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**ACTIVE LEARNING: STRATEGIES THAT HELP FIRST GRADERS
TRANSITION AND BUILD LITERACY SKILLS**

by
Kacey J. Weber

A Thesis

Submitted to the
Department of Language, Literacy, and Special Education
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For the degree of
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Thesis Chair: Susan Browne, Ed.D.

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my loving mother and father, Matthew and Jami Weber, both of whom have supported me throughout my entire educational journey. To my father, my rock, who has believed in me and always emotionally, financially, and morally supported me throughout my life. To my mother, my best friend in the entire world, who has spent countless hours comforting me with words only a mother can provide during the most stressful moments.

I would like to thank my sisters and grandparents for their constant feedback, love, and support during some important decision-making moments.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my great friend, Patrice Steller. We embarked on this journey together and I am not sure I could have successfully completed this program without her friendship, support, and extra set of eyes.

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Abstract

Kacey Weber

ACTIVE LEARNING: STRATEGIES THAT HELP FIRST GRADERS TRANSITION
AND BUILD LITERACY SKILLS

2014

Susan Browne, Ed.D.

Master of Arts in Reading Education

The purpose of this research inquiry was to investigate what happens when first grade students that have not had the benefits of Preschool or Kindergarten education engage in active learning activities. The study was aimed at looking into how such activities can help with the transition into formal education, as well as with building the grounding literacy skills necessary for success in elementary education. The study was conducted in a first grade classroom with 31 students. The qualitative research paradigm was followed and data collected included student surveys, a “Sociogram,” student work, teacher observations, student interviews, and observational field notes. The classroom environment (in regards to setup, arrangement, and displays) as well as the effects of setting a safe and comfortable learning community were also importantly observed during this study. Findings indicate that: 1. Active learning had positive effects on student self-perception, 2. active learning had a positive impact on students’ perception of literacy, 3. active learning strategies and activities helped improve literacy scores, and 4. active learning helped create an effective learning community.

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Chapter I

Introduction

“Ms. Weber, when do we get time to do stuff at school? Like, when do we get to make things or have fun? My legs is hurting bad when I sit lotta time.” Justin is not alone with his initial thoughts and expectations of a school atmosphere during his first week at our brand new Trenton Public Charter Elementary School. He, like 60% of the other first graders at the International Academy of Trenton, has not had the benefit of attending Preschool or Kindergarten. The start of a new school year, in a new building with new friends, new teachers, and a new uniform can be a struggle to young students. Many often have to adjust to the structures of a formal educational environment—the rules, regulations, curriculum, expectations, schedule, and long school day.

As the initial startup weeks progressively passed, I took an interest in watching how these first grade students naturally began adapting to an environment that was all to new to them. As the school’s reading teacher, I have many opportunities to sit in on first grade classes and observe student behavior and understanding. I used a portion of this time to take notice of how students adjust to a school environment and to what affect this transition has on their literacy performance.

At the end of September, the students at The International Academy of Trenton began their benchmark assessments with a SABIS worldwide STAR assessment. As part of my position as the school’s reading teacher, I personally administered and proctored these formal assessments in the school’s computer lab. Students were given a 34-question silent reading comprehension test on the computer. My observation of this assessment

with first graders went beyond simply witnessing the low-level of reading abilities, and included additional struggles that some may not expect to find—working silently, navigating a computer mouse, performing individual work, and remaining seated an entire assessment. It was in this moment in time that I realized the severity of the newness that existed and how such adjustments actually may be hindering the literacy success of these students.

After the first STAR assessment, my observations narrowed to focus more on looking into the way in which students respond to traditional classroom instruction. I paid close attention to comparing classwork to homework, project performance to formal assessment performance, and group work to individual work. I also found myself observing and tracking student behavior, demeanor, and motivation/engagement levels in relation to the tasks and activities formed. As the weeks progressed into October, I noticed the excited smiles of September slowly fading from these first grade faces. Questions more like Justin’s were creeping up on a daily basis; students were becoming more boisterous with their disappointment regarding a formal educational environment, “Can we build stuff? When can we make different things? I wish we could just work on the floor! Why are we always in the classroom? When is the day over? Why do we sit all day? Why must we always be quiet?”

After zoning in on the comments and complaints of these first grade students, I began pondering on all that Preschool and Kindergarten instruction would have granted these children. Aside from educational play and basic phonemic awareness, early start-up programs offer children the opportunity to socialize, explore, observe and create an identity for themselves as a student. After connecting this train of thought to my

observational findings related to low-literacy performance, I instantly began considering the potential benefits of active learning strategies with literacy performance.

Story of the Question

As an avid believer of hands-on learning, I began questioning how active learning strategies related to literacy instruction would help first grade students, particularly those that did not attend Preschool or Kindergarten. The curriculum and material could remain the same as intended, but activities surrounding reading and writing instruction could greatly differ in structure and nature. My literacy lessons with the students could alter to fit a more active learning environment involving more movement, stations, creative activities, partner/group work, and ongoing projects.

The first grade students of the International Academy of Trenton Public Charter School still may need a basic literacy foundation. Active learning could potentially ease the transitional process of adjusting to the complexities of a new environment, while also providing initial reading, writing, listening and speaking skills that are often acquired in Preschool and Kindergarten classes. With the use of such hands-on instruction, students can begin acquiring specific factors related to long-term literacy success in forming a strong understanding of a learning community and acquiring high levels of intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, interest, and engagement.

Statement of the Research Problem

The basic foundation of early literacy instruction relies mostly on an observational phase in which students watch, listen, and carefully draw attention to the actions, dialogue and performance of their guardians (Jenson, 2005). The next step in early literacy development typically comes from a teacher-modeled activity and in the

form of an additional observational lens of the student (Kaplan and Owings, 2000). The experimental phase that closely follows the observational phase is often performed in a Preschool and Kindergarten environment (Jenson, 2005). Typically, educational play involving the formation of social skills, hands-on activities, and the interaction of a learning community simultaneously breaks and combines the ties of at home literacy (Gaitan, 2012). building factors involving cultural discourses and language acquired through life experiences, environment, identity, hereditary and social/economic factors.

Emergent literacy learners in first grade that have not had prior formal education often lack the foundation of these literacy skills acquired through dialogue and hands-on student interaction/play. They enter primary schooling with little knowledge and understanding of a learning community and formal educational rules, regulations, policies and expectations. Their literacy success and the further development of their reading, writing, speaking and listening skills have little to no prior support backing the development and readiness for elementary education. Therefore the problem that exists is that there is already a gap in literacy understanding and knowledge prior the start of formal primary emergent literacy instruction; students that have not attended Preschool and/or Kindergarten are already at a disadvantage in being behind students of the same age that were granted that privilege. Specifically, the question becomes: How can the elementary classroom shape literacy instruction to ensure that students who have not had the benefits of Preschool and Kindergarten achieve success?

Statement of the Research Question

Based off my own observation understanding of the research problem and my particular teaching beliefs and interests, I have come to question the direct correlation of

active learning and this created transitional literacy gap. Therefore, the research question I plan to investigate is: What happens when I use active learning strategies in literacy instruction to help transitioning first graders adjust to an educational environment? Active learning strategies are suggested to help students interact in whole group discussion that can lead to a better understanding of a learning community and thus, improve listening and speaking skills (Auster and Wylie, 2006). If used in relation to the curriculum and in light of the designated classroom materials, can such instruction improve the overall literacy performance and transitioning phase of these first grade students?

In order to investigate and explore this research question, I plan to carefully and systematically collect, organize, and analyze data in order to understand the affects of active learning strategies on the developmental transition and literacy success of these first grade students. Specifically, I want to incorporate active learning strategies into my reading and writing lessons to test its affects on a first grade student's attitude and performance.

Organization of the Thesis

Chapter II presents a scholarly literature review that begins with discussing the understanding and effectiveness of hands-on literacy instruction. The three subcomponents following active learning and literacy discussion are as follows: The maturity and readiness needed for emergent literacy success and development, the topic of classroom environment and atmosphere that best promotes literacy success through active learning strategies, and useful materials and techniques for promoting motivation and engagement in literacy instruction. This chapter ends with a summation of the

reviewed literature and ways this study may contribute to the understanding of promoting a smooth transition into emergent literacy success.

Chapter III of this research study describes the research and methodology study. Organized into categories, this chapter includes: The procedure of the study, the data sources, data analysis and the context of the study including information on the community, school and classroom environment.

Chapter IV reviews and analyzes the data and research of this study. Presented in this chapter are the actual findings of the conducted research study done through a narrative analysis. Answers to the research questions and problems are found within this chapter and organized in a clear manner.

Chapter V concludes the research project with a summary of the findings and drawn connections made from the results. This section ends with conclusions and relevant future suggestions and recommendations for further research.

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

“Research and common sense both tell us that when the human brain is actively engaged in learning, retention soars. Think of the brain as a great computer. If the eyes see while the ears hear, the mouth talks, and the hands touch, the brain is getting four different modes of input. Multiple sources of input ensure that the information received will be processed and stored” (Jenson, 2005, p.26).

Introduction

One of the greatest challenges in early childhood is the transition to primary schooling. Many school districts turn to transformative programs in offering students an extra year between Kindergarten and First Grade to help with acquiring the skills and readiness needed for successful completion of their first grade level (Allington and Gabriel, 2012). Considerable amount of research exists on transformative literacy instruction, as well as on methods and strategies utilized for helping students during Preschool and Kindergarten years smoothly transition into first grade (Auster and Wylie, 2006). However, there is little information pertaining to how to help current first grade students that have not had the benefit of attending Kindergarten to adjust to both the environment and expectations of institutionalized education. Chapter two presents a review of literature related to the effectiveness of active learning and its use in helping promote emergent literacy success. This literature review begins with discussing the understanding and effectiveness of hands-on literacy instruction. Sections thereafter explain how and why such learning may be effective for first grade students adjusting to a school environment. The first subcomponent discusses the maturity and readiness needed for emergent literacy success and development. The next section examines the topic of classroom environment and atmosphere that best promotes literacy success

through active learning strategies. The last subtopic examines useful materials and techniques for promoting motivation and engagement in literacy instruction. The chapter ends with a summation of the reviewed literature and ways this study may contribute to the understanding of the benefits that come from using active learning strategies to help promote literacy success in first grade students adjusting to a school environment.

Active Learning

Active learning, compared to passive learning, may help to promote engagement, motivation, socialization skills, and grade-level readiness in first grade students that did not have the benefit of attending Kindergarten. “Active learning can be defined as anything that involves students doing things and thinking about what they are doing” (Auster and Wylie, 2006). This type of hands-on effective learning can be done without changing the curriculum, standards, or materials in a traditional style classroom (Jenson, 2005). Students, particularly emergent learners and students from low-economic backgrounds, often benefit little from passive learning involving constant lecturing, worksheets, and repetitive assessments based on memorization or typical selective response. According to the National Survey of Student Engagement, active learning and high levels of student engagement through hands-on activities resulted in an increase in learning and retention of grade level reading material (Amburgh, Devlin, Kirwin, and Qualters, 2007).

Active learning is seen as an effective approach to teaching children because it involves a deep level of connecting with the material at hand. The direct interaction that comes with active learning strategies may help young students adjust to an educational setting. According to Ueckert (2008), active learning helps students to understand content

deeply enough that they not only recognize the main concepts and ideas, but they also tie such information to background knowledge and future encounters. Therefore, students are optimizing their learning beyond a single informational session to create long-term literacy knowledge.

