

Rowan University

Rowan Digital Works

Theses and Dissertations

3-12-2015

What is the effect of language arts small group instruction in the form of student directed centers or teacher directed small groups on the social and educational relationships of teachers and students within a primary grade classroom?

Jennifer Gorgo

Follow this and additional works at: <https://rdw.rowan.edu/etd>



Part of the [Elementary Education and Teaching Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gorgo, Jennifer, "What is the effect of language arts small group instruction in the form of student directed centers or teacher directed small groups on the social and educational relationships of teachers and students within a primary grade classroom?" (2015). *Theses and Dissertations*. 500.
<https://rdw.rowan.edu/etd/500>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Rowan Digital Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Rowan Digital Works. For more information, please contact graduateresearch@rowan.edu.

**WHAT IS THE EFFECT OF LANGUAGE ARTS SMALL GROUP INSTRUCTION IN
THE FORM OF STUDENT DIRECTED CENTERS OR TEACHER DIRECTED SMALL
GROUPS ON THE SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS OF TEACHERS
AND STUDENTS WITHIN A PRIMARY GRADE CLASSROOM?**

by
Jennifer Rebecca Gorgo

A Thesis

Submitted to the
Department of Collaborative Education
College of Education
In partial fulfillment of the requirement
For the degree of
Master of Science In Teaching
at
Rowan University
June 27, 2010

Thesis Chair: Susan Browne, Ed. D.

© 2015 Jennifer Rebecca Gorgo

Abstract

Jennifer Gorgo

WHAT IS THE EFFECT OF LANGUAGE ARTS SMALL GROUP INSTRUCTION IN THE FORM OF STUDENT DIRECTED CENTERS OR TEACHER DIRECTED SMALL GROUPS ON THE SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS OF TEACHERS AND STUDENTS WITHIN A PRIMARY GRADE CLASSROOM?

2010/11

Susan Browne, Ed.D.

Master of Science in Teaching

The purpose of this study was to determine the effect that student directed center work had on the social and educational relationships of teachers and students in a second grade classroom. The study showed that the effect was a positive one. Students showed academic growth along with growth toward a positive self-concept. Through surveys and academic work one was able to see that the students were better able to express themselves socially and academically. While the students were working together, they were creating learning communities that were facilitating academic growth as well as social growth amongst their peers and teachers. This study can have far reaching implications for the way that Language Arts small group instruction techniques can be utilized in the primary academic grades.

Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
List of Figures	v
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: Literature Review	7
Chapter 3: Methodology	19
Chapter 4: Data Analysis	24
Chapter 5: Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations	41
References	50

List of Figures

Figure	Page
Figure 1 Reported classroom friendships at the beginning of the study	25
Figure 2 Reported classroom friendships at the end of study	26
Figure 3 Student use of decoding strategies at the beginning of the study	28
Figure 4 Student use of decoding strategies at the end of the study	30
Figure 5 Student self-assessment rubric.	31
Figure 6 Student work rating	32
Figure 7 Comprehension strategies used at the beginning of the study	33
Figure 8 Comprehension strategies used at the end of the study	35
Figure 9 Weekly student progress rubric	37
Figure 10 Student self-assessment over the course of the study	38
Figure 11 Student response rubric	39

Chapter 1 Introduction

“Education is what survives when what has been learned has been forgotten.”

-B.F. Skinner

When I first heard this quote, I realized that when broken down, many questions arise from these few short words. What does education mean for each individual student we have in our classrooms? How do we know what we are teaching is really getting to the core of our students? These are very deep questions, and they cannot be answered in just one way; however, this quote should certainly make us want to explore the answers to these questions. Everything we teach our students in our classroom should ideally reach their hearts and their minds in a way that will benefit them throughout their lifetime. We should constantly be looking for the most beneficial strategies and supports in order to achieve that ideal.

Purpose Statement

Language Arts is the corner stone of learning for each of our students. Without language, one cannot convey his or her deepest thoughts and feelings, whether mundane or profound. In the primary grades, teaching language to each student is imperative, and the tiniest gap in instruction can lead to a lifetime of lagging behind. Today, Language Arts centers are thought to be one of the best ways to enhance reading achievement in the classroom (Miller, D. 2002). When implemented, however, we need to make sure that we are meeting the goals and checkpoints that our students need to advance. If used incorrectly, language arts centers can become a detriment to student learning, and that is something that we all need to avoid if we want to provide our students with an *education* that goes beyond just learning the words.

Small groupings within the Language Arts classroom need to be examined in order to determine their effectiveness in lower elementary grades. When used correctly, they can be a positive alternative to traditional, direct instruction. The research that has already been done on this topic shows that using small, student centered groupings allows students to take responsibility for their learning as well as increasing their motivation to read and write adeptly (Nichols, J.D., 1994).

My research will focus on what types of groupings are being used in the primary grade classrooms today, as well as what types are proving to be the most beneficial for these students. My students will participate in various types of Language Arts centers and will be given informal assessments to gauge their learning during each particular type of center. The students' relationships with their peers as well as with the teacher will also be looked at to determine if these types of groupings encourage a learning community within the classroom. When students feel comfortable within their classroom environment –their peers and teachers- they will be better set up to achieve to the highest degree they can. Research shows that collaborative groupings can enhance these relationships within the classroom (Turner, J., 1995).

Statement of Research Problem and Question

Although teachers may be embracing the concept of student-centered, collaborative small groups within the classroom instead of traditional direct instruction, many are not creating effective centers that are age appropriate. When used incorrectly, student centers can become frustrating and detrimental to a student's education; a waste of invaluable instructional time.

It is from this idea then that my research question has evolved. As a soon to be teacher I hope to find out how Language Arts centers can be structured in order to benefit primary grade

level students, primarily second grade students, to the highest degree. To find this out I will examine what happens when primary grade students are grouped together in different set ups for language arts centers. The question I chose to ask is then: *What is the impact of collaborative student centers during language arts in a second grade inclusion classroom?* This question, in turn, raises others, such as: *What types of groupings are the most beneficial?* And, *Should these groupings be based solely on grade level cognitive ability, or are there other factors involved in choosing the types of centers that should be implemented?*

The Story of My Question

As I sat in a room with 25 six year olds, scrambling to find which Language Arts center they should have been at two minutes ago, running into each other and asking any adult in the near vicinity for help, I began to contemplate my experience in this first grade classroom. Over the past three weeks I had gotten to know these little boys and girls, not just as individual learners, but as little people with very diverse personalities and strengths. I watched as Sean, the only one in the room who seemed to know where he was going, tried to explain to the others how the rotation of centers should work. Our cooperating teacher was already busy with her first reading group, and she made it clear that the students had to figure this rotation out on their own, so it was every boy and girl for themselves.

As I was watching and thinking, I felt a tap on my arm. When I turned around I saw Arianna with her braids falling away from her face and her neck arched up so she could look at me. I knew that whatever this was about, it must have been important because Arianna has a stubborn streak about her that prevents her from ever asking questions. “I was in the bathroom,” she said with an inquisitive look on her face. “I have no idea what my pictures mean.” The

pictures she was referring to were hung up across the blackboard by clothespins on a string. The center she was assigned to required that she figure out what words the pictures on the cards represented, and then write that word on her center worksheet. I walked over to the chalkboard with her, thinking, “She should be able to figure these pictures out, she’s one of the highest level reading students in this class”, and “She must just want to talk to me, she loves to talk.” Much to my dismay however, I did not know what the pictures showed either. I looked down at Arianna with the same inquisitive look that she had given me a minute earlier. She shrugged her shoulders and smiled and I laughed, patted her on the shoulder and promised to procure an answer for her. Turns out, the picture was of a radiator. How absurd – I didn’t even know if *I* was spelling it right until I used the spell check on my laptop!

This picture was one of twenty that the students had to figure out in this particular center. I couldn’t help but think this type of center was way too difficult for these kids, but they still tried so hard to complete it. I also couldn’t help but come to the realization that after our eight weeks here were up, and we were no longer there to answer their many questions, these centers would become nearly impossible for them to complete. Even if we could not always answer those questions, at the very least, we were there to commiserate with them about not knowing the answer. Once we left, from where would that empathy and understanding come?

When I went home that night I began to think about how many times in the one hour that was allotted for Language Arts centers, I was asked a question. At least every few minutes a student needs a word read to them or something spelled. What had I learned in my last four years of college about this? These students were reading their frustration levels on a daily basis and I knew it. I began to observe the frustrated, angry looks on their faces when they could not understand a sentence they had to read. Once they had decided against trying to figure out the

words on their own, I watched them copy the answers from someone else in their center. My experience in the classroom told me that this is not the way center work was supposed to be. It was supposed to make the students feel empowered in their learning and most certainly, to learn something. My students were spinning their wheels, and looking to others for the answers they weren't coming up with on their own.

Every day after that, I walked into this classroom thinking of ways to adapt the centers to the students' needs and I began thinking about different ways collaborative groupings can work. After all, I am a collaborative education major, it should have been easy for me right? But if I've learned one thing in the past several months, it's that with kids, nothing is cut and dry. Each one of them has their own wonderful and quirky qualities, and each one of those qualities should be brought out to help them further their learning. How can these Language Arts centers cater to the many needs of our students? How can we create these centers to avoid frustration levels? I felt like the answer to these questions would not be so easy to find. But, I knew that it would be well worth trying.

Organization of Thesis

Chapter Two of my thesis will examine the research that has been done on collaborative student groups used in the classroom today. It will also look at the cognitive development of primary grade level students and the research that has been done to show if student centers are really effective in lower elementary classrooms. Some other topics Chapter Two will discuss are: student motivation within Language Arts and the influence of classroom contexts on young children's' motivation. Chapter Three will discuss the context of the study as well as the design of my research and the methodology behind it. In Chapters Four and Five I will discuss the

results of my study and what these results mean for any further research that should be done on this topic.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Question: What is the effect of language arts small group instruction in the form of student directed centers or teacher directed small groups on the social and educational relationships of teachers and students within a primary grade classroom?

