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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the results of a survey study of the perceptions of a small sample of teachers about the benefits of providing students with instructional choice. Instructional choice was defined as a conscious decision of the teacher to grant the student some degree of control over either the content or the activity of learning. Teachers in the study were selected because each was a participant in the Annenberg Rural Challenge, a rural reform initiative that promoted project and place based learning. Using an instrument developed to gauge teacher perceptions of instructional choice, the researchers found that this group of rural educators favored the provision of instructional choice as a mechanism for improving learning. The teachers also saw instructional choice as a positive factor in reducing disciplinary problems. The authors conclude that reform efforts to standardize curricula in the public schools should be mindful that provisions for instructional choice may still be perceived by many teachers as a valuable tool in instructional practice. (Contains 27 references and copy of survey.) (Author/SM)

Instructional Choice in Rural Classrooms

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Running Head: Instructional choice

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Abstract

This paper reports the results of a survey study of the perceptions of a small sample of teachers about the benefits of providing students with instructional choice. Instructional choice was defined as a conscious decision of the teacher to grant the student some degree of control over either the content or the activity of learning. Teachers in the study were selected because each was a participant in the Annenberg Rural Challenge, a rural reform initiative that promoted project and place based learning. Using an instrument developed to gage teacher perceptions of instructional choice, the researchers found that this group of rural educators favored the provision of instructional choice as a mechanism for improving learning. These teachers also saw instructional choice as a positive factor in reducing disciplinary problems. The authors concluded that reform efforts to standardize curricula in the public schools should be mindful that provisions for instructional choice are may still be perceived by many teachers as a valuable tool in instructional practice.

Introduction

In 1906, the philosopher John Dewey analyzed the relationship of the child to the curriculum in a work entitled *The Child and the Curriculum*. It is a short work, only 40 pages in length. In analyzing the relationship of the child to the curriculum, Dewey understood the need to understand both the experience of the child and the requirements of the curriculum. For Dewey, learning was a continuous process of assimilating the external facts of experience and integrating these into the individual's own mental structures (Dewey, 1906). Dewey thus insisted that if we would understand learning, we would realize the child must have a role in her or his own learning. Or as another theoretician suggested, "learning is not merely to be told it or to see it but to act upon it, to modify it and transform it, and to understand the process and the consequences of the transformation" (Piaget as quoted in Silberman, 1970, p. 216).

In this era of standardized testing and state developed curriculum frameworks, it is of value to ask how children learn. Dewey's interest in the learning of the child is no less relevant today than it was many years ago. If the child has a role, what is that role? If the child's own experience enters into the learning process, do we see evidence of this? