the Pressely et al. (2003) study used an imaginative quick write that she knew her students enjoyed as a way to keep them entertained in activities like science. In the Widger and Schofield (2012) study, all the teachers followed an approach that allowed for student choice like the Montessori approach that allows students to decide how to use certain tools. A few of the teachers from this article had no leader in their class, which gave the opportunity for students to lead themselves. The interviews conducted by this researcher showed that some teachers allow student directed activities once they have completed the scheduled lesson plan, if there is time.

Teachers experience limitations, which may be why student-centered techniques are not commonly used. Teachers may not be allowed to use class time and teaching techniques according to personal preference. One teacher commented that she was obligated by her supervisor to use a math video for her lesson, but the students lost concentration. This example shows that the teacher was somewhat limited in her ability to differentiate the lesson due to employer pressure. Teachers also may shy away from student-centered techniques because the

preparation is demanding. For example, to create centers, teachers have to create three or four. This struggle became apparent during the designing of the mock student-centered classroom. Not only may centers cause difficulty, but general lesson planning can also be more difficult in a student-centered classroom because students may change the direction of the lesson in a way that the teacher is not prepared for. This possibility may cause teachers to use more concrete lessons in order to avoid unexpected concepts.

Despite the possible limitations, teachers can create opportunity for choice by realizing that students feel engaged when they are driving instruction. Teachers also must realize that there are tools for learning in every activity and setting. As Rousseau said, “What will they play with that I cannot turn into an object of instruction for them?” (as cited in Forbes, 2012, p. 66). Teachers should spend time planning their activities so that students will have a variety of choices, but teachers must remember not to limit student growth. Cubukco’s (2012) article explains that time is the most important factor in a student-centered environment. The teachers interviewed by this researcher commented that they usually allow for student choice when there is extra time. The mock classroom provides examples for ways that a teacher can structure a lesson based on the Common Core State Standards (CDE, 2014a) while also differentiating instruction.

### **Limitations**

Unfortunately, this study had numerous limitations. Time is a limitation in this study because this researcher was not able to expand on many subjects. The small sample size is also a limitation because participants were selected based on convenience. There were not enough students to adequately measure a broader opinion of student-centered education. Lastly, not having access to a traditional classroom for the mock classroom was a limitation.

## **Implications**

### ***Practical Implications***

The results of this study have practical implications on instructional practices. Since it appears that giving student choice is beneficial in numerous ways, teachers may adjust daily practices to create a more student-centered environment. Practical adjustments include allowing more time for students to explore concepts and work on projects and adding more play-based assignments. Additionally, teachers can allow for student choice of assignments or organize lessons into centers in order to accommodate both teacher goals and student choice. Another practical change may be to increase encouragement and praise toward students in order to reinforce positive behaviors associate with student choice.

## **Conclusions**

Reviews of previous literature and personal research have led to numerous conclusions about student-centered education. It was suggested that authentic learning happens through first hand experience when free from teacher interruption. It was also shown that student choice creates a contextualized learning environment with accessible information because students use inherent motivation to request lessons about real-world concepts that are meaningful to them. The research asserts that student choice reinforces student self-regulation, autonomy, self-control and responsibility. The research also proposes that student-centered curriculum increases student engagement through student choice of centers or projects.

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## APPENDIX A

### Interview Questions

- 1) Please define your teaching style. Why does this approach work for you?
- 2) What is your perception of student-driven education?
- 3) During which activities do you notice your students are the most engaged? How do you measure the level of engagement?
- 4) How do you choose lessons and content? How do you structure most of your lessons?
- 5) What accommodations do you make for different learning styles?
- 6) What techniques do you use to motivate students?
- 7) How do you incorporate experiential learning into lessons?
- 8) What have you noticed regarding lesson structure and retention? Are there relations between increased retention and specific teaching approaches (direct instruction vs. student-driven)?

## **APPENDIX B**

Thank you so much for being a part of these lessons. You are helping me collect information for my research paper.

Did you like it better when I told you what to do or you discovered what to do?

We sat two different ways. Which way did you prefer?

Did you prefer filling out worksheets or learning with “junk”(physical items)?

Did you like it better when I told you the right answer or helped you find it on your own?

Did you like working by yourself on your worksheet or working with other classmates with physical objects?

Again, thank you for your help today!

## APPENDIX C

### Basic Lesson Plan Format - #3

#### Grade Level for this Lesson: Kindergarten

##### I. Academic Content Standards

1. With prompting and support, ask and answer questions about key details in a text.
2. With prompting and support, retell familiar stories, including key details.
3. With prompting and support, identify characters, settings, and major events in a story.
4. With prompting and support, describe the relationship between illustrations and the story in which they appear (e.g., what moment in a story an illustration depicts).
5. Demonstrate understanding of the organization and basic features of print.
  - a. Follow words from left to right, top to bottom, and page-by-page.
  - b. Recognize that spoken words are represented in written language by specific sequences of letters.
  - c. Understand that words are separated by spaces in print.
  - d. Recognize and name all upper- and lowercase letters of the alphabet.
6. Demonstrate understanding of spoken words, syllables, and sounds (phonemes).
  - a. Recognize and produce rhyming words

##### II. Unit of Study – *State the BIG idea that this lesson will address.*

This lesson will use the book “**The Hungry Thing**” to stimulate rhyming, critical thinking, learning about story sequencing and enhance a general understanding of general/basic literature principles.