In a world where the techniques teachers should use to be considered highly effective is constantly being revamped and challenged, and then revamped and challenged again, one must question whether or not their current teaching practices are benefitting their own students in the best way possible. The subject of language arts and literacy is the foundation from which all other subjects can be learned. Therefore, it is extremely important, especially in the primary grades, that each student is fully grasping reading and writing to the best of their ability. Since how to teach our students these subjects is so highly controversial, it would be wise to examine the literature and research that has been published regarding this topic. Questions will arise such as; what is student directed instruction? What is teacher directed instruction? What types of these models are currently being used in the classroom? This literature review will begin with an examination of the definitions of student small groupings in centers and teacher directed instruction in small groups. It will then continue on with the benefits and detriments of smaller group instruction. This information will come from educational journals which focus on the research of small group instruction. The next section will include the theories of Piaget, Vygotsky, Dewey and Montessori as well as the cognitive development levels of lower elementary students. These will shed more insight into the cognitive levels and general abilities of students in the lower elementary or primary grades. The next section will then examine the different models of cooperative learning and the teacher's role in each of these settings. Finally,

the last section will focus on the relationships that are built when small group instruction is used within a classroom environment. Student success as well as communication between peers as well as students and teachers will be explained. All of these areas are imperative when trying to understand the benefits of a small group focus within a primary grade classroom.

Student Directed Instruction and Small Groups

We can first look at a Child-Centered, or a student centered, curriculum. The definition of which is an approach that focuses more on the importance of children's individual interests and their freedom to create their own learning experience within the classroom (Dunn and Kontos, 1997). The term 'child centered' first appeared in a book by Froebel in 1778 and has continued to be shaped into over forty different meanings. Depending on the interpretation, child centered or student directed instruction focuses on each child's decisions about their school curriculum as well as the teacher's role in such a classroom (Chung & Walsh, 2000). How does this definition relate to center or small group instruction? In a smaller group setting, students are able to choose more of what they would like to focus on. They are able to showcase their strengths and compensate for their weaknesses by asking questions of other group members to better understand an assignment. During group work in centers, each student can decide on the role they will play within that group. Some may choose to record the groups' thoughts; some may choose to lead the discussion, etc. In small language arts groups, students can practice newly learned strategies as well as work collaboratively to create texts. Students can also talk more freely about ideas than they would normally feel comfortable with during whole group instruction.

Another option in regards to child centered learning is Peer-Assisted Instruction.

According to research, this method has shown to promote academic success across a variety of subjects as well as with a great number of diverse learners (Mathis, p. 461). There is a program called “Peer Assisted Learning Strategies”, which builds upon tutoring done by peers within the classroom. This strategy has been shown to increase academic engagement in students who are normally on the low scale of performance. In the study done by Mathis, this strategy was used on first graders who were beginning readers. During each session, the students practiced phonemic segmentation, and read connected text. These students were able to make accurate predictions about each story before it was read. This was continued for sixteen weeks at the rate of 35 minutes per day. According to the results of the study, PALS enhanced reading performance way beyond that of typical instructional strategies. The students who took part in the PALS program outperformed those first graders who did not participate in the program (Mathis, p. 474).

Teacher Directed Instruction

There are several reasons that a teacher would use whole group instruction. These would include, introducing a new concept or idea, sharing background knowledge through the use of graphic organizers, reviewing terms from a previous lesson to activate background knowledge, reinforcing the main concepts of a difficult lesson, or for enrichment activities (Pardo and Raphael, p. 557). Some examples of whole group instruction would be the creation of a class KWL chart or an anticipation guide handed out before the modeled reading of a text. Another strategy called “Author Chair”, allows students to share their journal writings or projects with a real audience. The audience or classmates in this case, provides feedback on the writing and allows the student to get used to presenting their ideas in a public setting. Small group teacher

directed instruction can also have a positive effect on low level learners. These types of learners normally have low levels of participation during whole class instruction (Schumm, Moody, & Vaughn, 2000. p 461). In the case of whole group instruction, lower level students will normally spend most of their time listening and watching instead of participating in class. These are skills that need to be practiced within the classroom, not just observed. One disadvantage of teacher directed small groups is that the other children in the class are left to work on their own for the majority of the instructional time. Those students who are struggling usually spend this time off task, or end up copying another students' work to complete the assignment. In this type of setting, the comprehension needed to understand each activity is never realized because the student will not get past the directions of the activity. A study done by Mathis focused on teacher directed instruction. According to this study, a teacher conducted lessons with four low achieving students three times a week for thirty minutes at a time. The results of this study showed that individualized teacher instruction produced somewhat stronger scores than whole group instruction. Some advantages to teacher directed instruction include the fact that teachers become experienced in scaffolding procedure as well as the ability to immediately correct errors that are made by the student. A teacher is able to catch early problems more so than a student's peers ever could. A teacher is also able to teach to mastery, that is, continue to build on a skill at the student's individual level until they have reached a thorough understanding (Mathis, p. 476).

Cooperative Learning

“Cooperative Learning encourages students to discuss, debate, disagree, and ultimately to teach one another” (Slavin, p. 1). Cooperative Learning has long been said to be the answer to many educational problems. It has also been credited with emphasizing thinking skills and increasing higher level thinking and learning. Cooperative Learning is an effective way to prepare students

for a work force that calls for increased collaboration amongst peers. This learning strategy is often used to supplement teacher instruction. It can also be used to promote individual student exploration of a topic. Research in regards to cooperation in the classroom goes back to the 1920's. One type of Cooperative Learning is "student team learning". In this model, students are working together in a way that allows them to feel responsible for everyone's learning, not just their own. This method emphasizes the concepts of creating a team goal and celebrating team success. It highlights the importance of an established learning community within the classroom. Students must understand that the overall success of the group partly depends on them as individuals. As a whole, the group must meet certain objectives and are therefore learning as a team. This type of cooperative learning also focuses on equal opportunities for success within the group. Each student should be able to contribute by adding on to the knowledge the group has been compiling. If this style of learning is used, groups will receive a grade together as well as each student receiving an individual grade. This grade will be dependent on whether or not the student has added some type of schema to their knowledge base. It is important to note this grade is not based on the achievements of other students within the group.

Another type of cooperative learning is dubbed, Student Teams Achievement Divisions. In this collaborative model, students are assigned to four member learning teams that are leveled by performance, sex and ethnicity. The teacher presents a lesson and the students work in groups to make sure everyone in the class has gained the knowledge needed from the lesson. This type of cooperative learning has been used in grades 2-12 (Slavin, p. 2). There is a certain level of autonomy and a sense of responsibility that is needed to complete these types of cooperative learning modules. Students in Kindergarten and First Grade may have a hard time taking any

kind of responsibility for this type of learning. When implementing this model, one must reflect on what types of relationships are being fostered in this type of learning module. Depending on grade level, some students may feel pressured to perform in this type of setting. Students may also feel lost in the idea of group work without the teacher present to prod them for answers. A well- practiced routine must be present for the implementation of this type of cooperative learning situation to foster authentic learning.

Jig sawing is another technique found under the cooperative learning umbrella. When using this method, a group of students are assigned to a task that has been broken down into several parts. An example of this would be the study of a biography. The task of reviewing the biography would be broken down into the person's early life, his or her first accomplishments, his or her major setbacks, his or her later life, and his or her impact on history. Each student in the group will read the section assigned to them and then will be broken up into separate subgroups where every student has read the same material. The students will then return to their original groups and explain what they learned from the other 'experts' in the subgroup (Slavin, 1991, p. 75).

As of 1991, there had been 70 high quality studies done on the academic achievement aspect of cooperative learning. 61% of these studies found that there was significantly greater achievement in the classes which used cooperative learning as opposed to traditional teaching methods. According to this study, only one class utilizing traditional teaching methods created higher achieving students. One of the most important aspects addressed in these studies was the importance of the relationships that form within these cooperative learning groups. One of the earliest findings was that students who work closely together in groups tended to build stronger relationships. This is important, but it becomes even more important in ethnically diverse

communities where communication is limited between ethnic groups (Oishi, 1983). These studies also showed growth in student's self-esteem (Slavin 1990). Students in these groups are able to take a problem and come up with several possible solutions. This is an important piece when examining small group instruction because it shows student interactions with one another. Group dynamics play a major role in whether or not small groups are successful.

Cognitive Development with Piaget and Vygotsky

According to Piaget, children construct their own realities based on prior knowledge as well as new experiences. He believed that knowledge was constructed as a result of those experiences and then honed during future social situations. For Piaget, the importance of the school setting was that it provided children with a means of testing this knowledge that they had previously constructed (Tzuo, 2007, p. 35). The classroom structure that best relates to his theory would be one with a great deal of freedom present. As a teacher, one would set up an environment for children to explore on their own, with social interactions necessary to complete activities. A classroom with centers centered around Piaget's theory would allow for minimal instruction from the teacher. The students would be asked to work together and to draw conclusions from one another.

Another similar theory would be that of Vygotsky. According to him, learning is an interactive and constructive activity in which the individual as well as society play an active role. He believed that knowledge is constructed as a result of social interaction and is then internalized. This is slightly different than what Piaget believed. For Vygotsky, learning played a major role in development. He would be a strong supporter of group interaction within the classroom because of his idea of "zone of proximal development". This is the idea that each

student has a 'zone' or group of levels where the best learning can take place. When students are assisted by their peers they can attain to higher levels of thinking, or higher levels within their 'zone'. Teachers can also play an active part in challenging students to learn in the higher levels of their zone. Pushing the students slightly above their comfort level and asking higher level thinking questions would allow this to happen. Both Piaget and Vygotsky emphasized the importance of peer interaction and cooperation. This was the key to students moving along the learning curve (Dockett and Perry, 1996, p. 57).

Both of the aforementioned theories of learning fit in nicely with the idea of student directed centers. In order for students to reach their highest potential within the classroom, they need challenges. These challenges can be in the form of questions and assignments posed by the teacher. However, they can also be just as effective if posed by other students in the classroom. Sometimes students can be the best teachers, and when the students are taking this role within the classroom they are helping themselves as well as others to attain to these higher levels of thinking. In a small group arrangement, directed by students, each student has the opportunity to showcase his or her strengths. In small groups, the students are able to work together to come up with solutions to problems, create new ideas and go above and beyond the standard curriculum.