Active learning strategies may help to directly build literacy success in young students. According to a study performed by Riggs (1995) involving active and inquiry learning strategies that supports emergent literacy, students “felt more confident, empowered and excited for reading and writing activities when given hands-on inquiry learning strategies” (p. 5). Her study also suggests that literacy based practices are most effective when tied directly to hands-on activities, personal experiences, and small group discussion (Riggs, 1995). According to Fosselman (2013), active learning strategies such as the following: Repeated Reading, Guided Pairs, Teacher-Made Audiotapes, Partner Reading, Choral Reading and Readers Theatre, can directly help build reading comprehension and fluency skills in emergent literacy learners.

Research shows that “...students in our schools today must be approached in a different fashion” (Saylor, 2008, p. 21) than students of prior decades. The ongoing rise of technology and research supporting hands-on active learning strategies suggests educators need to “learn to teach in ways they were not taught” (p. 21) to best promote literacy instruction. Dewey (1943) believed the only way students can obtain literacy success is by the actual act of “doing.” He furthered his perspective on effective learning in saying that the learning done in the classroom should not be for the purpose of preparing for life, but rather it should become the life of the child; learning begins where the learner exists and becomes part of the life of the student. This deep, rather than

surface learning needs to be grounded by authentic, meaningful literacy strategies that promote creative thinking, hands-on activities, and deep inquiry based questioning/exploring (Riggs, 1995).

The hands-on activities offered by an active learning approach helps add to the formation of brain structure in developing readers (Jenson, 2005). Therefore, multiple senses are brought into play when students are observing, creating, and presenting different ideas and topics in early literacy instruction. Specific active strategies, activities, and methods centered on observing, creating, and presenting are continuously evaluated in terms of effectiveness, grade-level readiness, and transitional purposes. The questions many previous researchers began examining are: What exactly does active learning involve, what types of activities promote and support active learning, and what specific benefits are a result of this type of instruction and learning?

According to Khourey-Bowers (2011), active learning involves conceptual change, which means that such learning brings students face to face with their existing conceptions and provides them opportunities to build, test, add or change prior thoughts or curiosities. The room for exploration provided by active learning gives students responsibility for their own learning (Riggs, 1995). An active learning environment provides for a student-centered classroom in which students self construct knowledge through choice on specific topic matter, support from the educator, and exploration of their own curiosities (Khourey-Bowers, 2011). Active learning comes fully into play when students participate in the following components during content lessons: “debating ideas, asking questions, comparing answers, developing explanations, considering alternatives, and making ideas public” (Ueckert, 2008, p. 48). According to a study

performed by Shields (2010), when young literacy students perform hands-on active learning around any given topic, they are “more willing and able to utilize higher cognitive and metacognitive strategies such as summarizing, planning, and self-monitoring of their work because they are more interested in learning and developing mastery in that task or activity” (p.17).

Active learning specifically may include group work activities, physical movement, experimentations, collaboration, music, artwork, and technology. This hands-on approach should not replace passive learning of lectures and straight-forward assessments, but rather it should be included within the context of the subject for avoidance of simply lecture-response teaching (Ford, 2014). The overall goal of active learning is to promote energy from movement that will spark the motivation and engagement needed for retention, exploration, and meaning making skills. According to a study performed by Loundas (2001), students participating in active learning activities involving role-playing, hands-on crafts and projects, group/peer interaction, mini studies, ongoing assessment tools (such as portfolios), not only performed better on finalized assessments than those students that only participated in passive learning styles, but they also had higher levels of self-efficacy and involvement. Active learning improves the retention and response to material because it involves physical movement that takes away some of the pressure of being restricted in a school desk. Instead, the active movements “trigger the neurons in the brain to get the thought processes in gear” (Ford, 2014, p. 28) for more enjoyable and meaningful learning.

Maturity and Readiness

Children are seen as “ready” for primary schooling when they have “the ability to participate in group dialogue competing for the attention of one adult; capacity to concentrate; to be self efficient; use their initiative and sit for long periods of time” (Fabion & Dunlop, 2007, p.10). The question then becomes: What happens when emergent literacy learners come to school without the necessary skills needed for further development of emergent literacy success? A major component of Kindergarten instruction involves social interaction, educational play, and close observation of teach and peer interaction (Fosselman, 2013). According to Saylor (2008) successful Kindergarten academic instruction involves the start of developmental phonics skills including the recognition of upper and lower case letters, rhyming words, syllables, consonant sounds, specific common blends, and the understanding of letter-sound relationships. If students have not had the benefit of Kindergarten instruction they not only need help developing beginning phonics and whole language skills, but they also need practice acquiring social abilities as well (Saylor, 2008). When active learning strategies are used in language arts lessons with emergent literacy students, practice is not only aimed at promoting reading, writing, listening and speaking skills; active learning strategies also gives students the opportunity to build ownership, take risks, question, explore, socialize, and present their work (Riggs, 1995).

Active learning strategies can help students slowly transition into filling the roles and expectations of a primary school atmosphere. A study performed by Ford (2014) that took place during the first semester of a first grade classroom, suggests that using active learning strategies involving movement and rules (such as Hokey Pokey, and Tic-Tac-

Toe vocabulary) not only improved reading comprehension test scores of almost every student in the class, but also helped students conform to an educational setting.

Many first grade students, especially those that have not attended Preschool or Kindergarten, can use extra assistance in maturing into a developmental learner. Ongoing active learning activities involving group work and research or comparison can help young transitioning students better conform to understanding the roles and responsibilities of not only a literacy learner, but also of a individual student (Auster and Wylie, 2006). Working in a small group will help develop a sense of partnership and grant them a specific role that will affect not only their own learning but also the learning of their peers (Loundas, 2001).

Aside from understanding the roles of a student within an educational setting, these learners also need to acquire the social rules and values associated with coming to terms with such change (Fabian and Dulop, 2007). Many researchers suggest having students help create classroom rules and expectations. This will help students to begin playing their role in helping build the rules they need to begin following (Loundas, 2001), while also helping them to practice their brainstorming and application skills. School wide rules and expectations should also be demonstrated through hands-on practice, visuals, and multiple forms of modeling to insure the comprehension of these important concepts. An important factor to consider is that “readiness is not an end in itself...waiting for children to demonstrate their readiness by learning something spontaneously without some preparation of the environment is fruitless” (Pinata and Cox, 1999, p. 62). Therefore, not only do the rules and regulations need to be set forth to help

build the maturity of the students, but the atmosphere has to be organized and learner friendly for true literacy success to develop.

Classroom Environment and Atmosphere

According to Dewey and his theory on “Inquiry Learning” (1897), the atmosphere and environment of the classroom is just as important as the actual strategies and material. Each individual’s level of resilience must be taken into consideration during the transitional emergent literacy stage, and the environment in which they are attempting to adjust to should be of vital importance in the planning and assessing stages of teaching. Education involves providing students with the necessary tools (social competence, problem-solving skills, critical consciousness, autonomy, and sense of purpose) they need to adjust to the numerous situations that life presents to them (Fabian & Dunlop, 2007). Therefore, the environment and atmosphere of the classroom are important factors to consider during active learning practices.

Numerous studies have been conducted on the actual atmosphere and setup of a literacy based classroom and its effect on learning styles. Some researchers suggest “U” shape classrooms which provides for a reading and writing surface, view of each other, the teacher and the classroom board (Loundas, 2001), while others suggest setting up desks in small groups for constant peer collaboration (Fabian & Dunlop, 2007). Each class differs according to the specific makeup, interests, personalities, and emotions of the students. Teachers should test the classroom setup to see what works best for his/her class. In addition to the seating arrangement, the classroom should include additional arrangements that suit the needs and interests of the class as a whole. A reading corner or classroom library with social stories that involve similar emotion students may be facing

as they transition into the school setting makes for powerful material to use during active learning strategies (Fabian & Dunlop, 2007). Additional literacy corners or sections should be used to help students adjust to the atmosphere of a learning community. Classrooms involving stations or designated reading, writing, or partner/group work corners also helps to support differentiated learning in helping to satisfy each individual learning style (Saylor, 2008).

Aside from the literal setup of a classroom, the educator should aim to best promote a safe and comfortable active learning community for students by paying careful attention to tone and body language. He or she should build a learning community in which students feel safe to discuss the emotions and feelings within the texts in comparison to their own thoughts and experience. This will help promote emergent literacy success because students will be less afraid to share and explore experiences and new thoughts or curiosities. Students that feel respected, valued, and safe within a classroom tend to perform better on reading and writing assessments because they have practiced connecting, expanding, and voicing their thoughts and opinions on selected topics (Guthrie, 2004).

In addition to the emotional aspect related to the classroom atmosphere, there also should be specific physical artifacts and displays that connect students to the literacy studies. Word walls, character maps, plot-timelines, reading charts, classroom journals, portfolios, and other ongoing active learning strategies and methods should be constantly utilized to help students acquire the necessary skills needed for subsequent grade levels. According to Fosselman (2013), ongoing active reading and writing learning strategies used with emergent literacy learners suggests leading to stronger literacy skills in middle

and high school grade levels because the students began their literacy journeys with the understanding of a continued process of building on all necessary skills. Classroom instruction should reflect the ongoing process of literacy instruction and students should play a huge part of displaying, organizing, and/or sharing their ongoing active learning classwork. Ongoing literacy assessments not only helps to promote literacy success in emergent learners, but it also helps students to better understand themselves as learners and an important part of the learning community (Riggs, 1995), which is essential for transitioning first graders.

Socialization. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development theory (1978) is defined as, "the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). This type of learning is best when students learn through socialization amongst peers and collaborate with one another to "learn and internalize new concepts, psychological tools, and skills" (p.4).

Social interaction is one of the biggest adjusting factors for primary aged students (Fabian & Dunlop, 2007). The relationship they have with their teacher is vital during the transitioning process and emergent literacy stages, and should be one that involves encouragement, support and guidance. This bond, if formed correctly, can promote sense of self-worth, optimism, self-efficacy and autonomy (Fabian & Dunlop, 2007). Educators should also stop to consider that, "If children are to make sense of school with its institutional ways, bewildering new vocabulary, and strange culture, most will need support and the opportunity to talk through what school means to them" (Fabian &

Dunlop, 2007). Active learning and powerful teaching should involve open-ended conversations with students discussing not only the topic at hand, but their feelings, curiosities, confusion, and self-expectations and goals. All literacy activities should include clear instruction, teacher models, room for discussion and presentation, and effective feedback (Fabian & Dunlop, 2007).

Aside from forming strong educator-student relationships, students also need the opportunity to build strong educational relationships with their peers, which is essential in early literacy instruction. In light of this understanding, active learning strategies are often geared towards great amounts of group work. Peer teaching, collaboration, editing, and problem solving help students engage in ways that individual work often does not permit (Riggs, 1995). Research shows that early literacy students engaged in group and partner practice work, tend to perform higher on formal assessments (Connor, Morrison, and Slominski, 2006). Some researchers suggests breakout groups in different sections of the room to allow active communication without interrupting others, a break from traditional classroom seating, and a more hands-on approach to benefit the following areas: persistence, achievements, and attitudes (Loundas, 2001).

Fabian and Dunlop (2007) say that “Secure and happy children are able to fully participate in, and engage with, the educational challenges confronting them...and in short, emotional well-being empowers children as literacy learners (p.22). A student’s emotional well-being greatly affects his or her language and socialization skills within a classroom, and therefore, greatly affects both the transitioning period in adjusting to an institutional environment and their ongoing literacy success. An active learning strategy that can help children build on their emotional well-being and self-esteem is “Show And

Tell” with use of a transitional object that ties them to other people whether at home (during time apart) or to peers in finding a common link (Fabian & Dunlop, 2007). According to Guthrie (2004), the sharing of meaningful student work tends to lead to higher self-efficacy and self-esteem levels, which is essential in adjusting to a new educational environment.