### **III. Academic Learning Goals (outcome(s)/objective(s))**

*Outcomes/Objectives must be observable and measureable. What will the students do?*

The students will be able to understand the sequence of the story and retell the order. They will understand which pictures correlate with certain story parts. They will understand reading from left to right and recognize punctuation in the story.

### **IV. Intro - Introduction to Lesson**

*How will student's interest be captured? State your exact wording. What will you say to introduce the lesson?*

“Hello boys and girls. It’s getting close to lunchtime and I am SO HUNGRY! (Then, I will put a sign around my neck that says ‘FEED ME’.) Can anyone guess what this sign says? Today, we are going to learn about reading while reading the book ‘The Hungry Thing’.”

**Rationale:** The lesson is being introduced this way in order to give clues about the story in the book. It also captures student’s attention because of the outlandish, funny comment. It will intrigue them to hear what happens in the book

### **V. Through – Instructional Strategies**

*Write out each step of the lesson: exactly what you will do and say and what the students will do. Be specific as you outline each step.*

1. I will seat the children separately in rows and stand in front of them.
2. Each student will get a lined piece of paper.
3. “While we read, I am going to ask you all questions about the book, so be ready to write down the answers.”
4. We will start by looking at the cover of the book. “Here is the title, boys and girls. Please copy the title on your sheet of paper.
5. “Here, at the bottom of the cover, is the authors and illustrators name. What is the difference between an author and illustrator?”

6. I will read the book aloud to the students. While I am reading, will ask the following questions and tell them to write the answers down on their paper:
  - a. What is this at the end of this sentence? (Using a period, exclamation point and question mark.)
  - b. Where should I start reading? On the left or right? Write L or R for the answer. Which way do I go to find the next word?
  - c. How do I know when one word stops and another starts?
  - d. Do you see that “Hungry Thing” is capitalized? That is because it is the name of the “thing”. Write a lower and upper case h and t.
  - e. Based on what the rhyming word the hungry thing said, what is the real food they might feed him? Draw a picture of the food on your paper.
7. “Now that we have finished the story, tell me, who is the main character? This is the person who was in the story the most and was the most important.” (I will call on their raised hands to answer these questions.)
8. “Can you tell me the setting? The setting is where the story takes place, an example is ‘a house’.”
9. “Now, what do you think was the major event of the story? This is the most important part of the story or the biggest thing that happened.”
10. After the story is done, I will give them a separate worksheet with some pictures from the story out of sequence.
11. “Boys and girls look at the pictures on the sheet, where are they from?”
12. “I see that you recognize them from the story we just read, but are they in order of the story? Please number the pictures 1-6. 1 should be the beginning of the story and 6 is the last thing that happened. Number the pictures in the order that they happened.
13. “Now that you have numbered the pictures, can you please turn to a friend and the person on the right should tell the first half of the story. (Wait a few minutes while they do this.) Now the person on the left should tell the second half of the story.”
14. The next activity will be to read some of the words from “The Hungry Thing”!
15. I will give them a worksheet with sentences. One word from each sentence will be bolded and large. It will be a word that they can phonetically sound out. They will take turns trying to read it aloud to the class and me.
16. “Okay, (name), try to read the big dark word. Take your time and try to sound it out.”
17. “You did a great job at reading that word! Everyone please write the word on your lined sheet of paper.”
18. “Boys and girls, you did great!”

**Rationale:** *What is your reasoning behind the instruction being organized and presented in this way?*

The lesson was conducted this way in order to ensure that they adequately met all the standards that were outlined for this lesson.

**VI. Assessment:** I will assess the students during the lesson based on how well they answer the questions I ask. I will also have each of their lined papers and worksheets to refer to. I will assess their reading level based on how well they can sound out the words I picked.

**VII. Materials:** This lesson will use the book, “The Hungry Thing”, lined paper, two worksheets and writing materials.

**VIII. Describe one student for whom an adaptation will be needed.**

a. One student may have ADHD, so have difficulties staying on task.

b. This student will be seated closest to me so that I can remind him/her to keep pace with the class. He/She will also be given special jobs, like passing out or collecting the papers, to get them out of their seat for a minute and provide some needed body movement.