Dewey and Montessori's Views

John Dewey and Maria Montessori are two more large contributors to the child centered learning approach. For Dewey, learning meant experiencing things by any means necessary. Together, teachers and students decide at what level learning should take place, as well as which experiences should be had within that level. Dewey viewed education as a democracy and he felt that the purpose of school was to prepare students for a larger democratic world outside of

the public school system (Dewey, 1998). However, Dewey also believed a student's freedom should be constructed to a certain point, and should not solely be based on free will. He ultimately thought that a student's curriculum should be flexible enough to allow for some free play, but firm enough to allow teacher direction to increase the student's knowledge base. Dewey saw the teacher's role to be to keep order and focus within the classroom. He said, "There is no intellectual growth without some reconstruction, some remarking, or impulses and desires in the form in which they first show themselves" (Dewey, 1998, p. 74). He saw the ideal aim of education to be the teaching of self-control to its pupils. Dewey's theories tie in with small group instruction, whether teacher or student directed. For students to get the most out of their education, they need to have a leader that will tailor their experiences to their particular needs. For instance, if a group of students need a few more lessons on pulling the main idea from a text, the teacher would set up an activity that would be effective in leading the students to that end, not bringing them there herself. Allowing students to work in small groups gives them important social tools they will need to succeed later in life, once public school is a distant memory.

Montessori also had theories that tied in with child centered learning. She believed that the child has the power to teach himself. She felt as if it was not the teacher's job to talk, but rather to arrange the classroom in a way that would enable the child to develop skills and knowledge without any direct instruction (Montessori, 1995). The only exception to this rule, Montessori argued, would be if a student is exhibiting a negative behavior. This would affect the learning environment for other students in a negative way. At this point, it would be the teacher's job to jump in to correct the negative behavior so it would not influence other students to behave in the same way. Thus, the students would have the ability to learn freely within their

environment (Montessori, 1995). Montessori took the most liberal view of a teacher's role within her classroom. The question is whether or not younger students are able to handle this much freedom within their classroom. If socially, these free types of interactions can be handled, will they be learning everything they are required to know in this world of standardized tests and data collection. Another aspect that should be discussed alongside with Montessori's theories is whether or not these strategies can be balanced with some teacher directed learning. This would create a better balance within the classroom.

A compilation of these two theories would be something that is called High Teacher Control and High Child Freedom. In this type of situation, both the teacher and the students maintain control in the classroom setting. Their roles are continually negotiated depending on the task at hand. The teacher's authority is not used to undermine the child's independence, but rather, used to help teacher and student work together to form the best learning environment possible (Buzzelli and Johnston, 2002). Literacy centers can be created which give students a form of autonomy, while also giving the teacher the ability to set guidelines for the center. This would be most beneficial for children in lower elementary grades that will not have the cognitive higher level thinking skills needed to complete an assignment start to finish without any teacher direction what so ever.

Social Interactions and Relationships

Humans form different types of relationships every day. Whether they be fleeting or lasting, every person we meet leaves some type of mark upon us. It would be a fallacy to imply that students do not have the same types of interactions in the school environment. These interactions can be either a positive or a negative towards the goal of learning. These

interactions will shape a student's character for years to come. Relationships that we form as adults are dependant upon the social situations in which we are placed. The same can be said for students within the classroom. An example of this would be classroom size. Class size affects the number of students in the class with similar interests and learning characteristics. In larger classrooms, students are more apt to meet others with the same learning styles and interests as them. In this case, cliques are more likely to form amongst students (Hallinan, 1974).

The ability to choose friends with similar interests increases with the age of the child. Older children are more discriminatory in their friendship choices. For instance, by fourth grade a student would have formed an opinion as to whether or not they like rap music. They would naturally gravitate towards other students who feel the same. This level of cognitive thinking is not present in students in the youngest grade levels. These younger students would therefore say they had more friends than would a student in a higher grade level. In the youngest grades it is important to promote these social and academic groupings so the students have the opportunity to make decisions based on their likes and dislikes (Hallinan, 1974).

A study completed in 1974 focused particularly on the social differences between open classrooms, semi open classrooms and traditional classrooms. An open classroom would be one defined by small group work as well as multiple interactions between students. A traditional classroom would be defined as mostly whole group instruction and teacher directed learning. A semi open classroom would fall somewhere in the middle of the aforementioned extremes. The results of this study showed that students were friendlier with each other in the open classrooms. This is most likely the case because they were grouped with everyone in the classroom at one time or another and got to know each student individually. This proved that the free interactions

within the open classrooms made the students' choice in friends more realistic at the lower elementary level (Hallinan, 1987).

This study emphasizes the positive social outcomes for students in classrooms where small group instruction and student led instruction is implemented. The students are able to form close relationships with others in their classroom. These are students that may never have had the opportunity to talk with one another if they had not been assigned to a grouping. Smaller groups that are changed periodically can also help build a learning community within a classroom, emphasizing the importance of relationships between students and teachers. When a teacher is able to interact with students one on one they are able to better understand the student as a learner. They are also able to anticipate and examine any roadblocks that may pop up during the school year for their students. This one on one communication with their peers and teachers also increases the student's confidence in their ability to learn. If students feel comfortable within their classroom environment, they are more likely to ask for help when it is needed (Tzuo, 2007).

In conclusion, small group instruction, whether student or teacher directed, has been shown to be a positive alternative to traditional teaching methods. The research that has been done on this topic is all encompassing and vast. The topics discussed in this literature review tie together in explaining the many benefits, as well as some detriments to this style of teaching and learning. When deciding whether or not small group instruction would be beneficial for any group of students, one must take into account the whole picture. Each student's learning style, strengths and weaknesses must also be considered. If this is done, one will have one of the best teaching strategies that can be found in their 'teaching toolbox'.

Chapter Three

Context of Study

This study will take place in the Vineland Public School system, specifically, a second grade inclusion classroom in Petway Elementary School in Vineland City, NJ. The population of Vineland City is approximately 60,724 individuals. It is the largest city, in total area, in the state of New Jersey. The racial makeup of the city is as follows: 67.03% Caucasian, 38.03% Hispanic or Latino, 14.16% African American or Black, 1.71% Asian, 0.67% Native American, 0.04% Pacific Islander, and 3.48% from two or more races. 31.1% of the households in Vineland, NJ have children under the age of 18 living in them. The median household income is \$54,024 and the median family income is \$64,185. The per capita income for the city is \$24,512. About 11.0% of families and 12.8% of the population are below the poverty line, including 19.0% of those under age 18 and 9.1% of those age 65 or over.

Vineland Public Schools serve students in public school in grades K-12. The district is one of 31 Abbott school districts statewide. Schools in the district are Casimer M. Dallago, Jr. Preschool Center / IMPACT and Max Leuchter Preschool Center for preschool, Dane Barse School, D'Ippolito Elementary School, Marie Durand School, Johnstone School, Dr. William Mennies School, Petway School, Gloria M. Sabater School, John H. Winslow School, for grades K-5, Landis School, Anthony Rossi School, Veterans Memorial School, and Thomas W. Wallace, Jr. School for grades 6-8, Vineland High School for grades 9-12 and Cunningham Alternative School for students with "personal or academic challenges that prevent them from reaching their full potential". In 2008, *Forbes* listed Vineland as the 2nd least-educated city in the country, behind Lake Havasu City, Arizona.

Pauline Petway Elementary School has a student population of 571 students. Of these students, 90.9% have English as a primary language, 7.3% have Spanish as a primary language, 0.4% have Russian as a primary language, 0.2% have Hindi, and 0.9% are considered 'other'. 43.7% of students enrolled at Petway Elementary are White/Caucasian, 36.9% are Hispanic, 17.4% are Black, 1.8% are Asian, and 0.2% are American Indian. There are 274 males and 288 females. There are 84 students (15%) that are classified as students with disabilities, 310 students (55%) are considered economically disadvantaged, and 21 (4%) are considered limited proficient in the English language.

In the second grade inclusion classroom where the study will be taking place there are 25 students. Of those students, six (6) are classified as students with a learning disability and one has a 504. 11 out of the 25 are Caucasian, 4 out of the 25 are Spanish, 8 out of the 25 are Black, and 2 out of the 25 are Asian. Twenty (20) out of the twenty-five (25) students receive free or reduced lunch and are considered economically disadvantaged.

Six (6) students in the class are reading above a second grade reading level. Thirteen (13) students are reading at a second grade level. Six (6) students are reading below a second grade level. Of these six (6) students, five (5) are classified and one(1) is not.

Currently, the students receive Language Arts Literacy instruction for 2.5 hours during the morning block of instruction. During this time, forty minutes are devoted to whole group reading instruction, sixty minutes are devoted to Guided Reading/Centers, and fifty minutes are devoted to Writing. The Harcourt/Trophies materials are utilized for Language Arts Literacy instruction.

Research Content and Design

Teachers across the country do their best every day to engage their students and get them thinking. In his book, *Teaching With the Brain in Mind*, Eric Jensen writes about getting the brain's attention. He writes that to increase the intrinsic motivation of students, teachers should create learning experiences that provide choices, that make the learning relevant and personal, and that make it engaging (Jensen, 1998). This study will focus on the effects of student directed centers on lower elementary students and relationships that are formed in the classroom. These relationships will directly correlate with the implementation of the student directed centers. It will also examine the academic effects of student directed centers on language arts literacy development.

This study will take a qualitative approach to this topic. I will use the teacher research collected to examine the relationships that form between students and teachers in the classroom. In this case, teacher research can be defined as, "a systematic, intentional inquiry by teachers" (Lytle & Smith, 1993, p. 5). To implement this research, I will use taped student interviews, teacher observations, student work completed in the student-directed centers, in addition to a survey that will be implemented orally at the beginning of my project as well as the end.

Research Design and Methodology

This research study will be qualitative. The personal relationships of students cannot be gauged by quantitative data, so the students' opinions and observations become an integral part of the study. Because the students are in the primary elementary grades, written surveys or interviews will not be included, the majority of data collected will be orally recorded. The

majority of the students in this second grade classroom are reading at or below a second grade level and therefore much would be lost in written surveys and interviews.