Community and Family Connection. Language and culture are not something that students carry in their backpacks” (Gaitan, 2012), and language and culture within a classroom may greatly differ from the language and culture students adhere to at home. Previous literature says that early childhood programs are most effective in terms of beginning literacy instruction if they are part of a broader coherent framework, linking development initiatives to the child’s home and primary schooling (Fabian & Dunlop, 2007). Therefore, during transitional periods, family and communal connections greatly affect the rate of the adjusting period. It is extremely important that children have as much support and connection to their three sources of environmental identity (school, home, and community) as possible, and the lesser the gap between these three important ties, the stronger the transition (Fabian & Dunlop, 2007). Language and culture serve as important factors in the educational process and parents play critical roles in shaping a child’s understanding of their family ties, history, attitudes, beliefs, experiences, social network, community and aspirations (Gaitan, 2012). In order to best promote effective transition to an educational environment and to promote literacy success and readiness, these factors are important to engage and consider. Classroom active learning activities should reflect the individual lives of students and ties to their families and communities as much as possible in order to bring early literacy at home instruction, observation, or

baseline to play at the educational environment (Saylor, 2008). According to Holdaway (1979) and the Theory of Literacy Development, learning to read is a natural development that begins in the home with a child witnessing parents/guardians modeling the reading process. This process is very much like the process of learning oral speaking skills in that children watch, test, and practice reading the same way they practice language skills (Holdaway, 1979). In addition to this, according to Morrow (2012) and The Emergent Literacy Theory, there should be a strong tie in early education to the critical role of the child's home environment since this has great relevance to the development of reading, writing, listening and speaking abilities.

To directly tie the early emergent literacy experiences of home life to that of the beginning of literacy instruction at an educational environment, teachers should consider active learning activities that directly reflect the personal lives, experience, and culture of each individual student (Morrow, 2012). According to Fantuzzo, McWayne, and Perry's (2004) active learning activities directly tied to parent and guardians (such as half in school and half at home read aloud and writing notes home to parents about books read in school) led to an impressive increase in the students' motivation, attention, task persistence, reading comprehension scores, vocabulary skills, and low conduct problems. Participation in projects and activities that allow for reflection on individualized experiences and family ties have led to greater self-efficacy ratings (Shields, 2010). According to Fosselman (2013), young literacy students that participate in ongoing creative activities tied in some way to the community or select interest of the students, show an increase in performance, comprehension, and participation in whole group discussion. According to McCormick and Zutell (2011), a student's home life is critical

in the early stages of emergent literacy, and if the home factor has various limitations, teachers should use active learning strategies such as tape-recorded readings and hands-on activities with magazines and newspapers, in order to expand student interest in ongoing assessments. According to Paratore and Edwards (2011) and in regards to the Family Literacy Theory, teachers and administrators often need to bridge the gap between home-life experiences and early emergent literacy education within a school by building connections to school and home life through shared book experiences and open communication between teachers and parents.

Motivation and Engagement

According to Guthrie's Engagement Theory, solid literacy instruction that leads to full comprehension must include: engagement and intrinsic motivation (Guthrie, 2004). Therefore, reading instruction needs to include text selection based on student interest, hands-on approaches/activities, and proper teacher scaffolding, which according to Vygotsky (1978) and the Zone of Proximal Development, is a major teacher-based ingredient for improving student interaction and understanding. John T. Guthrie and fellow researcher Cox (2001) conducted a study to further examine the role of reading engagement and motivation in a classroom with early emergent literacy students. In light of their research data and results, Guthrie and Cox discuss the importance of seven factors necessary for classroom application. These factors are as follows: "Learning and Knowledge," "Real-World Interaction," "Interesting Texts," "Autonomy Support," "Strategy Instruction," "Collaboration Support," and "Evaluation" (p. 288). According to Guthrie and Cox (2001), assessment is more valuable when based off active learning

progress, such as through use of portfolios rather than on formal literal comprehension tests.

Active learning activities have been used with many transitional programs as well as standard Kindergarten classes to help build the foundation of literacy education through hands-on activities that motivate and engage young learners (Fabian & Dunlop, 2007). Such activities involve topics and strategies that directly link student choice and therefore, interest, to content area topics and allow for exploration and excitement (Heller, 2006).

Many educators and researchers are impacted by Guthrie's research on motivation and engagement. Such educators are grounding their literacy instruction on the following belief: Every child should read something he or she choose, read accurately, read something he or she understands, write about something personally meaningful, talk with peers about reading and writing and listen to a fluent adult read aloud (Allington and Rachael Gabriel, 2012). To best support the transitioning period through active learning activities that will promote motivation and engagement, Fabian and Dunlop (2007) suggest using playtime that extends over a long period and that slowly transitions into reading and learning time.

According to McCormick and Zutell (2011), a student's motivation and engagement levels can be increased through use of hands-on active learning literacy activities. Some suggested include: Improving comprehension through a focus unit on a selected topic that interests students, increasing knowledge of word meaning through abstract diagrams, developing fluency through Reader's Theatre, and acting out fictional texts related to content area classes in order to bring topics alive.

Culturally Responsive Classroom. Au, an educational theorist in favor of culturally responsive classrooms, strongly believes in the inclusion of multicultural literature and personal cultural ties to education when teaching emergent literacy learners (Au, 2006). Research suggests “that children tend to prefer and are more likely to engage with literature if it reflects their personal experiences” (Hughes, et.al, 2010, p.19). According to Au, students of diverse backgrounds have little opportunity outside of the classroom for formal exploration of their hierarchal roots and therefore, often times literacy gaps are created (Au, 1998). She suggests use of multicultural and active learning projects that may help students understand and share their backgrounds with peers to help close that gap (Au, 2006). “It is important, however, for educators to clarify their own cultural heritage and experience before they embark in the education of others”(Gaitan, 2012, p. 309). Educators must not forget to model and demonstrate for students an open form of communication in which they share their own personal story as well. This will help to set a mutual learning community without forms of oppression.

The entire class can benefit from active learning strategies that are centered on multicultural literature and the sharing and exploration of a specific culture, for “involving students’ culture in the learning setting means that students are motivated to understand human freedom, justice, and equality through diverse cultural values” (Gaitan, 2012, p. 310). The inclusion of experimental and hands-on activities directly connected to the home lives and cultures of students helps instill positive attitudes about diversity and influence the acceptance of all people in our society (Gaitan, 2012). In addition to helping promote the future open-mindedness of our society, research shows immediate beneficial link between multicultural text and increased reading

comprehension, recall, and even phonological awareness” (Hughes, Koehler, & Barkley, 2010, p.19). In addition to that, the use of such literature is said to not only improve literacy skills, but it also helps to fill in the gaps that occurred because of the rapid transition into primary schooling (Hughes, et.al, 2010).

According to Moll (1994)’s study and the Socio-Cultural Theory, when family and home-life connections were brought to the classroom experience by direct interaction (storytelling, artifacts, videos, etc.), they served as the central role of influence on literacy instruction and success. Moll (1994) studied a child of a farmer. This study involved the farmer coming to visit the classroom to speak of knowledge related to farming. The students then talked about the work and lifestyle of farmers and performed different hands-on assessments after the presentation. The results of Moll’s study concluded that bringing visitors of different trades to reflect the home-life of students generated positive self-esteem and powerful literacy learning to the classroom.

According to a study performed by Gorkman (2013) on elementary students and culturally responsive teaching practices, students were more intrinsically motivated after the inclusion of hands-on active learning strategies connecting materials of racial and cultural background, lived experiences, and communal ties. Gorkman’s (2013) study also suggested that emergent literacy connected to cultural responsive hands-on activity teaching helped students transition into stronger literacy development involving critical thinking and reflection.

Conclusion

After reviewing the current literature surrounding active learning, especially in regards to primary school transitioning, it is clear that hands-on activities are very

effective in helping with the maturity and readiness of students, as well as creating a safe learning community, and promoting motivation and engagement. Activities that involve social interaction and connections to personal background and culture have shown to help students smoothly transition into primary grade levels after Kindergarten (Kaplan & Owings, 2000). Peer and group work add to the language and literacy skills that begin the process of building maturity and readiness for future grades.

Student-centered classrooms offering student choice and highlighting specific individual interests help to promote intrinsic motivation and ongoing student engagement (Guthrie, 2004). Students transitioning into first grade not only need interesting, relatable topics and materials, but they also need the support and communication established through educational relationships within the school. Teachers need to constantly be aware of their personal effect on students and how their demeanor, tone, and modeling may help build the roles, responsibilities, and self-esteem of their students Waskow, M. (1998).

Chapter 3

Research Design and Methodology

Teacher research, often called teacher inquiry or action research, begins with the development of questions that arise from classroom practice. Specific questions can stem from why students behave a certain way, why some lessons are more successful or what happens when specific changes or additions are made to the classroom environment or curriculum. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) define teacher research as a systematic process in which teachers work together to pursue a research interest either individually, in inquiry teams, or with university researchers. Thus, in light of their ideas on teacher research such inquiry is “systematic and intentional.” According to Shagoury and Power (2003), “Every teacher has wonderings worth pursuing. Teacher research is one way to pursue those wonderings in a thoughtful, systematic, and collaborative way” (p. 9). Therefore, it is safe to say that teacher research is personal and tied uniquely to the interests, background and curiosities of the educator and his/her classroom or school.

The curiosities that stem the foundation of teacher research come about when both theory and practice intersect and bring about specific connections worth reflecting and exploring (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). It is then that teachers explore unknown areas, or areas that form a great disconnect between why something is done and how it is fulfilled. The research teachers conduct takes place within their own classroom/school for the purpose of bettering the instruction and environment for students, but teachers also aim to professionally expand their knowledge and credibility on education and student learning. Because such research is personally connected to the classroom teacher, he/she is the most important contributor to the actual collection of data. The teacher’s observation, teaching strategies, field notes, and participation in the actual study is the

most crucial component of the research. Therefore, teacher research most often is qualitative in nature in that such inquiry is rich in data collection, and typically answers “why” and “how” questions related to in-depth topics. Teacher research, and most qualitative studies, are circumstantial and greatly vary depending on the variables presented. The qualitative research paradigm mostly conveys a study that is flexible and adaptable to new discoveries and situations that may arise, and yet provides room and data sources for explaining the different situational circumstances that add to the research experience (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

As a school reading teacher questions have arose from my daily experience in working with students and I have come to understand the value in qualitative teacher research. My main grounding question, “What happens when first grade students are engaged in active learning to support their transition into school as well as their literacy skills” lead to specific aims at evaluating the effectiveness of hands-on activities. This type of research required detailed field notes describing the student experience and adjustment. In addition to documented investigator notes, rich qualitative data was required for capturing the verbal and emotional response of students through use of interviews and group dialogue. I was present in the inquiry process as a participant observer in a first grade classroom evaluating and tracking major factors that quantitative research often limits, such as, commentary and observations regarding thoughts on the classroom design and school environment, reasoning behind student choice, and analysis of extensive ongoing student work.

Procedure of Study. Before I began collecting data, I administered an initial survey that asked students about their preferences for learning environment and activities,

as well as their thoughts and views of themselves as a learner. It was important to get a baseline of their thoughts regarding literacy, the school environment and views of themselves as learners before beginning this active learning research study. I explained students exactly what active learning is and how we they would be using different strategies and activities in our lessons to help transition into institutionalized education and practice deep rather than surface learning as a class. I specifically reminded students that it was important to discuss thoughts throughout the process, especially in regards to the classroom setup and the hands-on activities and assessments.

In the beginning of this research study, I closely monitored their response to hands-on activities, paying particular attention to capturing student dialogues and quotes. Over the course of the six weeks, I tested and applied different active learning activities to the English and Language Arts lessons of this class. Throughout this process, I changed the typical reading and writing activities to include a more hands-on approach. I also utilized the classroom space in a different ways; desks were rearranged often and the classroom was divided into different stations. In addition to the actual classroom climate, students were offered more choice and therefore, they began to gain responsibility for their own learning and actions.