**Basic Lesson Plan Format - #3**

**Grade Level for this Lesson: Kindergarten**

**IX. Academic Content Standards**

1. With prompting and support, ask and answer questions about key details in a text.
2. With prompting and support, retell familiar stories, including key details.
3. With prompting and support, identify characters, settings, and major events in a story.
4. With prompting and support, describe the relationship between illustrations and the story in which they appear (e.g., what moment in a story an illustration depicts).
5. Demonstrate understanding of the organization and basic features of print.
  - a. Follow words from left to right, top to bottom, and page-by-page.
  - b. Recognize that spoken words are represented in written language by specific sequences of letters.
  - c. Understand that words are separated by spaces in print.
  - d. Recognize and name all upper- and lowercase letters of the alphabet.
6. Demonstrate understanding of spoken words, syllables, and sounds (phonemes).
  - a. Recognize and produce rhyming words

**X. Unit of Study – State the BIG idea that this lesson will address.**

This lesson will use the book “**If You Give a Mouse a Cookie**” to stimulate rhyming, critical thinking, learning about story sequencing and enhance a general understanding of general/basic literature principles.

**XI. Academic Learning Goals (outcome(s)/objective(s))**

*Outcomes/Objectives must be observable and measurable. What will the students do?*

The students will be able to understand the sequence of the story and retell the order. They will understand which pictures correlate with certain story parts. They will understand reading from left to right and recognize punctuation in the story.

## **XII. Into - Introduction to Lesson**

“Boys and girls, what do you think would happen if I gave this cookie to a mouse? What might happen if I give this cookie to (student name)? We are going to read, “If You Give a Mouse a Cookie” and find out what happens! After, you will pick an activity to do related to what we read.”

**Rationale:** I introduced the lesson this way to get them in the process of sequential thinking. I want to stimulate them to consider what happens following an action. I also want them to know what to prepare for. This is effective because they immediately are intrigued by what’s going to happen next.

## **XIII. Through – Instructional Strategies**

*Write out each step of the lesson: exactly what you will do and say and what the students will do. Be specific as you outline each step.*

1. I will seat the children in a group on the rug and sit on the floor in front of them.
2. We will start by examining the cover of the book. “Where do you think the title of the book is? Does anyone know where the names of the author and illustrator are? Do any of you hope to be an author or illustrator?”
3. “While I read, I am going to ask you questions about the book. Be ready to turn to a partner and share or raise your hand to share with all of us!”
4. I will read aloud to the students, while I read, I will ask the following questions:
  - a. What is this at the end of this sentence? (Using a period, exclamation point and question mark.)
  - b. Where should I start reading? On the left or right? Put up your left or right hand to indicate the answer. Which way do I go to find the next word?
  - c. How do I know when one word stops and another starts?

- d. Based on what the item that was just given to the mouse, what do you think the mouse will want next?
- e. Why did the mouse want to hang up his picture on the refrigerator?
5. “Now that we have finished the story, who do you think was the main character or the most important person in the book?”
6. “Where was the setting of the book? Where did it happen? An example would be, at a park.”
7. “What do you think was a major event in the story? This would be the most important thing that happened.”
8. “Okay boys and girls, now it’s time for you to choose your activity! There are three stations around the room with different activities, you can walk around and pick one that looks interesting to you.”
9. The three activities will be:
  - a. Matching Game – there will be two piles of cards. One pile will have a picture from the story and an easy to sound out word. The other pile will have rhyming words on them. “At this station, you will match up the words from the book, with words that rhyme! You can look at the example that is taped on the wall and organize your chart on the floor. When you are done matching all the cards, I will have you take a picture of your rhyming chart!”
  - b. Story Sequence Cards – this station will have 6 x 6 sheets of paper, crayons, markers and pencils. “At this station, you will use these cards to draw what happened in the story. Draw at least 3 pictures with something from the beginning, middle and end. When you are done, tape them on the wall under the words and numbers beginning, middle and end. Feel free to make them as colorful as you like!”
  - c. Letter Blocks – this station will consist of some blocks with taped pictures from the story on them. There will also be smaller blocks with letters on them. “This station is spelling with blocks! You can put the block pictures in order that they happened in the story, and then use the blocks to spell the word of one item in the picture.
10. The students will select which station they want and start learning.
11. I will walk around to monitor the small groups and make sure they are on task.
12. If a student or group finishes, they can rotate to another station.
13. At the end of twenty minutes, we will take a tour of everyone’s work. The students will have the option to share out about how they created their work.

**Rationale:** I organized the lesson in this way in order to give each learning style an activity. The Matching Game will attract literal, concrete learners. The Sequence Cards will appeal to artistic and abstract learners. The Letter Blocks will help kinesthetic learners.

**XIV. Assessment:** I will assess learning through the finished products of the stations. I will refer to the pictures, taped up drawings and block creations. I will also assess the learning by taking notes throughout the lesson regarding the students' answers to questions.

**XV. Materials:** This lesson will use the book, "If You Give a Mouse a Cookie", coloring materials, paper, paper blocks, picture cards, a camera, tape and writing materials.

**XVI. Describe one student for whom an adaptation will be needed.**

a. If there is a student with a special need, he/she should be able to find one activity that corresponds with their learning style. They will also be paired with a buddy and have sheets of words to give clues.