At the beginning of the semester, I will orally administer a survey to each student. This survey will gauge their relationships with others in the classroom. It will also examine the students' overall comfortableness with the teaching styles used in the classroom. This survey will also ask the students to self-assess their learning in various areas of the educational day. This same oral survey will be given at the end of the semester to examine how the opinions of the students have changed. It will show how each student now views his/her classmates as well as his/her learning potential. This survey will also show each student's level of confidence in regards to learning.

A second method of collecting research data will come in the form of taped student interviews. These interviews will be recorded while the students are participating in Language Arts centers. I will ask the students to describe the activity, the purpose of the activity (i.e. the learning goal), as well as why they feel the center activity is important to learning. I will also ask the students what they feel their role is in the center and what they are doing to contribute to the group as a whole. I will be looking and listening for both positive and negative interactions between students as they complete the center activity. I will be looking for whether or not the students work well together and share the responsibilities in the center activity appropriately. After the time has expired, I will ask the students if they have achieved the goal put forth by each particular center, as well as if they feel that they were a contributing member to the group activity.

The third method of data collection will be observations done by myself during the student directed centers. Each type of center and its procedures will be noted. I will also monitor student frustration levels and compare them with the academic level of each student. I will be looking for students who stay on task and for what interval of time this is achieved. I will also look for those who take leadership roles within the groupings. I will assess whether groupings of similar academically leveled students, or varied academically leveled students are most effective.

A fourth method of data collection for this study will be student work. Students will be asked to complete an assignment for each center they take part in. The work each student completes will be examined for overall improvement over the course of 16 weeks. Center work will be graded using a rubric that gauges completeness, effort, collaboration, as well as correctness. Each center will be broken down by skill. There will be a decoding/spelling center, a reading center for understanding informational texts and a reading center for understanding fictional texts. Each of the reading centers will focus on fine tuning a comprehension skill. Students will be asked to read a passage and complete an activity practicing a skill such as visualization, inferring, activating schema and background knowledge, and retelling.

These forms of data collection will then come together to form a comprehensive viewpoint on the effectiveness of student directed centers on student relationships, as well as their academic achievement. This data will also show the effects of student directed centers on student motivation within the classroom. The results of this study will offer insight into the best ways to create centers for elementary students. It will also examine the ability of student directed centers to help foster a learning community within a second grade classroom.

Chapter 4

Data Analysis

In this chapter the results of the data analysis are presented. The data was collected and processed in response to the question that was posed in Chapter 1 of this thesis. The goals of this data collection were to develop a baseline for student achievement levels, to show growth of those achievement levels over the course of 16 weeks, to gauge the effectiveness of student relationships and interactions on academic achievement, and to show the correlation between student directed centers and student achievement. These goals were accomplished and the findings presented in this chapter will discuss the effectiveness of student directed centers.

At the beginning of the sixteen weeks of the data collection, a survey was administered to the twenty-five students in a second grade inclusion classroom. The survey was orally given and the answers recorded by the teacher. The students were asked to answer five aspects of the survey. Students were asked to answer the following: 1.) Please name your friends in this classroom. 2.) Name a decoding strategy you could use if you came to a word you did not know while reading. 3.) Name a comprehension strategy you use while reading. 4.) Out of these three faces, please point to the one that best describes how you feel about your classroom. 5.) Out of these three faces, please point to the one that best describes how you feel about your reading ability. The three faces included a happy, smiling face, one with little emotion shown, and a third with a saddened face.

As the following graph illustrates, at the beginning of the study three of the students in this second grade classroom felt they had more than five friends in this classroom. Two students said they had four friends in the classroom. Eight students said they had three friends in the

classroom. Six students said they had two friends in the classroom. Five students said they had one friend in the classroom, and one student said he had no friends in this classroom.

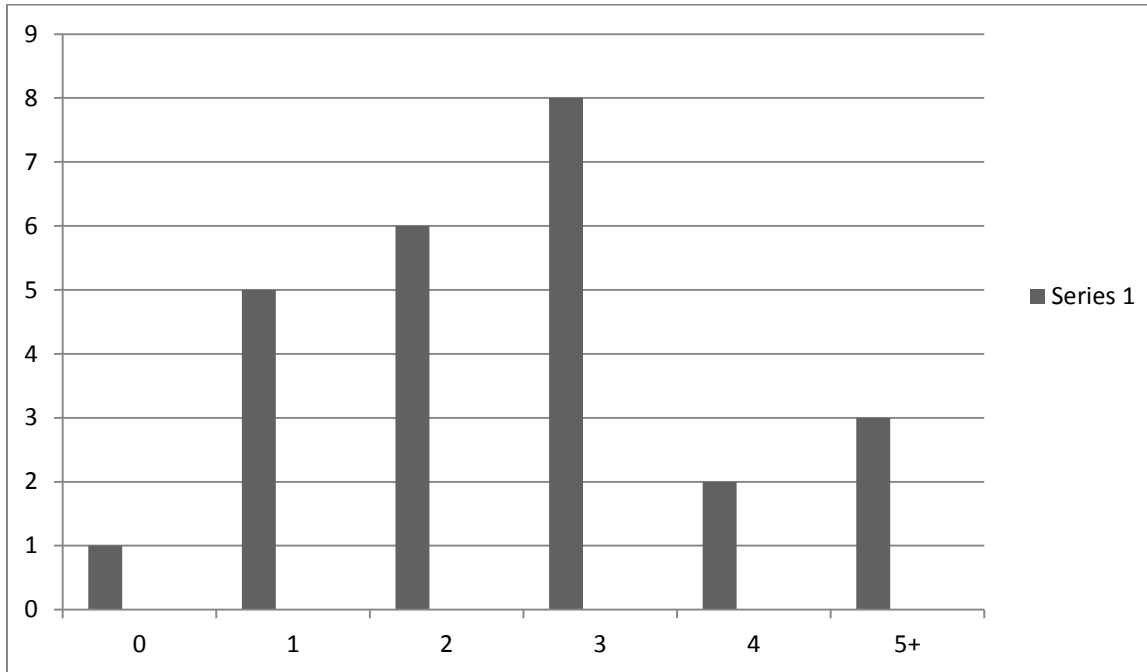


Figure 1. Reported classroom friendships at the beginning of the study.

The student who said he did not have any friends in the classroom is a classified student. Of the students who said they had one friend in the classroom, three are classified students. Of the students that said they had three friends in the classroom, two are classified students. According to this survey, the female students in the classroom felt as if they had more friends in general than the males in the classroom. All of the females in the classroom said they at least had three friends in the classroom.

This information becomes important in this study because the comfort level, and feeling of belonging of each student within the classroom setting sets the stage for interactions among peers. These students will be working together throughout the sixteen weeks of study and

beyond. At the end of the sixteen weeks, the same question was asked of the students taking part in the study. When asked, eight students were able to name five or more friends in their classroom. Six students expressed that they had four friends in the classroom. Six students said they had three friends in the classroom. Five students named two friends in the classroom. No students said they had one or no friends in the classroom. This information can be graphically expressed in the following chart.

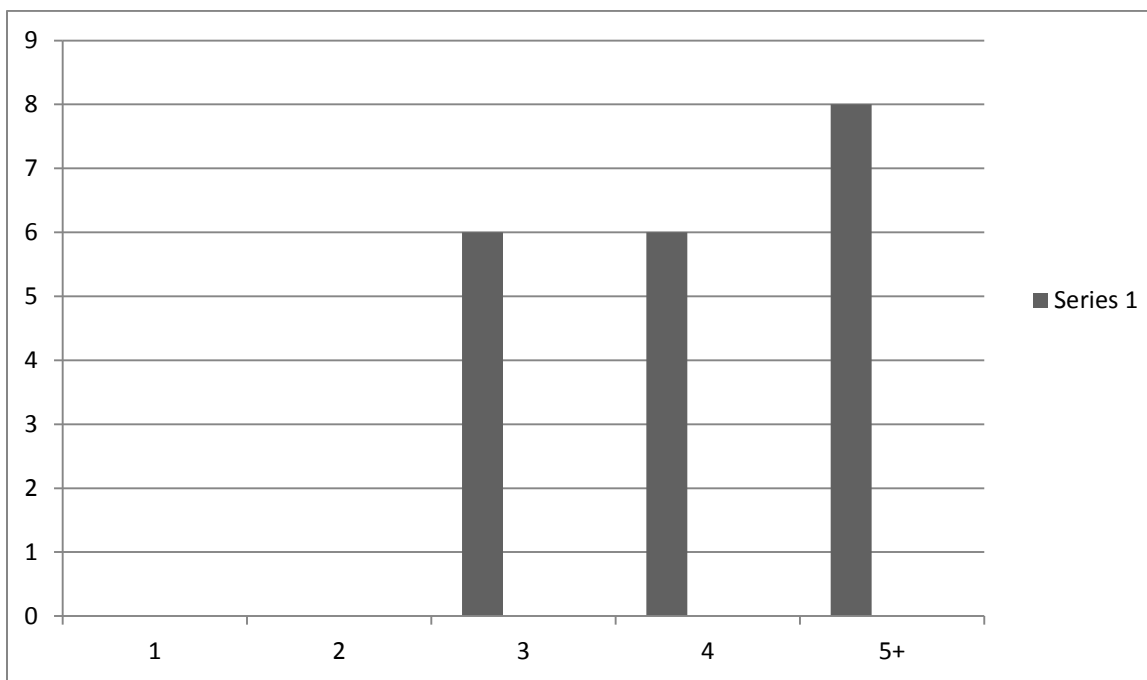


Figure 2. Reported classroom friendships at the end of the study.

This data change suggests that over the course of the sixteen week study, all of the twenty five students were able to make additional friends, or keep the same number of friends they had within the classroom environment. It should also be noted that the response time of the students decreased as well. During the first survey administration, the majority of the students took several minutes to name the friends they had in the classroom. During the second survey

administration, the majority of students were able to name their friends in less than thirty seconds. This suggests the authenticity of the friendships that were formed.

The second question the survey addressed was in regards to the decoding of unfamiliar words. At this point in the year (January), students had been taught several decoding strategies for reading which included: chunking the word into ‘digestible bites’, stretching out the word to hear each sound within it, getting their lips ready to hear the beginning sound, skipping and then returning to the word, looking at the pictures for word clues, and then finally, asking for help.