The first change that was brought about was the reading and response activities. Prior to this change, I would have performed an oral reading of a story and had the students follow along as I read each word slowly. After reading, we would have participated in an oral guided reading comprehension assessment as a class. Students then would have been asked to perform a worksheet or specific assessment in relation to the story and discussion. For the sake of this research study, I started my approach to a more

active learning environment with alternating between a choral and echo reading of a story. Our reading response activities changed to include finger painting activities, nature walks, group work, and Reader's Theatre.

Our writing activities also greatly altered. Normally students are provided large lined paper and asked to write simple sentences in relation to the reading. They rarely are given writing assignments outside reading response. With a more active learning approach, I included different activities that involved drawing, creative writing responses, group story writing, and computer journaling. Students were encouraged to share their work, which according to John Guthrie (2004), is a major part of active learning in that students gain responsibility in taking hold of their learning and sharing it with others.

Our listening and responding activities also altered in nature. Typically, students listen to the stories or lectures and raise their hand to respond. In order to create a more active learning approach to listening and speaking skills, students participated in different activities that including, acting out stories, character interviews, group work games including the important roles of a listener and a speaker, and partner presentations. During these activities, students were given as much choice as possible. They were constantly reminded of the fact that they are taking control of their learning environment and given the responsibility to make the best choice that fits their individual interest and needs.

Throughout this research study I documented the reaction, engagement, behavior, and performance of these first grade students using different forms of data collection methods explained below. The initial student survey conducted at the start of this research study was re-administered at the close of the six week inquiry for purpose of

noting changes in student response. Through use of the data collection and the array of active learning activities, I was able to better understand the effects of such engaged learning on a group of first graders that for the most part have not had the privilege of attending Preschool or Kindergarten. This information can be helpful in filling in the research gaps related to the powerful effects of active learning on a specific learning group such as those present in this classroom.

Data Sources. Throughout the process of bringing active learning activities to this first grade classroom, I paid particular attention to the actual visual response of student behavior and reaction. I collected this data through my own informal observations, and I documented the gathered information in my personal field notes. My field notes were sectioned off into categories: Observations, Student Comments, Student Reactions, Performance, and Other.

Each day conducting short, individual interviews in which I asked students about their thoughts, reactions, and opinions regarding specific activities or methods. I made separate handouts typed up for these pullout interviews. I documented student responses on the sheet with the interview questions. These papers were put into a file under the student's classroom number for data analysis. During individual pullout interviews, I also conducted the "Sociogram" questionnaire (Leung, 2006). Students were asked which students in the class they would to socialize and work best with. These questions and the "Sociogram" technique helped determine the social factor of the classroom (the prefect vs. the loner). This information was used for analysis of student choice and effectiveness of classroom setup. To best keep track of the specific information regarding classroom setup, researcher maps were drawn and documented.

In addition to the pullout individual interviews, I walked around to process group interview questions to assess the nature of actual thought-process involved in the assignment. Questions such as, “How did you figure that out,” “What will you do next, and why” will be asked to groups of students. The purpose of these questions was not only to assess the effectiveness of the group work and activity at hand, but also to begin getting students to self-assess through metacognitive thinking, which is another important factor of active learning (Guthrie, 2004).

Another major data source collected was the actual work of the students present in this first grade classroom. During the data collection period, I stored student work into individual folders with student’s numbers. These folders also included the individual interview responses. Student work involving both formal and informal assessments included: tests, quizzes, responses, and any hands-on activities or presentations that resulted in a graded rubric that was added to the folder during the course of these six weeks.

Data Analysis. The collected data was analyzed in an organized qualitative manner. The student interviews were cross-examined for commonalty in specific phrases, comments, or related topic concerns or excitement. Different colored highlighters were used to find similarity and a chart was created to document the highest ranked common threads. The “Sociogram” was formatted into a scale grid with points assigned to each student so that the “stars, mutuals, isolates, cliques, and cleavage students are all identified” (Leung, 2006). Student performance prior to the research study was already documented in preparation for comparison of data. Therefore, student’s post-active learning grades were plotted on a graph in a different color next to the pre-active learning

grades to document and analyze change. Field notes including group interview process responses were analyzed under the set categories and presented in the form of a table. Classroom seating charts and classroom maps were drawn and analyzed in terms of effectiveness regarding student behavior, attitude, and performance. This information is presented in the form of a graph. The initial and final response to the student survey was calculated as a whole and is presented in a table for comparison.

Context

Community. Trenton, a city in Mercer County and capital of the state of New Jersey has a population of 84, 913 residents. There are 28,578 households and 17, 747 families. About 22.4% of these families and 24.5% of the population are considered below the poverty line. The median household income in Trenton is \$36,601 and the median age is 32.1 years. Demographically the community consists of 26.56 % White, 52.015 African American and 33.71 % Hispanic. Trenton is continuously ranked in the top most dangerous cities in the United States. The New Jersey State Prison, which houses some of the most dangerous criminals and includes two maximum security units, is located within this city. The Trenton Public Schools serve students in K-12 grade and the district is one of 31 "SDA Districts" statewide, which requires the state to cover all costs for school building and renovation projects under the supervision of the New Jersey Schools Development Authority. There are numerous charter schools in Trenton including the new Sabis International Academy of Trenton Public Charter school which opened its doors for the first time September 8, 2014.

School. The International Academy of Trenton Charter School currently serves students in Grades K-3, and will expand by one grade level each year to become a K-12

school. It is one of the six Sabis high-performing charter schools in the United States. The school network is “modeled on a rigorous, college-preparatory system of education that has achieved a solid record of success in closing achievement gaps for students most at risk of being left behind” (International Academy of Trenton Charter School, 2014). The demographics of the student population at the International Academy of Trenton Charter School consists of 75% African American students and 25% Hispanic students. 98% of the students in this school qualify for free or reduced lunch. The school’s ELL population consists of 20% of the student body, 3% of which are classified as LEP students requiring bilingual instruction.

The staff of the International Academy of Trenton Charter School consists of 14 highly qualified teachers classroom teachers, seven paraprofessionals (teacher aids), one Reading Specialist (ELA Intensive Educator), two Child Study Team professionals, one social worker, one speech therapist, and one school nurse. 90% of the school staff are white and 5% are African American and 5% are Hispanic or Latino. 63% of staff members have a BA/BS degree, 35% have a MA/MS degree, and 2% have a PhD/EdD degree. The administration consists of one building Director (Principal) and an Academic Quality Controller (Vice Principal).

Classroom. The first grade class in which this study was conducted is one of the three first grade classes at the International Academy of Trenton Charter School. Within this classroom there is one African American female classroom teacher and thirty students including nineteen Hispanic students and eleven African American students. Eighteen of the students are male and twelve of the students are female. According to an initial survey conducted by the classroom teacher, eighteen of the thirty students did not

attend Preschool or Kindergarten in an institutional setting. Out of these students, ten of them are male and eight of them are female.

Although the International Academy of Trenton Charter School just recently opened their doors, STAR testing was administered in early September to begin the baseline of assessing students reading comprehension skills. According to the STAR testing results, 47.1% of students in this first grade class fall below the 25th percentile. 41.2% of the class falls between the 25th to 29th percentiles and 11.8% falls between the 50th to 74th percentiles. In addition to the STAR testing results, it is also important to note that 10% of the class is bilingual, but did not qualify for English Language Learner Services.

Chapter 4

Data Analysis

Introduction

Chapter four provides an analysis of the research findings as they relate to my exploration of the question, “What happens when active learning strategies are used with first graders that did not attend Preschool or Kindergarten?” and “How can these active learning strategies help build literacy skills while supporting the transition to a formal school environment?” As I reviewed and began analyzing the data collected from student surveys and interviews, formal assessment grades, and field notes of observations and entries recorded in my teacher research journal, I identified some important emerging themes. The four emerging categories confirmed from the data collected are as follows:

1. Active learning had positive effects on student self-perception,
2. active learning had a positive impact on students’ perception of literacy,
3. active learning strategies and activities helped improve literacy scores, and
4. active learning helped create an effective learning community.

Profile of the Sample

The subjects for this study were Ms. Scott’s 31 first grade students from The International Academy of Trenton Public Charter School. This first grade class was specifically selected based on the high percentage of students that did not attend Preschool or Kindergarten. Presented below are two figures that show the number of students that did not attend Preschool and Kindergarten. These results came from the general school admissions questionnaire.

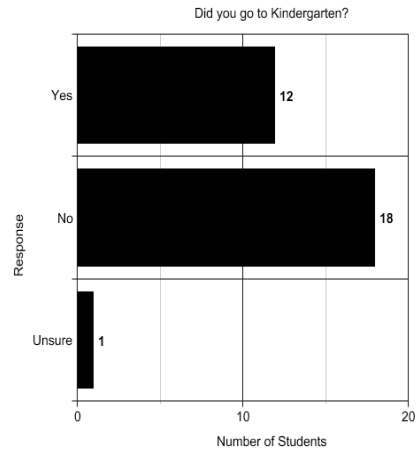
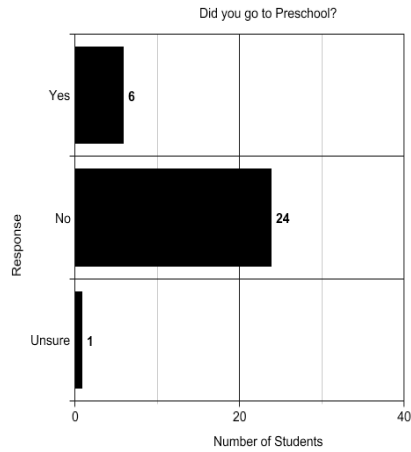


Figure 1: Did you go to Preschool?

Figure 2: Did you go to Kindergarten?

Table 1 below shows the gender and demographical makeup of the 31 student subjects that participated in the research study.

Table 1

Demographical Information

Male	Females	African Americans	Hispanics	Asians	Whites
18	12	11	19	0	0

For the sake of displaying the findings of this research study with the promise of confidentiality in revealing any factors related to identity, the participants were randomly assigned a number ranging from 1 to 31.

This study was conducted over a 4-5 week period and involved the use of active learning strategies during all Language Arts lessons including: Reading, writing, grammar, spelling, and phonics. The active learning activities included in the lessons are as follows: Reader’s Theatre, Finger-Painting, Nature Walks, Character Interviews,

Partner Presentations, Choral/Echo Reading, Computer Journaling, Draw-What-You See, Group Story Writing, Group Story Writing, Group Work Games, and a Literature Brochure.

I began the study by conducting an initial survey, which I personally created to assess students' views of themselves as students, and in particular as readers and as writers. The survey also assessed their views and understanding of the school atmosphere as well as what is asked of them as a student. The format of the survey was a mix between multiple choice questions and true/false questions. This survey was very effective in measuring the initial attitudes and views of students upon entering a new atmosphere with new expectations, new tasks, and new rules/regulations.

After the initial survey was given, I used the "Sociogram" (Leung, 2006) not only to determine the socialization of the classroom in identifying the "stars," isolates," "cliques" and "mutuals," but also as a major form of student-choice in understanding the preference of partners and seating arrangement of each individual. Using a grid, I marked each student's first, second, and third choice for a partner within the classroom. This data collection was helpful with regard to setting an effective learning community based around student choice and centered on the positive emotions of comfort and partnership. After my "Sociogram" results were finalized, I used the "Classroom Architect" (Teach with Technology, 2008), to virtually design my classroom by the exact dimensions before actually assessing the setup. I created four different classroom designs that I wanted to assess both with and without the closest possible partner arrangement choice of each student. I documented my observations and results within my teacher research journal.

Once the classroom was best set for an effective learning community (based on monitoring effort, motivation, noise level, control, and attitude of students), I began implementing the active learning strategies and documenting observations, student interviews, and results in my teacher research journal. During this time, my last important collected data came from student work and assessments. I tracked the reading, writing, phonics, spelling, and grammar grades in the month of November and compared them to the scores from the month of October. Throughout this time, I also took notes on informal assessments and observations in my teacher research journal.

Emerging Themes and Discoveries

Active learning Positively Effects Students Self and Literacy Perception. The before and after responses to the student surveys suggest a major connection between active learning and student self-esteem and self-efficacy levels. Due to the complexity and importance of each question within the survey, a full table was created and is included in the Appendices (See Appendix A). For purpose of presenting and explaining important comparison pieces from the table, specific figures are included in this chapter to portray some major findings to support the statement that active learning does promote higher levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy levels. The survey questions were related to student preferences (in terms of their favorite place in the building as well as their reading/writing preferences), as well as their outlook and perception (related to how they view themselves as learners and in how proud or likely they are of showcasing their work).

The complete initial survey results (included in full as Appendix A) suggest that students prefer working with a partner oppose to working alone or in a group.

December's response for this question altered in that more students opted for preferring to work in a group rather than with partners. Active learning strategies used within the classroom during this time helped students appreciate the power of group work and thus altered their preference. In terms of workspace, October's survey response shows preference for working on the floor instead of at a desk or table, but December's response changed in favor of working at a table. Again, this change in preference came about from the many activities that were assigned with group work at tables. Students enjoyed working at tables with multiple partners. In fact, Michael said, "I love working at a table with lots of friends because it helps us all learn together. I learn something from everyone here."

In addition to the workspace, the atmosphere for reading preference also altered from preferring to read outside of school as concluded from October's responses to preferring to read in school as noted from December's responses. Active learning strategies such as Reader's Theatre and Choral/Echo Reading kept students not only motivated and engaged, but also excited to perform group readings and these results suggest that students now view reading in school more beneficial and exciting than reading outside. October's survey also showed that 30 out of 31 students selected the "Schoolyard" as their favorite place in the building. According to December's survey results, 20 of the same students switched their response to say that "The classroom" was their new preferred location. The fact that 20 first graders chose a classroom environment over a schoolyard is astonishing, and suggests that the active learning activities must have been exciting and memorable for students.

To assess student preference with hands-on activities and their ideal situation, the

survey included the following question: “Which would you prefer?” With the following options: “Listening to drums, Talking about drums, or Playing the drums.” In October, 29 out of 31 students said they prefer “Playing the drums” and not one student chose “Talking about drums.” In December, 20 of the same 31 students changed their response to “Talking about drums.” The active learning strategies we focused on as a group involved deep, detailed class discussions that involved the background knowledge, interest and a response from each individual that obviously left an impression on these first graders. One particular student made the comment, “I love when we have class talks because its fun to share stories about our homes and learn stuff too.” Students were also asked the following question: “What do you wish you did the most?” With the following options: “Sit in a desk, Create, or Discuss.” Not one student chose “Sitting in a desk” at either survey distribution, but in October, 27 of the 31 students chose “Create” and 4 of the 31 students chose “Discuss.” In December, 16 of the same 31 students chose “Create” and 15 of the 31 chose “Discuss.” These results may suggest that these emergent literacy learners prefer and probably relate most to dialogue instruction. It is also important to note that a big observation made during this research study is that students participated most with in-depth responses when our classroom dialogues were informal, consisted of humor, and involved acting out gestures or free use of the board. It is also important to keep in mind that many of these students did not attend Preschool and Kindergarten and that this type of learning most likely conforms to their only prior experience with education outside of a school setting.

Students were then asked to complete the following statement: “School is...” and were given the following answer choices: “Boring, Fun, or Exciting.” In October, 15 of

the 31 students chose “Boring,” another 15 chose “Fun” and only 1 student chose “Exciting.” In December, 16 of the 31 students changed their response to say that school is “Exciting,” while 8 students said school was “Boring,” and the remaining 7 called school “Fun.” The interesting analysis here is not only based on the fact that the number of students considering school “boring” went from 15 to 8, but rather the number of students that said school was exciting went from 1 to 16. The word “exciting” seems to bring a more powerful connotation than the word “fun” in this context and in regards to this topic. The word “fun” would lead one to believe they consider school to be a great atmosphere with friends and activities, but excitement suggests that they are curious and interested. This is the beginning of noticing a change in the students’ perceptions of the atmosphere of the school as well as themselves as learners (seeing school as “exciting” may suggest an increase in levels of motivation).

An even greater surprise came when analyzing the data collected from questions that directly tied to their self-efficacy and self-esteem as not only a reader and a writer, but also as a student within a formal educational environment. The two major statements that stood out most with this theme are presented in the Figures below. Figure 3 includes the results generated from the statement, “I am proud of my work,” and Figure 4 includes the results generated from the statement, “I am a good student.” In September only 13 of the 31 first graders admitted to being proud of their work and only 7 of these same 31 students believed they were a good student. These numbers greatly altered in only 4-5 weeks in that December’s survey results showed that 18 of the 31 students are proud of their work, and 24 of them believe they are a good student.

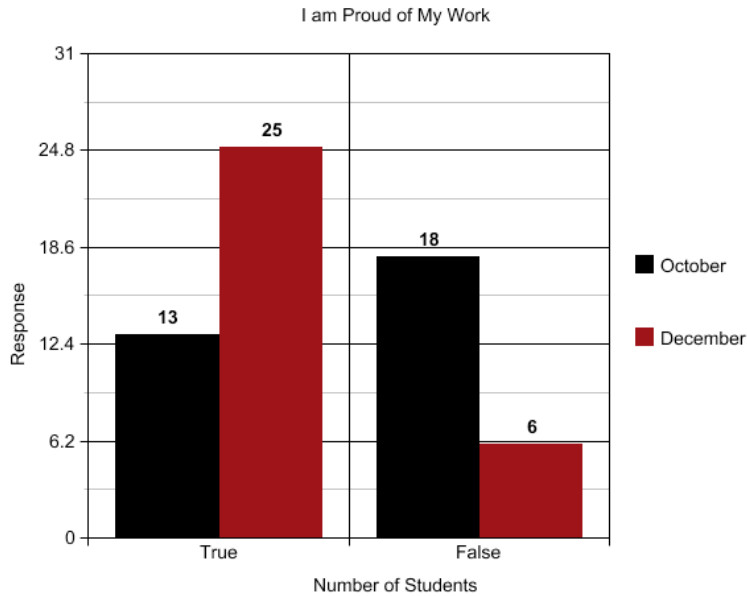


Figure 3: I am Proud of My Work

Working with partners of their choice in an active learning environment helped with motivation and engagement levels, which altered self-efficacy and self-esteem levels and thus their performance. Students were also asked to say true or false to the following statement, “I like to share my work.” In October only 8 of the 31 students said true to this statement, but in December this number greatly altered to 30 of the 31 students responding true to this statement. This question, as well as the results from the figure above suggest that active learning, when used in an emergent literacy classroom with emphasis on building reading, writing, listening and speaking skills, forms an string effect: Students engage in active learning activities together and thus are motivated and engaged enough to perform high quality work that is worth sharing. As a result of this pattern, these first graders now believe they are good students as shown in the figure below.

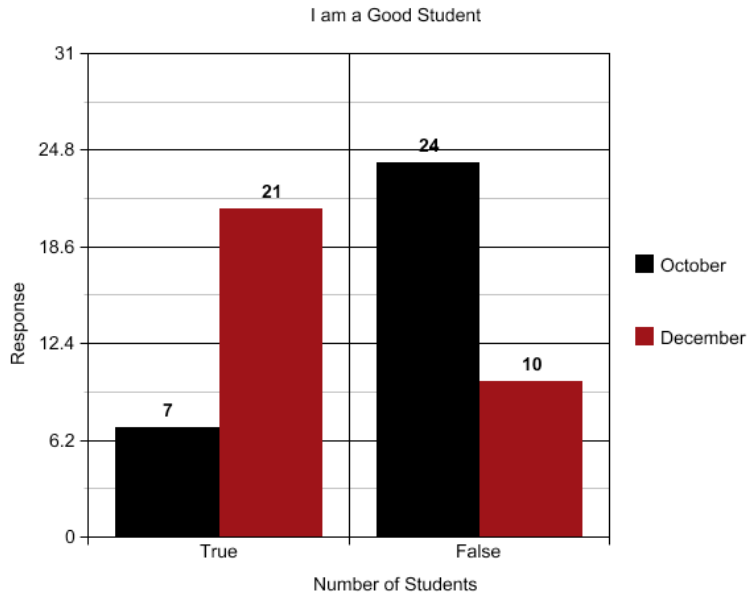


Figure 4: I am a Good Student

In October only 7 of the 31 students believed they were a good student. Most of these children never viewed themselves as students, let alone learners, prior to the start of the school year (not having had Preschool or Kindergarten experience), it is important to understand that these active learning strategies and the adjustment to a learning community helped change the perception of these students to now view themselves as actual students. In December 24 out of the 31 same students changed their answers to say they do see themselves as a good student. This is because they are listening, thinking, reading, and writing as a good student would—they are engaged, motivated, collaborating and sharing.

The change in the majority of student perception of their work and their view of themselves as learners also resulted in a major change in their feelings towards reading and writing. Figure 5 below shows the change in student response in regards to their response to the statement, “Reading is…” when given the choices “Boring, fun, or

exciting.” 15 out of 17 of the initial student response of “Boring” changed to “Exciting” after 4-5 weeks of hands-on active learning instruction.

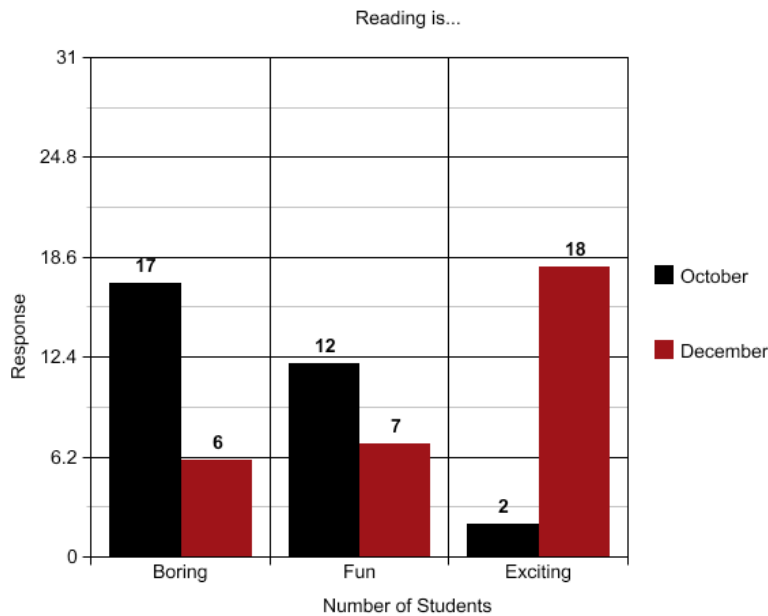


Figure 5: Reading is...

This figure helps support the fact that not only do students find school to be exciting, as explained earlier from a previous statement, but they also find reading to be exciting. Initially, in October, students associated the task of reading with a boring connotation. This dramatic change in results over a short period is a direct reflection on the active learning strategies involving acting out the characters, dialogue interviews, and hands-on activities related to the plot. The reading discussions took place around an artificial classroom campfire and involved passing around a fake marshmallow on a stick (substituted in place of the “talking stick”). Students were engaged, motivated, and excited to share their personal opinions, experiences, and responses to the literature. On the same note, back in October when the students were directly asked if they like to read

and write, 26 of the 31 students said false to that statement. In December, only 13 said false.