Out of the twenty-five students, fourteen students were able to name a specific decoding strategy using the wording taught to them. Six students were able to give an example of how they would decode an unfamiliar word but were unable to give the corresponding strategy. Five students were unable to give an example or a specific decoding strategy. The following chart illustrates the information obtained from the posed question in January.

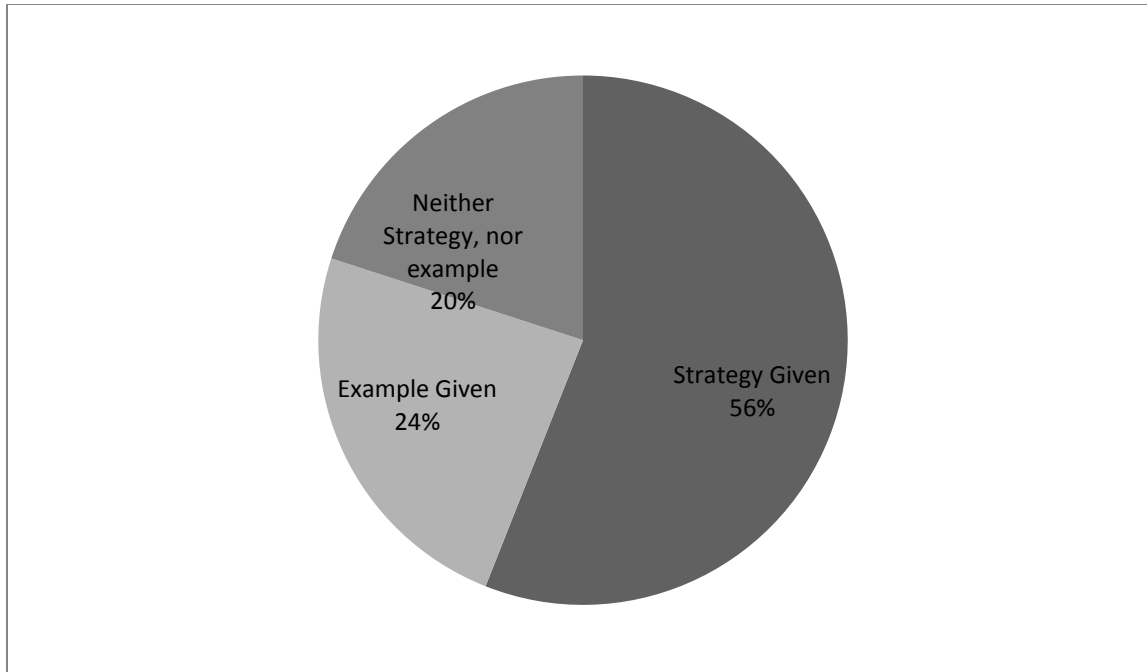


Figure 3. Student use of decoding strategies at the beginning of the study.

Throughout the sixteen week study, each student spent one out of five days during the week working in a student directed, decoding center. At the beginning of the study the rules for the center were clearly defined by the teacher. The rules of the center were as follows: 1.) Respect yourself and others 2.) Learn together. These rules are written by the students into center notebooks as well as posted in the classroom. The overarching goal of the center was also communicated to the students. For this decoding center, the overarching goal of the sixteen week study was for the students to be able to decode grade level text accurately and with fluency.

The correct use of materials for the center was modeled on a weekly basis for refreshment. Leveled texts were available for the students' use during the center time allotted to them. To prepare for guided reading groups, as well as the center activities, the students were regularly assessed on reading levels. These assessments provided the teacher with an instructional level that was appropriate for each student, and the student with a letter that

corresponded with the bins of books they could choose from. This procedure was outlined and modeled regularly as a reminder.

Although the activities of the center varied from week to week, the structure of the center stayed the same. This is an important factor in determining effectiveness of student directed centers. The students are then able to focus on instructional content rather than the organization of materials. In turn, the majority of the time students spend in the center is spent learning and working together, rather than setting up and finding materials.

At the end of the 16 weeks the same question was asked in the survey. Each student was asked to name a decoding strategy, or an example of that strategy. The following pie chart illustrates the responses.

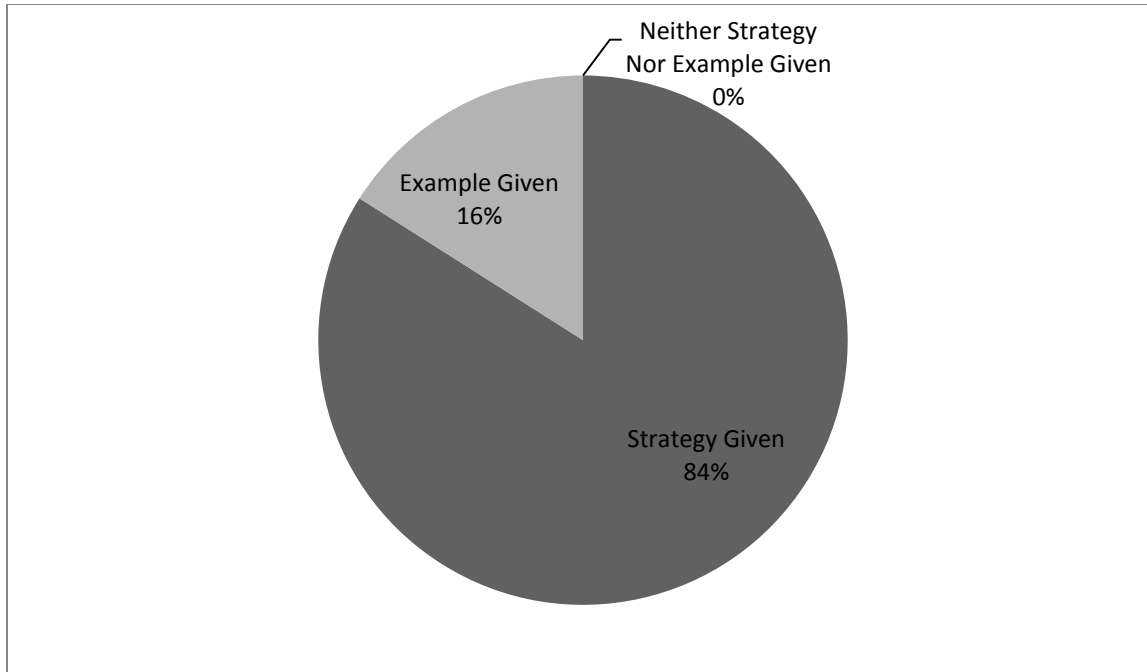


Figure 4. Student use of decoding strategies at the end of the study.

According to the survey given at the end of the 16 week study, 21 out of 25 students were able to name a decoding strategy and give an example, which is 84% of the classroom population. 4 out of 25 students were able to give an example of a strategy but were not able to name the specific strategy. This is 16% of the classroom population. There was a 28% increase in the number of students that could name a decoding strategy and an example. There was an 8% decrease in the percentage of students that were only able to name an example of a strategy. The number of students who weren't able to name a strategy or an example went down to zero.

Included in the decoding center was a built in accountability system that the students used on a daily basis to rate interest and progress. Examples of high quality work were shown to the students before the start of the center activity. These examples were taken from previous student work in this classroom. Students were then given the accountability rubric poster for the decoding center. The rubric is as follows.





Decoding Center Rubric			
			
I did not try this activity.	I completed the activity.	I completed the activity.	I completed the activity.
I did not work with my group.	I worked with my group.	I worked well with my group.	I met the given objective and took a leadership role
Less than Expected	Appropriate Work	Very Well Done	Outstanding Work

Figure 5. Student self-assessment rubric.

This rubric was used by each student at the end of their work in the decoding center. In order to gauge the center’s effectiveness in furthering student accountability and confidence accurately, the responses were to be kept anonymous. In the beginning of the study, the majority of student responses were rated ‘outstanding work’. Over the course of the 16 weeks the responses became more varied. The following is a graph illustrating the response categories over the 16 week study.

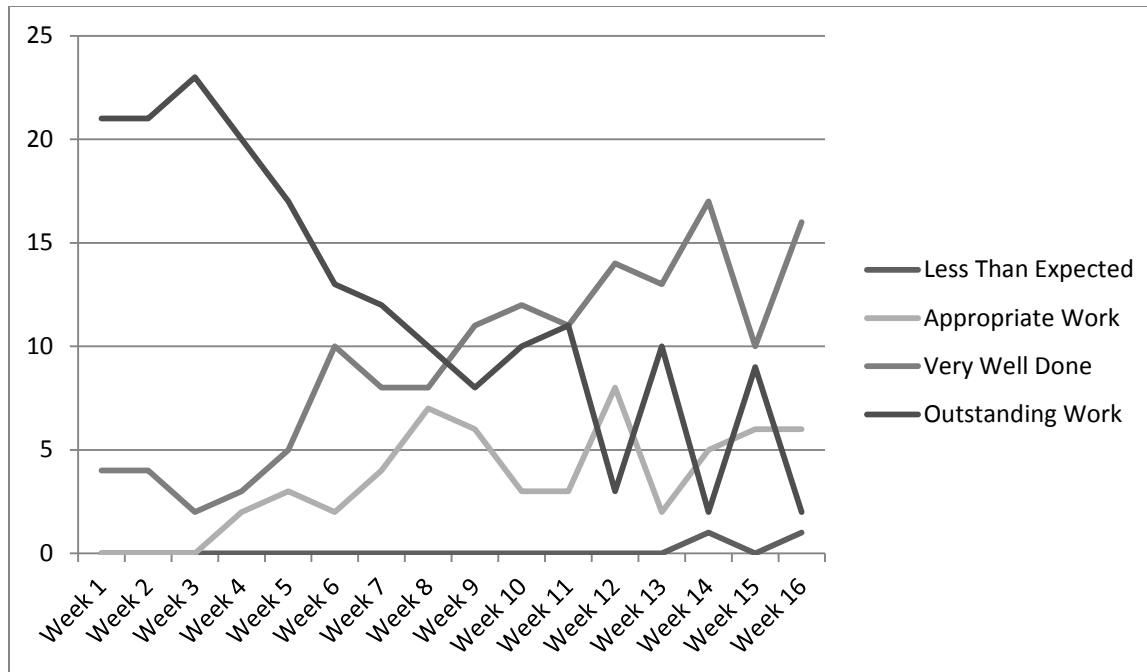


Figure 6. Student work rating.