Active Learning Helps Improve Literacy Scores. It should be of little surprise to see a jump in literacy scores after reviewing the data of increased self-efficacy and self-esteem levels of these first grade students. Typically, with high forms of motivation, engagement, the desire to share and present work, and positive connotation with reading and writing, comes high assessment marks. The literacy scores for this first grade class did not only slightly increase in specific areas, but the class average for each of the 5 literacy subcomponents greatly altered in the 4-5 weeks of active learning instruction. Table 2 presents the class averages for the months of October and November. The greatest change is the difference in the average reading scores with a 16-point increase over the course of one month. The second greatest change can be seen in the students' spelling averages, which increased by 15 points after a month of altered instruction involving active learning strategies. These changes may be a direct result of the engagement and motivation associated with hands-on activities and positive group dialogue and discussion that altered a student's new, but original, perception of a school that "Always makes you sit in a seat for a long, long time until your legs and head hurt," as Christopher examined.

Table 2

First Grade Class Averages

	October	November
Reading	61	77
Grammar	75	84
Writing	70	80
Phonics	83	93
Spelling	80	95

In addition to noticing a formal change in assessment scores, I also kept track of informal assessments and observations in my teacher researcher journal. I kept an eye out for change in oral response, attitude, expression, and even willingness. Below is an excerpt from an entry made on November 19, 2014:

“This morning we used finger-painting to practice our spelling words. I knew the kids would absolutely love the hands-on, messy, colorful approach to writing the words, but...little did I know, they were just as eager to write the words later with pencils and paper as they were earlier with paint. I walked around and asked a few students why they were so excited to write their spelling words again without the colorful paint and I got the same response, ‘because Ms. Weber I know how to spell them fast now!’ I think the success came from a combination of the fun, colors, and the fact that it was memorable! These kids need some good memories in school because memories last, memories stick, memories make for long-term learning!”

It was then that I began noticing a change in the willingness of my these first grade students. As the weeks passed, I heard less moans and groans and more excitement and enthusiasm. Every morning, I would find kids standing by my desk before breakfast and morning announcements asking me what fun activities I had planned for our lessons. In the hallways, I had 2nd and 3rd graders coming up to me asking when they would have a

chance to participate in activities their younger first grade siblings came home bragging about. The talk was on, students were spreading the word of our classroom experiences like wildfire—sharing their excitement and joy with members outside of their class.

In addition to noticing a change in the overall class averages and the attitudes of these first grade students, I also noticed a change in the effort put into even the most informal classwork assignments. Below in Table 3 is a comparison of a response from the same student with same-leveled text from October to December. In the beginning of October we were not practicing multiple use of hands-on learning activities and her response derived from a simple teacher generated question-student answer oral assessment. At the end of November, I asked the same question with an identical leveled text (different story) during a character interview session (one of our active learning activities) and the nature of her response improved dramatically. Her response in December was in a complete sentence, was more in-depth, and included personal opinion.

Table 3

Student Responses in October vs. Student Response at the End of November

Question	Beginning of October	End of November
“Why was the main character upset in the story?”	“He is not happy. he knew his mom wanted him to go.”	“Billy was upset in the story because he couldn’t go to the park with his friends and that he had to go to the race to watch his brother. If he was mean then he would have still went to the park. But he knew he had to do what was right, like when I had to go to my bo’s party instead of seeing the movie <i>Frozen</i> . Sometimes you have to just listen to your mom and do what is right.”

I also noticed immediate change with physical evidence of student work. An example of a change in student work with active learning is included in the appendixes (See Appendix B). For sake of explanation and analysis of this chapter, a description of the change seen in the student work is displayed below:

The assignment asked the students to write a sentence about something they enjoy doing outside of school and to draw a picture of it below their sentence. One student wrote, “I lke to ply sokr” and the picture showed a black and white stick figure kicking a soccer ball. This student was given the exact same assignment a few days later but with use of Microsoft Paint. The sentence the student typed was, “I like to ply soccr wif lots of peple and thn we eat puzza.” below the sentence was a colorful picture of a soccer team playing soccer and a scenery involving a sun, clouds, and even a pizza slice.

Hands-on use of technology inspired this student to write more than she did when using a pencil and paper. These first grade students are growing up in a world that uses computer

devices to communicate ideas, exchange dialogue, and even perform everyday activities such as shopping or seeing friends and family (through video chats). When given the opportunity to use a computer to complete an assessment, these first grade students not only put more effort into their work, but they also were more engaged, excited, and motivated to complete the assignment to the best of their ability. Use of the computer seemed to serve as the missing link that tied their personal experience with informal learning to that of formal education. Sparks flew in their eyes when they were given the opportunity to complete a task they were confident in doing. I captured a major moment of this realization in the teacher researcher excerpt below that will help explain this discovery. On November 24, 2014, I wrote:

“It amazes me that many of these first graders cannot hold a pencil, but they can navigate a computer better than many adults. Bringing the students to the computer lab today was pretty exciting to witness as a teacher. Rosie ran to the five-year old Dell and tried swiping her finger across the monitor, while yelling: ‘Miss Weber, my touchscreen is broken!’ I could not help but chuckle. Once I explained and demonstrated how to use the computer mice, they quickly began typing away on paint and using shapes I didn’t know paint had! These students came alive. They looked at ease...at home. They knew what to do, how to exit tabs and even how to print their work. I saw a side of intelligence in these kids that I didn’t know existed.”

Active Learning Helps Make for a Smooth Transition into Elementary

Education. Students were given the “Sociogram” questionnaire (Leung, 2006), which asked them to rank their three top choices of students to work with and/or sit next to in class. I created a grid so that I could graph the results, which are included in the Appendixes (See Appendix C). Each time a student was another student’s first choice they received 3 points. If they were a second choice of someone else then they received 2 points, and if they were a third choice then they received 1 point. Each student’s points

were tallied. The organized results after the tallying are presented and organized by the social makeup suggested by Leung (2006) in Table 4 below. The “Star” students are those that received the highest amount of points. There was one male student and one female student that fell under this category. The “Isolates” are students that did not receive any votes. I kept in mind that these students could and should be paired together because they are not involved or related to any specific cliques or mutual friendships, and could potential make great partners or friends. I found that the class had both a male and a female “Clique,” which means three students chose each other and were excluded from the remaining students in the class. The “Mutuals” are the pairs of students that both chose each other as their first choice.

Table 4

“Sociogram” Analyzed Results

Stars	Isolates	Female Clique	Male Clique	Mutuals
Student 30 (M)- 32 pts	Student 10 (M) Student 9 (F) Student 11 (F)	Student 20 Student 22 Student 25	Student 16 Student 24 Student 29	Student 2 & 8 (F) Student 6 & 18 (F)
Student 28 (F)- 27 pts	Student 14 (M) Student 17 (M) Student 15 (M) Student 19 (M)			

I used the results from the table above to consider student placement within the classroom. I knew that I wanted to compare the atmosphere, in regards to effort, motivation, attitude, behavior, and performance, in honoring and not honoring student choice. However, after I collected the “Sociogram” data, I realized I also needed to assess the setup of the classroom. Through use of the program “Classroom Architect” (Teach with Technology, 2008) and trial and error with four different classroom maps, I tried out

different classroom designs. I understood that constantly altering the classroom setup could get tedious and become ineffective, but because of my research and own curiosity, I decided it was worth the risk in attempting to build the most effective classroom environment. The four tested classroom designs are included in the Appendices (See Appendix D). I first tried the “Fish Bowl” setup in which a small group of students form a circle within a large circle made-up of the remaining students. Below is an excerpt noted in my teacher research journal from October 27, 2014 in regards to that setup:

“Today’s I tried the fish bowl setup in honoring student choice and by arranging the class as best as possible to the preference of the students. The fish-bowl arrangement did not work so well. I noticed that the students in the inner circle lost any form of confidence they normally would have and the students in the outer circle seemed to fidget more, and assumed they would get away with more than usual. I’m afraid that this setup is only effective with older students. Dialogue in regards to this setup is really tricky with young students. The room also seemed very disorganized and tight. I liked that the kids were excited about sitting with their friends, but I don’t see this arrangement lasting.”

After having trouble with the “Fish Bowl” setup, I decided to attempt the “2-3-2” patterned arrangement. Below is an excerpt noted in my teacher research journal from October 29, 2014 regarding that arrangement:

“Today’s I tried 2-3-2 setup without honoring student choice. I arranged the desks in three sections and wow... what a change from Monday. The room was much more organized and looked clean and presentable BUT the atmosphere was so depressing. How could such a simple change seriously alter the attitude of these children? They were miserable. Student motivation and response was at an all-time low. I also noticed more behavioral issues. I am starting to think that the setup of the classroom should be aimed more at pleasing student-interest than teacher preference. I find myself thinking of my dad and how he always says “Happy wife, happy life.” Now I am beginning to say, “Happy students, happy lesson.” I have to find a setup that works for both the students and myself. This is not it.

After having trouble with student motivation and performance with the “2-3-2” setup, I decided to attempt the “U” patterned arrangement. Below is an excerpt noted in

my teacher research journal from November 3, 2014 on that arrangement:

“I loved the ‘U-Shape’ today! But man, oh, man, did I hear grunts. ‘Ms. Weber he’s too close to me,’ Or ‘Ms. Weber, Why do we always have to sit and stare across at others and waste all the space in the middle?’ Although I felt I had great control of the class today, I really don’t think the kids liked the shape. Standing in the center was so convenient during instruction time. I could see and hear each kid and his/her attempt at side conversations or in-the-desk fiddling. But this setup did make it hard for group or partner time.

My last and final attempt at finding the perfect classroom setup came on the fourth attempt when I decided to put the desks into small tables of five. Below is an excerpt noted in my teacher research journal from November 5, 2014 on that arrangement:

“Success! Wow, today I came up with the perfect combination of making the students happy with their peer selection in sitting with their preferences (I did the best that I could in setting this up as close as possible to their liking) and with a classroom setup that would help promote the most effective learning environment. The kids were so motivated today! I decided to assign numbers to the tables like they do in Kindergarten, so that I could constantly make it a battle or competition between tables, which raised motivation and engagement levels. I also felt that the students’ work greatly altered...they were working with their friends and they did better than usual! The tables now make sense to me...they work so well in Kindergarten so why would they not work well with first graders that did not have the opportunity to attend Kindergarten? They practice social skills with the students of their choice and during literacy instruction. They were so excited today. I could feel it. I could almost smell it. Surprisingly the tone and noise level was much lower than expected! Why? How can this be? They are sitting with their friends! Oh, I get it. No more yelling across the room to communicate with the student of their choice. Now, they whisper right next to them. No more fighting with kids they don’t get along with, and no more anxiety in getting answers wrong. I also noticed they worked better in groups because they felt part of a team and knew that they were responsible for their segment of the project. Who wants to let down their own friend? I am beyond excited for this classroom setup!”

In addition to constantly referring to my own thoughts throughout this process and documenting them in my teacher research journal, I also performed numerous student interviews in which I would randomly select a student and ask them questions about their

thoughts, experience, interests, and feelings regarding the active learning strategies. One particular short segment of a dialogue with a student struck a cord with me:

Me: “Why do you feel you are doing better than you were before?”

Student: “I am working with José and he is my best friend.”

Me: “Why is he your best friend and how is working with him helpful?”

Student: “Because he can write, and I can draw. When we do things together, we do them better because we’re partners. Sort of like a small team.”