According to the data collected the amount of students who rated their work ‘less than expected’ stayed at zero or one over the course of the 16 weeks. Those who rated their work ‘appropriate’ ranged from 0 at the beginning of the study up to a peak of 7 at week 8. The students who gave themselves a rating of ‘very well done’ ranged from a low of 2 during week three to a high of 17 at week 14. The rating that had the greatest change was that of ‘outstanding work’. This rating went from a high of 21 at week 1 to a low of 2 by week 16.

The third question that was asked in the administered survey was to name a comprehension strategy used while reading. At this point in the school year, the students had been taught several comprehension strategies which included: Visualizing, Inferring, Monitoring for Meaning, Making Connections, Questioning, and Determining Importance. These strategies were taught through whole group reading and revisited for practice during the year.

At the first administering of the survey, thirteen students were able to name a comprehension strategy by name. Of these students, ten named the ‘Making Connections’ strategy, and three named the Visualizing strategy. Twelve students were unable to name a comprehension strategy used while reading. The following pie chart illustrates the data collected for known comprehension strategies.

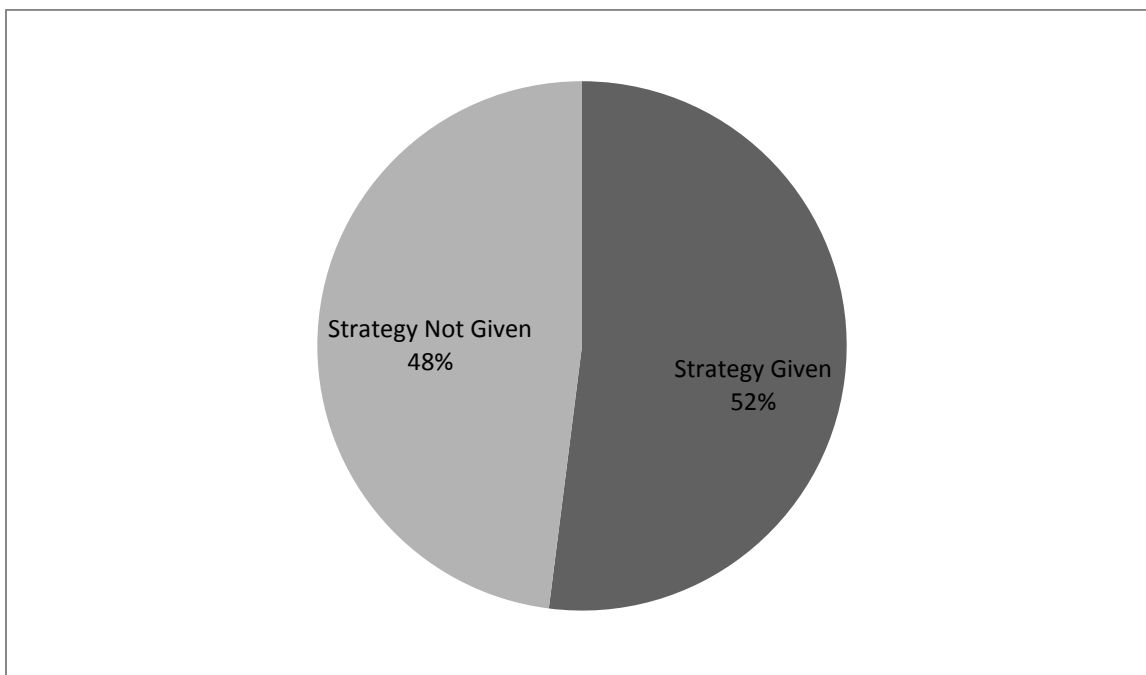


Figure 7. Comprehension strategies used at the beginning of the study.

A comprehension student directed center was implemented. This center focused on a different comprehension skill every week. All of the comprehension skills had been previously introduced during Whole Group reading before their inclusion in the student directed center activities. Each week, the students would choose from a group of leveled texts ideal for practicing the given strategy. Each student in the group was to pick a text on their level and,

using sticky notes, mark the pages on which they used the specific comprehension strategy. After they had finished reading, they were to explain their text to a partner in the center, as well as how the comprehension strategy helped them understand what they were reading. As an assessment, at the end of the given time period, each student was to write one example of the use of strategy. This was placed in the 'completed center work' bin.

At the end of the 16 week study, the survey question was administered again. The following information will later be shown in the form of a pie chart. When asked to name a comprehension strategy twenty-two out of twenty-five students were able to name a strategy as well as give a text example. This second half of the question was not asked during the beginning survey and therefore, cannot be compared. However, it is interesting to note that twenty-two students were able to remember the texts they used to practice a given strategy. Three students out of twenty-five were not able to name a comprehension strategy that they used while reading. There was a 36% increase in the number of students who could name a comprehension strategy. There was a 36% decrease in the amount of students who could not name a comprehension strategy by the end of the study.

According to this data, the students were able to practice comprehension strategies within a small group setting, effectively. It is notable that automaticity was built throughout the study. Something that cannot be expressed solely through data was the way in which the students were able to communicate information to the survey administrator. At the beginning of the study, the students had an average response time of one minute and thirty two seconds. At the end of the study, the students had an average response time of twenty seconds. Also, the average time students spent talking about the strategy increased by thirty three seconds from the beginning of the study to the end.

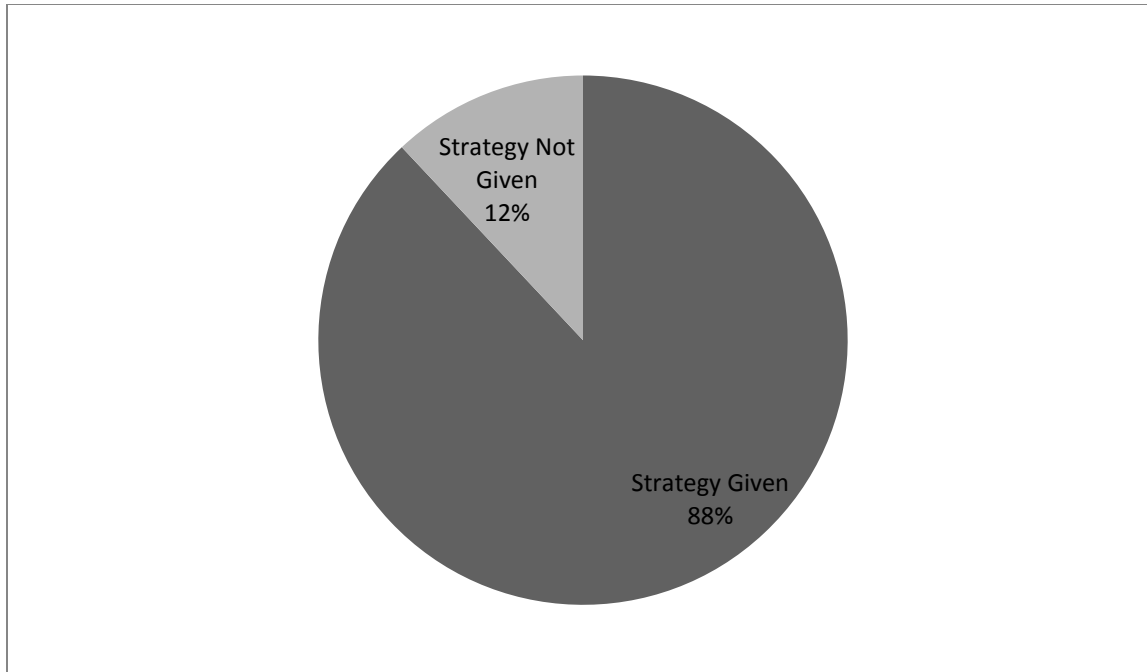


Figure 8. Comprehension strategies used at the end of the study.

The fourth question asked in the survey related to the comfort level of each individual student in the classroom. Each student was asked how comfortable they felt in the classroom environment. They were asked to rate this feeling with a sad face, an indifferent face, or a happy face. The students were asked to not just take into account their feelings that day, but the majority of their days in school. Out of the twenty-five students, during the initial administration of the survey, six students pointed to the sad face in answer to this question, fourteen students pointed to the indifferent face, and five students pointed to the happy face. At the end of the study, five students pointed to the sad face, twelve students pointed to the indifferent face, and eight students pointed to the happy face. The majority of students still related to the indifferent face in regards to their classroom.

The fifth survey question asked the students to rate their feelings in regards to their ability to excel academically. Each student was asked to rate his/her confidence level in regards to

academics with a sad face, an indifferent face, or a happy face. During the initial survey administration nine students identified the sad face, four students identified the indifferent face, and twelve students identified the happy face. At the end of the study, four students identified the sad face, six identified the indifferent face, and fifteen students identified the happy face.

In addition to the initial and culminating surveys, data was collected on a daily basis during the center participation time. This data was collected through anecdotal notes as well as interviews. As previously mentioned, the students took part in three language arts/literacy centers on a weekly basis. These centers included a decoding center which was student led. Each student was responsible for choosing an instructional leveled text. They were then asked to mark 3-5 'mystery' words with sticky note magnifying glasses created by the teacher. After marking his/her words, each student was to use decoding strategies to figure out the meaning of each 'mystery' word. Each student was then to use a dictionary to find the real meaning and pronunciation of his/her mystery words and compare those meanings and pronunciations to their own work. They were then to choose a partner within the center and check the work of one another. At the end of the center, each student was asked to fill out a sheet that contained blank spaces to record his/her findings, as well as the accountability section mentioned earlier in this thesis.

During this center, the students were rated on a four scale rubric. The rubric included sections for collaborating and respecting peers, the appropriate acquisition of materials, putting effort into the given task, and staying on task over the course of the 30 minute center. The following is the rubric used to collect data.

Teacher Name: **Ms. Gorgo**

Student Name: _____

CATEGORY	4	3	2	1
Collaboration/Respect	Student reads and decodes quietly and stays in one place in the decoding center area.	Student reads and decodes quietly. S/he moves around once or twice but does not distract others.	Student makes 1-2 inappropriate comments or noises when reading and decoding, but stays in one place in reading area.	Student reads and decodes loudly, makes repeated comments or noises OR fidgets and moves about often, distracting others.
Chooses Appropriate Books	Student chooses a book which s/he has not read before, which is at or above grade level, or has been previous approved by the teacher.	Student chooses a book which s/he has never read before and which is slightly below his/her reading level.	Student chooses a book s/he has read once before that is close to his/her reading level and was approved by the teacher.	Student chooses a book that s/he has read many times before or which is more than one grade below student's reading level.
Tries to understand	Stops reading when it doesn't make sense and marks words for decoding. Uses decoding strategies then looks up words in dictionary.	Stops reading when it doesn't make sense and tries to use strategies to get through the tricky spots or to figure out new words.	Stops reading when it doesn't make sense and asks for assistance to decode.	Gives up entirely OR plows on without trying to decode.
Stays on task	Student works the entire period. This may be independent reading or done with a peer.	Student reads and decodes almost all (80% or more) of the period.	Student reads and decodes some (50% or more) of the time.	Student wastes a lot of reading time

Figure 9. Weekly student progress rubric.

Each week the average rubric grade was calculated and the student work was collected. The following graph illustrates the average rubric grade over the course of the sixteen week study. The highest grade that could be achieved was a 16 and the lowest a 4.

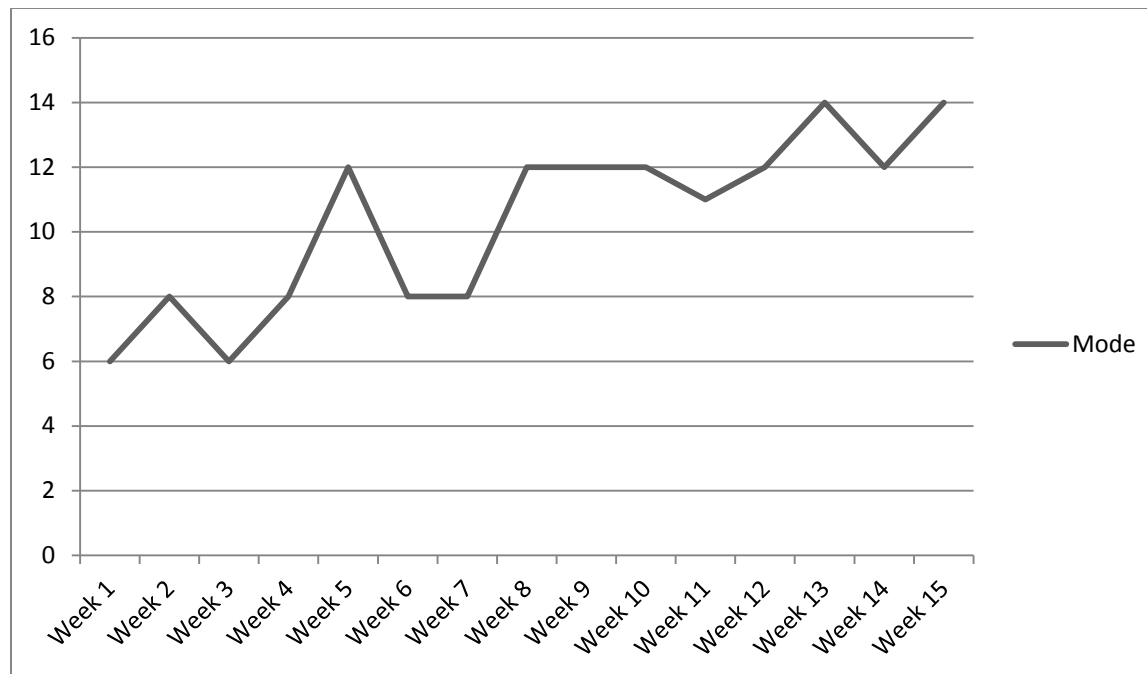


Figure 10. Student self-assessment over the course of the study.

According to the data collected, during the first week of the study the mode for the rubric score was a six out of sixteen, eight students received this score. The mode for weeks 2 through 16 are as follows: 8 (10 students), 6 (8 students), 8 (10 students), 12 (4 students), 8 (6 students), 8 (9 students), 12 (8 students), 12 (9 students), 12 (8 students), 11 (10 students), 12 (10 students), 14 (6 students), 12 (8 students), 11 (8 students), and 14 (9 students). According to this data, the mode had a general increase over the course of the sixteen week study. The students knew what was expected of them as the weeks went on and their ability to complete the center appropriately increased.

The third center the students participated in was an informational text comprehension center. In this center, each student was asked to choose an on level informational text on a topic of his/her choice. Large selections of leveled informational texts were available in the classroom library. Once selected, each student was to read the text and create five questions for a center

partner to answer. Four of the five questions had to be able to be found in the text. One of the five questions could have been a ‘think outside the box’ extension question. It should be noted that the center pairings were according to guided reading level and so all of the students within a given group were reading at the same, or close to the same level. The students would then switch their texts and questions and a partner would answer them in complete sentences. Each student’s questions were graded on a simple rubric to measure accuracy and completeness. The rubric was as follows:

Score	Below Basic-1	Basic-2	Proficient-3	Advanced-4
	Student shows little understanding of the task at hand.	Student is able to create one or two questions.	Student is able to create three or four questions.	Student is able to create five questions.
	Student is unable to form questions that make sense.	Student is able to form questions in short sentences that lack some details.	Student is able to form questions that include important details from the informational text.	Student is able to form questions that include important details from the informational text and extend critical thinking skills.

Figure 11. Student response rubric.

During the first week of the study, the majority of the students in the class received 2’s on this scoring rubric. Out of twenty-five students, sixteen received a score of 2, three students received a score of 1, four students received a 3, and 2 received a score of 4. The students that received a 4 during this first week belonged to the highest leveled reading group. Over the course of the next fifteen weeks, the average rubric score steadily increased, but never made it to an average of 4. The average score for weeks two, three, four, five, and six was a 2. The average score for weeks seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen and sixteen was a 3. The

first week of the study showed the least number of 4's, with two students receiving a score of 4. The last week of the study saw the most, with eight students' receiving a score of 4.

This information shows a direct correlation between repetition and practice and the student's ability to produce thought provoking questions that enhance learning. During the last week of the study, out of the eight students who received a rubric score of 4, three students were classified as communication impaired. This is significant because they were able to accurately form at least one higher level thinking question correctly.

In summary, this chapter has focused on the data collected throughout the sixteen week time period that was spent in a second grade inclusion classroom. It includes a survey consisting of five questions that was administered at the beginning of the study as well as at the end. This data also includes information from three student-directed centers implemented in the second grade inclusion classroom. One center was for the practice of decoding, one was to practice various comprehension strategies taught during Whole Group Reading, and the last center was to practice working with Informational leveled texts. These specific centers were chosen to align with curriculum and current classroom needs.

Over the course of the study, a generally positive increase in ability and confidence was achieved and this will be discussed in the culminating chapter of this thesis.

Chapter 5

Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to determine the relationship between student directed centers and the social and educational relationships of teachers and students within a second grade inclusion classroom. To accomplish this, a general background of each student and their academic history was required. For those students who were classified, it was also necessary to form a comprehensive background of their disabilities and the classroom modifications needed for them to achieve academic success. It was also necessary and beneficial to form a positive rapport with each student to allow them to feel comfortable discussing academic feelings and goals honestly. This study also required a thorough study of the various theories of student directed learning as well as the flip side of teacher directed instruction. This was achieved through the Literature Review in Chapter 2 of this thesis. A comprehensive understanding of various classroom structures and environments was necessary to create the appropriate center activities that would enhance student learning. The structure of these centers as well as the evaluations used to gauge student progress was painstakingly implemented to ensure an accurate data collection and the process of analyzing. Once the skeleton structure of each survey and center was created and recorded, the research could begin. The conclusions and recommendations will be recorded in the following pages.

To begin, the survey question data will be discussed. The first question that was asked related back to each student's friends in the classroom. This data collection included the number of friends named, as well as the time it took for each student to respond. This was significantly telling. Although the majority of the students in the class could name several friends within it, it

took longer for them to name them at the beginning of the study than at the end. This shows that the students felt more comfortable in the fact that the students they named were, in fact, their friends. Over the course of the study, the majority of the group interactions that took place happened during Guided Reading/Center time. This block was sixty minutes each day. It is also significant that this increase in friends took place from the time period of January to May, when classroom rules and dynamics had already been put into place. It would have been beneficial to have been able to administer the survey at the beginning of the school year, as well as the January and May administrations. It should also be noted that the increase in those the students named as friends, were other students within their reading/center groups. This shows that the interactions within the centers were positive enough to create friendships within its members. Each of the twenty five students in the class was able to make at least one additional friend over the course of the sixteen week study. They were able to do this while staying on task and completing assignments appropriately as well, as was shown in the additional data collected.

By using authentic leveled texts in the centers, the students were able to bond over interests and similarities that they may have not known about previously. Studies show that as children get older they begin to be more discerning with their friendships and begin to realize those around them with the same interests. The group work that took place during this study allowed a forum for discussion amongst the students and these similarities were able to be realized and friendships built upon.