During additional student interviews, I kept notes of the dialogues, sometimes recording verbatim what certain students would say. I organized all of my student interview data related to the active learning strategies. The data is organized into two tables. Both tables are organized according to the asked questions, and with inclusion of the frequency and rank for each common themed response. The first table, Table 5, presents general active learning questions and responses that were asked during the interview process. The second table, Table 6, which is presented below table 5, presents questions and responses to the effectiveness of specific active learning activities performed over the 4-5 week period.

Table 5

Active Learning Activities (General)

Question	Theme	Frequency	Rank
1) Which activity was your favorite?	Finger-painting	16	1
	Computer Writing	9	2
	Reader's Theatre	6	3
2) Why did you like that activity?	Fun	15	1
	Helpful	9	2
	Colorful	7	3
3) Which activity did you like the least?	Brochure	16	1
	Character Interviews	10	2
	Creative Writing	5	3
4) Why was this your least favorite activity?	Difficult	15	1
	Boring	11	2
	Long	5	3
5) How did the activities help you learn?	Memory	11	1
	Understanding	11	1
	Performance	6	2
	Application	2	3
	Connection	1	
6) To what extent did you learn from your classmates during these activities?	Greatly	22	1
	Moderately	5	2
	Very little	3	3
	None	1	4
7) How did you feel during the lessons?	Happy	13	1
	Excited	13	1
	Smart	5	2
8) How did these activities make you feel as a reader and a writer?	Better	19	1
	Smart	6	1
	Happy	6	1
9) What has changed most about our lessons?	More fun	11	1
	More excitement	7	2
	More moving	6	3
	More partners/Groups	5	4
	More learning	2	5
10) How, if at all, do you feel different about our class and classroom?	I like it more	12	1
	It's more fun	8	2
	I have better friends	7	3
	I feel more safe	4	

Table 5 presents important questions that were asked to students during general interview sessions after completion of the active learning activities we had planned in our schedule. The themes presented in the chart are the student responses and were not given by me for student choice selection. I cross examined the dialogues and came up with the most common responses (the themes) and tallied the frequency, and therefore, the rank of each response to organize the chart from high to low response. Students were asked what their favorite activity was and 16 of the 31 students said it was finger-painting, which was followed by computer writing with a response from 9 out the 31 students. By referring back to the class averages, one can see that their reading and spelling scores increased the most, which ties well with understanding that finger-painting and computer writing are their favorite activities. 21 out of 31 students said that the reason they most enjoyed for the finger-painting activity most was that it was “fun.” Their least favorite activity was the brochure with a response of 15 out of the 31 students saying it was “difficult.” I found this result to be interesting because I felt that the brochure activity was most like our typical activities before the change with incorporating more hands-on learning.

The results presented in the chart on how these activities affected students are solid in suggesting the powerful effect of active learning strategies. Students were asked, “How did these activities help you learn?” 11 out of the 31 students said that the activities helped with their memorization skills and an additional 11 out of the 31 said the activities helped them better understand a concept. When students were asked, “How did you feel during the activities, 13 out of 31 said they felt happy and an additional 13 said they felt excited. The theme of excitement is occurring again and may further suggest possible reasoning for the rise in motivation and engagement levels. On the same note, when

students were asked, “What changed most about our lessons?” 11 out of 31 of the children said the lessons were now more fun and 7 additional students used the word “exciting.” This may mean that students are finding the lessons and material to be captivating enough for it to resonate with them in ways that typical lessons failed to do. An additional question was asked on their feelings regarding how the activities made them feel as a reader and a writer and 19 out of the 31 said “better,” while there was a tie with 6 students that said the activities made them feel “smart” and an additional 6 students said the activities made them feel “happy.”

During some of the interview sessions, and after our active learning strategies, I asked students “To what extent did you learn from your classmates during the activities.” 22 out of the 31 students said “greatly.” This response suggests the power of classroom group work during active learning activities; hands-on learning has a positive effect on partnership and peer learning. The first graders understood and admitted the benefit of shared work, responsibilities, and effort. In order to conclude the interviews after the final active learning activity, I asked students how they felt different about the classroom since the inclusion of hands-on learning activities. Their responses ranged from, “I like it more,” which was the top response with second ranked response of, “It’s more fun.” The third ranked response to this question was “I now have better friends.”

Table 6, as shown below, presents detailed questions regarding specific active learning activities that we did as a class, as well as the students’ reaction and feelings towards them.

Table 6

Active Learning Activities (Specific)

Question	Theme	Frequency	Rank
1) How, if at all, was the Echo-Reading helpful?	Learn new words	13	1
	Comprehension	10	2
	Not Sure	8	3
2) How, if at all, did acting out the story help you understand it better?	Comprehension	23	1
	Character Understanding	5	2
	Retelling	3	3
3) What was your favorite part about the nature walk?	Being outside	17	1
	Learning new things	8	2
	Discussing	6	3
4) How, if at all, was finger-painting the spelling words helpful?	Memory	20	1
	Spelling	6	2
	Practice	5	3
5) How did sitting on the floor during the activity help you?	More room	13	1
	Working with others	9	2
	Not be bored	9	2
6) How, was using the computer helpful during word and sentence practice?	Fun	11	1
	Fast	10	2
	Easy to correct	10	2
7) How did interviewing the characters in the story help you as a reader?	Got to know them	19	1
	Understanding	5	2
	Comprehension	5	2
	Not sure	2	3
8) How did working with a partner and group in the stations help you as a learner?	Discussion/Collaboration skills	10	1
	Better grade	10	1
	Support	10	1
	Not sure	1	2
9) How did creating a story with magazine cutouts help you as a reader and a writer?	Practice words and sentences	19	1
	Easier to build a story	7	2
	Learn the correct spelling	5	3
10) How does comparing the story, characters, and vocabulary words to yourself and others help with learning outside of school?	Learn about others	11	1
	More knowledgeable	10	2
	Help lead discussion	5	3
	Not sure	5	3

The specific questions asked to students during the interview process are presented above in table 6. This data helps draw conclusions regarding the positive literacy effects of active learning strategies on first grade students adjusting to a formal educational environment. When students were asked how the echo-reading was helpful, the number one response was that it helped them to learn new words. When students were asked how acting out the story helped them, the number one response was that it helped them with reading comprehension. According to the survey, the number one response for why they liked working on the floor was because “It gave them more room.” This response was followed by the response of getting the chance to work with others. These first graders were giving accurate answers in understanding that the activities were actually helping to build their literacy skills (which can be seen in their student assessments and grades). They did not respond in saying “It gave me more time with my friends,” or “It made school go by faster.” Instead, they were giving valid, high-level thinking responses in saying that they actually enjoyed these activities because they helped them improve as a reader and writer.

In regards to technology, students were asked how using a computer was helpful. The three major themed responses were almost evenly ranked in that 11 out of 31 students said that using a computer was “fun.” The other two responses were tied in that 10 out of 31 students said “it was fast” and another 10 students said “it made it easy to correct mistakes.”

When asked “How did interviewing the characters from the story help you as a reader,” 19 out of 31 students said that it “helped to get to know them better.” When asked about the benefit of with a partner the top three responses, in ranked order, were:

“improving discussion/collaboration skills,” “getting better grades,” and “having support.”

According to the survey, 19 out of 31 students said that the use of magazine cutouts helped in creating a story by offering practice with putting together words and sentences and in comparing the story, characters, and vocabulary words to their own lives. An additional 11 out of the 31 students said that the magazines helped them to “learn about others,” and the remaining 10 out of 31 students said it helped them to become more “knowledgeable.” Again, these first graders are providing reasoning for the liking and enjoying the active-learning activities in that they recognize the powerful effect such strategies have on their learning. The survey responses from these students help to suggest that active learning may help students to not only adjust to a school environment, but also to mature into understanding the multifaceted components of being a emergent literacy learner.

An analysis of the data suggests that the hands-on active learning activities made an effective impact on Ms. Scott’s first grade students. In only 4-5 weeks, these first grade students had a change in their perception regarding themselves and their outlook on formal education. In October, they did not consider themselves good students, they were unwilling to share their work with others, and they were unsure of whether or not they wanted to work in groups and discuss different literature. In November, these same students enjoyed their time in the classroom, were enthusiastic about sharing their work, put more effort into their assessments and enjoyed sharing and participating in group discussions. Their reading, writing, phonics, grammar, and spelling grades increased, on average, by 10-15 points.

These first grade students are beginning to show improvement in transitioning to the new atmosphere of the school. As the data suggests, they are more understanding of the rules and regulations, their attitudes are centered more on intrinsic motivation, engagement, and the willingness to help and support one another. The rise in literacy grades suggests that students are meeting higher levels of school expectations and their change in the level of their responses (as seen through the exemplar explanation of student work and presented in Appendix B). Although hands-on active learning strategies seem like the perfect solution for struggling emergent literacy learners adjusting to a new atmosphere, there are always limitations, troublesome variables, and important factors to consider before any discovery is considered “proved.” Therefore, Chapter 5, in addition to presenting the full summary, reconnection to the reviewed literature, and further suggestions for future research, also has a section that discusses the specific limitations and implications of this research study.

Chapter 5

Summary, Conclusions, Limitations and Implications for the Field

Introduction

As the research study came to an end, I stepped back and began reflecting on my data analysis and the discoveries that came from exploring the question, “What happens when first graders that did not attend Preschool or Kindergarten engage in active learning activities to help build literacy skills?” During this process of sitting back and examining the entire research study, I also kept in mind my original sub-questions: Would active learning help students adjust to a new educational environment? How will active learning help build the literacy skills of emergent literacy learners? How will the children respond to the active learning activities? Will their performance, effort, motivation, engagement, and grades change with the use of these hands-on activities? This chapter summarizes the research findings, identifies the limitations, and explores how this study complements broader research on active learning activities. It also explores the implications for literacy instruction with a particular focus on use of active learning activities in helping first graders transition to an educational environment, while building on their emergent literacy skills.

Summary of the Findings

Based on the data collected and analyzed, I can say that these first grade students have been positively affected by the use of hands-on active learning activities in more than one way. Active learning promotes social interaction, group dialogue, and higher levels of self-efficacy, motivation and engagement. Although active learning alone may not directly improve literacy grades and smooth the transition into formal education, it

does help build the necessary frame of mind to promote intrinsic motivation and peer-support necessary for actual literacy success.

While incorporating hands-on active learning activities into my literacy lessons, I first noticed a change in the attitude and demeanor of these first grade students. When I introduced an activity, students would cheer and get excited to participate in what the lesson had to offer. I also noticed a decrease in the fidgeting and side conversations. The practiced activities kept them engaged.

The combination of the active learning activities and the learning environment of the classroom (with student-choice seating and floor activities) led me to discover the power of group work. I instantly noticed a great change in the way students were completing assessments—they were excited to work together, they put forth more effort, they took on responsibility in splitting and organizing the tasks according each individual's strengths and interests, and they were proud and excited to share the final result.

Another unexpected benefit of active learning activities was the observed rise in self-efficacy in these first grade students. A majority of the students initially (prior to the change in instruction and as shown from the initial survey results) did not consider themselves good learners, did not like sharing their work, and had negative connotations associated to the classroom atmosphere. Once they participated in active learning activities that brought out their strengths, addressed their weaknesses, and made learning exciting, their original perception changed. These children began considering themselves better students. They started to enjoy time in the classroom and found reading and writing to be exciting. According to the interview sessions and data presented in Chapter 4,

many of these first grade students believed the active learning activities helped them to better understand the content, improve memorization skills, and provided an opportunity to learn from other students within the classroom.

Literacy scores greatly improved over the 4-5 weeks of instruction that included heavy use of hands-on active learning activities. Reading, writing, spelling, phonics, and grammar scores as a class average improved 10-16 points in only one month. A major change in the literacy averages is a direct result of the dramatic change in student work. The hands-on activities gave students the opportunity to use more than a pencil, paper, and their brain; these activities gave first graders the opportunity to use creative thinking skills, collaboration time with peers, and room for exploring new curiosities which originally served little to no interest to them. Therefore, intrinsic motivation, engagement, excitement and curiosity became the major concluding themes linked to the discoveries of this research study.

Conclusions of the Study

In looking over the summation of the findings, I can say that my research study has validated the results of the National Survey of Student Engagement (Amburgh, Devlin, Kirwin, and Qualters, 2007) that stated active learning and high levels of student engagement through hands-on activities resulted in an increase in learning and retention of grade level reading material. As presented in Chapter 4's data presentation, the average for all major literacy components increased by 10-16 points in 4-5 weeks of active learning hands-on instruction.

One of the strongest discoveries this research study led me to understand is that active learning activities can positively change students' perception towards themselves,

literacy topics, and the school. The majority of the first grade subjects of this research study did not attend Preschool and Kindergarten, and therefore, their initial outlook on formal education upon entering a new school and atmosphere was based on hearsay—what their parents, television, and community had to say about education. They were not yet granted the opportunity to first-handedly experience formal learning. I found that most of their initial assumptions led them to believe that being a “good” student was far out of reach and that sharing work was intimidating, discussing literature was boring, and reading was tedious. The active learning activities gave these first graders the opportunity to see that they have it within themselves to succeed; they have the interest, motivation, and engagement needed to be successful. The more they enjoyed the activities and the partners/groups they worked with, the more effort they put into their work and thus, the more excitement they had in sharing the final product with the class. Riggs (1995) would agree with such findings in that his study suggests that the involvement of active learning greatly supports emergent literacy in simply giving students the power to “feel more confident, empowered and excited for reading and writing activities when given hands-on inquiry learning strategies” (p. 5).

The active learning activities played a major factor in the reasoning behind the increase in literacy scores. Once the students had an increase in positive perception of themselves as learners and of a formal educational environment, combined with an increase in motivation and engagement, their effort and enthusiasm lead to stronger student output. The increase in partner work and group dialogue helped their understanding of the literature and increased their comprehension levels, which serves as the backbone to literacy success. Their writing did not necessarily improve in terms of

grammatical layout, but it did become more detailed and in-depth with ties to background knowledge (which can be viewed in the Appendixes under student work).

Group work and group dialogue also helped to improve students listening and speaking skills, which is another important factor related to the increase in literacy grades. Students soon began to better understand the respectful group environment enforced during active learning activities. Upon coming to school in September, many students did not understand that they needed to raise their hand to respectfully speak. Instead, they would interrupt each other and call-out, which would constantly disrupt the flow of the discussions and prevent room for text-to-self connection and the sharing of personal experience and background knowledge. As reading, writing, speaking and listening skills improved, their understanding of what it means to be a student in a formal educational environment also improved. These students not only grew in terms of their understanding of literary content and performance, but also with their understanding of a learning community. In other words, they learned and practiced what it means to work equally with a partner, collaborate effectively with a group and how to be respectful and supportive as a mature and helpful peer. In addition to this, they also began following and better understanding the rules of the school.

Limitations of the Study

Although my study was successful in many ways, there are specific limitations and variables that need to be considered when reviewing the results and conclusions of this research. The school in which this research study was conducted opened its doors at the start of this school year. Students were adjusting to the new environment and setting.

Therefore, the increase in student grades, participation, and perception could also be a partial result of the gradual adjustment to the school.

In terms of actual limitations that came from this research study, it is important to consider the fact that the time span of 4-5 weeks only allowed for a specific grouping of active learning activities. There are numerous activities and classroom designs that could further add to the richness of the gathered data. However, as stated, the time constraint limited the comparing and contrasting of specific activities, as well as the inclusion of additional hands-on assessments and follow-up lessons.

Implications for the Field

Researchers in the field of formal emergent literacy instruction should focus directly on the wants and needs of the students. Providing a comfortable learning environment centered on respect, student-choice, and student-centered instruction best promotes effective literacy instruction. Through this study, I learned to follow the direction of my students as I gained insight into their own personal goals and interests. I learned to center instruction on these interests and to find and bring forth their individual strengths. My goal was not to make learning fun, but to make learning exciting. I wanted to find a way for these first grade students to generate multiple curiosities based off their own interests. It was with this goal in mind that I was able to help these students believe in themselves. With higher self-efficacy and motivational levels, active learning acted as a scaffold in helping these students transition into an educational setting for the first time.

Teacher researchers interested in conducting studies on active learning strategies may want to examine the effectiveness of each individual activity in terms of building self-efficacy skills and improving literacy scores. Further research can be conducted to

follow the effects of this active learning success beyond elementary education. In other words, additional research would need to be conducted to assess the effectiveness of active learning instruction with ongoing literacy success in middle and high school grade levels (again in comparison with sample groups with and without Preschool and Kindergarten background experience).

Final Thoughts

In summary, this research study with first graders and specific hands-on active learning activities taught me a lot about how to help students grow beyond simply being literacy learners. In other words, effective instruction helps students grow in areas that exist outside of just academics. These young students learned more than simply becoming stronger readers, better writers, clearer speakers, and quieter listeners. They also learned how to grow into being part of a learning community—in playing an important role in bringing their thoughts, experiences, and background knowledge into play.

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Appendix A

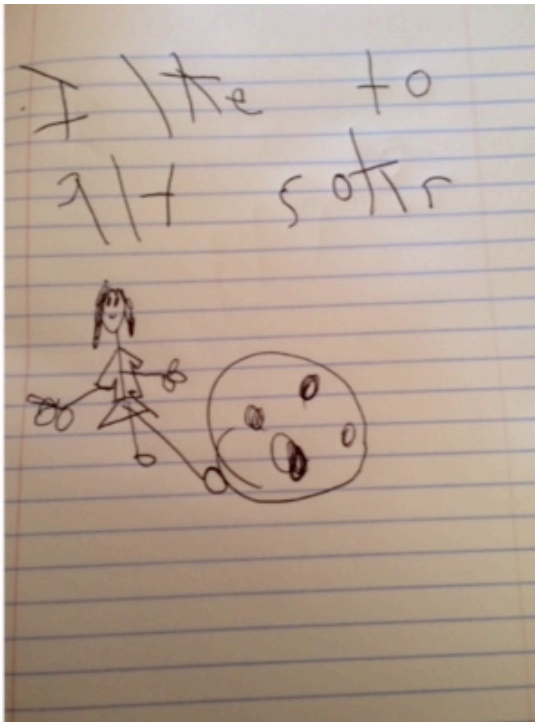
Full Student Surveys

Question	Choices	October Responses	December Responses
1) Which do you prefer?	Working alone	5	2
	With a partner	17	7
	In a group	9	22
2) Which do you prefer?	Working at a desk	2	5
	On the floor	27	10
	At a table	2	16
3) Which do you prefer?	Reading at home	10	3
	At school	6	21
	outside	15	7
4) Which would you prefer?	Listening to drums	2	2
	Talking about drums	0	20
	Playing drums	29	9
5) Favorite place in school	Cafeteria	1	1
	Classroom	0	20
	Schoolyard	30	10
6) Which do you do the most?	Sit in a desk	22	7
	Create	4	12
	Discuss	5	12
7) What do you wish you did the most?	Sit in a desk	0	0
	Create	27	16
	Discuss	4	15
8) I like when...	I read	3	14
	Teacher Reads	20	7

	I read with partner	8	10
9) I do my best when...	I work quietly	0	6
	Whisper with partner	10	12
	Discuss with class	21	13
10) School is...	Boring	15	8
	Fun	15	7
	Exciting	1	16
11) Reading is...	Boring	17	6
	Fun	12	7
	Exciting	2	18
12) Writing is...	Boring	24	7
	Fun	7	4
	Exciting	0	20
13) I am a good student	True	7	21
	False	24	10
14) I like to read and write	True	5	18
	False	26	13
15) I like to share my work	True	8	30
	False	23	1
16) I am proud of my work	True	13	25
	False	18	6

Appendix B

Student Work



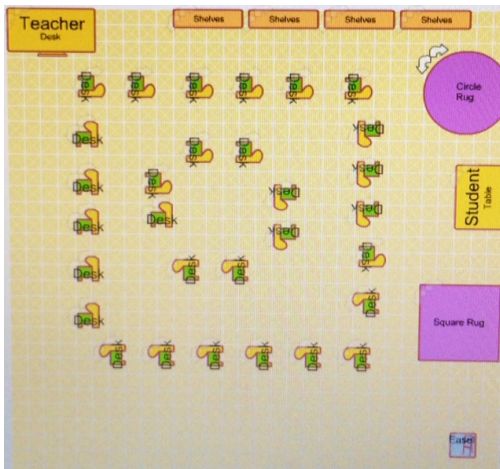
Appendix C

“Sociogram” Grid

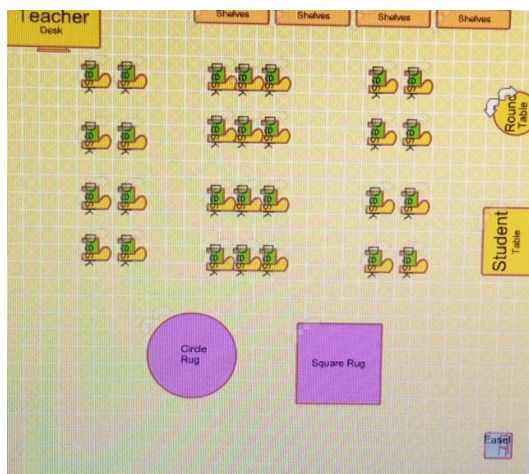
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31				1									2	3																						

Appendix D

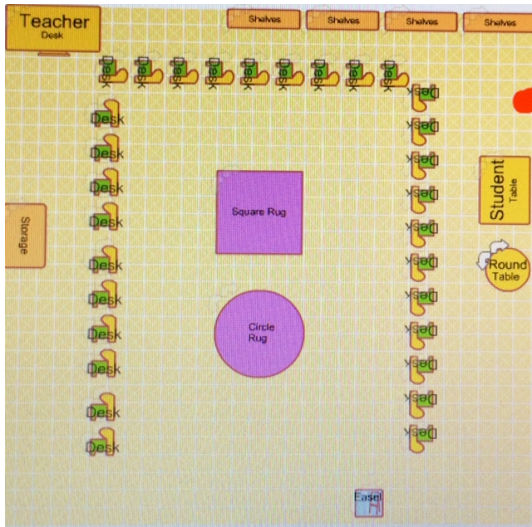
Classroom Designs



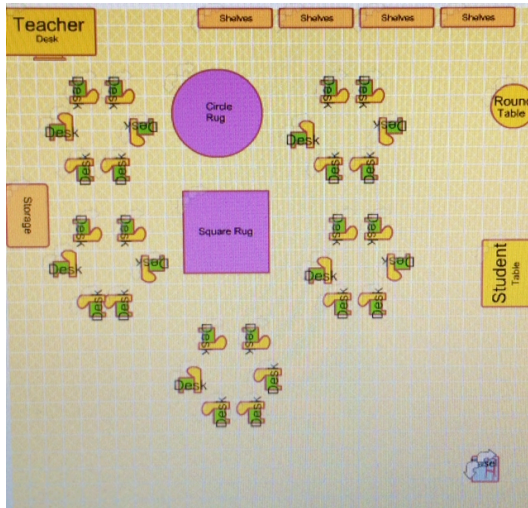
Fishbowl Classroom Design



2-3-2 Classroom Design



U-Shape Classroom Design



Tables Classroom Design