The second survey question that was asked to the students was in regards to decoding strategies. The students were asked to name a decoding strategy and/or an example of such. Out of the twenty-five students, fourteen students were able to name a specific decoding strategy using the wording taught to them. Six students were able to give an example of how they would

decode an unfamiliar word but were unable to give the corresponding strategy. Five students were unable to give an example or a specific decoding strategy. The decoding strategies had been taught thoroughly at the beginning of the year. The strategies were also posted on the ‘reading wall’ in the classroom. It is interesting that even though the strategies were posted, not all of the students were able to express their knowledge on the topic. This shows that they had not internalized the information. Repetition, especially in the younger grades, is a key to understanding and learning. The use of the strategies on a daily basis, and the identification of the strategies on a daily basis allowed the students the repetition needed to internalize the information and use it accurately. By the end of the sixteen week time period 21 out of 25 students were able to name a decoding strategy and give an example. 4 out of 25 students were able to give an example of a strategy but were not able to name the specific strategy. The number of students who weren’t able to name a strategy or an example went down to zero. This data shows that the decoding practice within the centers was beneficial to learning. It should also be noted that decoding strategies were not explicitly taught at any other time during the school day during the study. During the allotted time for centers the students were encouraged to ask each other any questions they may have had instead of first interrupting the teacher, who was conducting a reading group at this time. At the beginning of the study, this was hard for the children to do. They struggled with not running to the teacher for every question that popped into their heads, as is normal for second grade students. As the structure and routine of the center became more familiar to them, the questions posed to the teacher became less and less until finally they stopped altogether, except of course for ones that could not be answered by a classmate. It is interesting that this caused the students to become more confident in their ability to learn as well. It was noted throughout observations that things were being said such as, “You

don't have to ask her that, I know the answer!" and "Well you can figure that out I know it!"

The interactions between students became positive and uplifting.

The third survey question asked at the beginning and the end of the study was: Can you name a comprehension strategy that you use to help you understand what you are reading? At the first administering of the survey, thirteen students were able to name a comprehension strategy by name. Of these students, ten named the 'Making Connections' strategy and three named the Visualizing strategy. Twelve students were unable to name a comprehension strategy used while reading. At the end of the study the same question was posed to each student. Twenty-two students were able to name a strategy as well as give a text example. Three students were not able to name a comprehension strategy that they used while reading. This data shows that the practice of these strategies during the comprehension center allowed for internalization of the skills. As an observer, one would have seen students staying on task and completing assignments. The self-assessment rubrics created for the students were a large part of this behavior. In order for the students to be invested in the learning process they needed positive reinforcement.

At the beginning of the study every student was eager to mark down that they excelled at everything in the center "100 percent A+" as one student said when asked how he felt he did with the day's activities. It just so happens that this student had completed none of the assignments tasked to him. As the weeks went on, the students began to become more honest with themselves in regards to their work ethic. Several students were noted as saying that they felt they could have done better on any given day. This type of dialogue also opened the lines of communication between teacher and student. When the students began being honest about their academic performance, reasons for exceling or failing began coming out. Over the course of the

study students began coming to the teacher to discuss concerns they had, in regards to home and school. The teachers began to understand their students on more personal levels and this in turn, helped them to understand what they needed academically and socially. In a classroom where positive dialogue was becoming the norm, much more was being discussed and many more problems were being solved as soon as they cropped up.

The fourth question that was asked, asked the students to rate their feelings about their classroom as a whole. During the initial administration, six students identified with the sad face in answer to this question, fourteen students identified with the indifferent face, and five students identified with the happy face. At the end of the study, five students identified with the sad face, twelve students identified with the indifferent face, and eight students identified with the happy face. It does not appear, according to this data, that the center work had much of an effect on the student's views of school in general. It can be said that it could depend on the individual day or even hour that the student was having at the time of questioning. There are some students who will never admit to liking school at any time. It should be noted that several more students identified with the happy face in regards to their school experience. This increase of three students was classified students who all circled the indifferent face during the initial survey.

Considering the disabilities of the students within this classroom, the ability to communicate and make friends was difficult for them. This was an area where they struggled. It is promising then that they would have a positive outlook on the classroom environment. In general, those students with special needs often have lower self-esteem and it is harder for them to put themselves out there when it comes to their peers. It was noted at the beginning of the study that this was an issue in the classroom, as there were a lot of students who could not or would not

work with their peers. It was promising to see the interactions between students increase and become more positive.

The fifth survey question asked the students to rate their feelings in regards to their academic level. During the initial survey, nine students identified with the sad face, four students identified with the indifferent face, and twelve students identified with the happy face. During the culminating survey, four students identified with the sad face, six identified with the indifferent face, and fifteen students identified with the happy face. This data shows a positive shift. Fewer students were identifying with the sad face and more students were identifying with the happy face. None of the students went down a level in their feeling towards academics. This shows the correlation between the positive communications that were happening in the centers and the overall student self-worth concept. It appears that the center activities and group interactions were helping to build a positive self-concept within the students. Even though there were still some students identifying with the sad face, it was not expected that this number would reach zero by the end of the study.

The students that still identified with the sad face were asked why they felt this way. Those four students said the following: "I am not reading at the highest level." "I can't figure out how to spell harder words." "I don't read as well as ----." "School is hard for me." Three of these four responses show that these students are comparing themselves to others in the class, but also that they have a desire to continue to learn. The last response is the toughest because that is a reality for many students. For some, school is just hard and with obstacles such as learning disabilities, it becomes even harder. The teacher can only reassure and build up each of these students to help them move along their learning and social curve in the future; continuing to look for ways to better teach the students to their learning style.

Data was also collected through student work and evaluation completed at each student-led center. Student work was graded on a four scale rubric during the course of the study. This rubric looked at completeness, attentiveness, staying on task, and working with others. At the beginning of the study the rules and structure of the centers were very clearly defined. When expectations are clear and straightforward there is little room for interpretation and straying from the topic. This helped to set the students up to succeed in building knowledge and positive self-concept. It took two weeks for most of the students to get into a routine and complete the center work appropriately. Some struggled more than others and it took longer to establish the routine and self-monitoring ability. Second grade is still very young and most students need regular practice working independently and with group members.

Over the course of the study, the data showed an overall increase in students that received all 4's on the rubric. This shows that the students were building the skills needed to be in control of their learning. The students that received all 4's on the rubric were able to set up materials appropriately, stay on task during the allotted time, complete the assignment, and work with others in the group appropriately. These students also were able to extend the learning for themselves as well as their group members. This practice within the centers should translate to other aspects of the learning environment and the students showed improvement in other academic areas as well. They were internalizing the importance of working for their own learning benefit. They were taking responsibility for the learning that was taking place.

This information also ties in with the self-assessment tools that were used during center activity. Since the teacher was working with individual reading groups at this time, the students needed to be able to guide their own learning within a teacher manipulated environment. At the end of the center they were asked to rate they on a smiley face scale. This scale asked them to

express how well they worked with others in the center, as well as how much learning was achieved. At the beginning of the study almost all students said they were perfect in everything they did during center time. This is expected of second grade students. This was seen in all areas of learning. Each student wants to give themselves an 'A'. This is something that continues into the higher grades as well. It is important for students to learn at a young age to accurately evaluate themselves. If this is a skill learned early, it will benefit students well into adulthood. By the last week of the study, fewer students were giving themselves a perfect score on the self-assessment rubric. They were asked to explain their ratings on a regular basis. Those that did give themselves a perfect score were able to justify the reasons why. The students were overall, becoming more astute in assessing their performance. There were still those that always gave themselves a perfect score regardless, but those numbers did dwindle.

In conclusion, this study shows the inherent ability of second grade students to take responsibility for a portion of their learning when given structured learning activities and the assurance that they can succeed. It is so important to build a learning community where each student feels and believes that they are an integral part of the learning process and the classroom community. Through the systematic building of authentic centers, second grade students are able to do this. The centers must be tailored to needs and strengths. Thought and reevaluation on the part of the teacher is needed on a regular basis. Listening to and evaluating student progress is imperative. Over the course of this study, the students showed positive growth in all areas of Language Arts. Reading levels increased and a positive self-concept flourished. This type of learning can continue all the way to the end of the school year and beyond. Students in this study were able to make authentic friendships in the classroom and also bond with the

teachers. It is heartening to see that these types of relationships within an elementary classroom can have such a positive effect on student learning.

It is recommended for future studies that the center structure and implementation begins at the beginning of the school year when other routines are being established. By doing this, the students will have an entire school year to practice the skills used in the student-led centers. Because reading levels are lower at the beginning of the school year and not all comprehension and decoding strategies have been taught, it may be necessary to tweak the centers in content as the year goes on. However, the structure and set up of each center may remain the same.

It is also recommended that students are taught self-assessment techniques throughout other subject matters. Once students are able to practice and use the metacognition skills appropriately and really reflect on learning, more learning and growth can take place. This contributes to a positive learning community and school becomes a place where our students can feel safe and happy and are therefore in the best learning environment we as teachers can provide for them.

References

- Bruzzeli, C., & Johnston, B. (2002) *The Moral Dimensions of Teaching: Language, Power, and Culture in Classroom Interaction*. New York & London: Routledge Falmer.
- Chung, S., & Walsh, D. (2000). Unpacking child-centeredness: A history of meanings. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 32.2, 215-234.
- Dewey, J. (1997). *Experience and Education*. New York: Collier Books.
- Dockett, S., & Perry, B. (1998). Play, argumentation and social constructivism. *Early Childhood Development and Care*, 140.1, 5-15.
- Dunn, L. & Kontos, S. (1997). What have we learned about developmentally appropriate practice? *Young Children*, 52.5, 4-13.
- Fuchs, D., Fuchs L. S., Mathes P., & Simmons D. C. (1997). Peer assisted learning strategies: making classrooms more responsive to diversity” *American Education Research Journal* 34.1, 174-206.
- Hallinan, M. & Smith, S. (1989). Classroom characteristics and student friendship cliques. *Social Forces* 67.4, 898-919.
- Montessori, M. (1995). *The Absorbant Mind*. New York City: Holt.
- Oishi, S., Slavin, R., & Madden, N. (1983). Effects of student teams and individualized instruction on cross race and cross sex friendships. *Annual Convention of the American Educational Research Association*. Montreal, Quebec, Canada April 11-14 1983. Washington D.C.: National Institute of Education.
- Pardo, L. S. & Raphael, T. (1991). Classroom organization for instruction in content areas. *The Reading Teacher* 44, 556-563.
- Schumm, J.S., Moody, S. W., & Vaughn, S. (2000). Grouping for reading instruction: does one size fit all? *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 33, 477-488.

Slavin, R. E. (1991). Synthesis of research on cooperative learning. *Educational Leadership* 48.5, 71-82.

Tzuo, P. (2007). The tension between teacher control and children's freedom in a child centered classroom. *Early Childhood Education Journal* 35.1, 33-39.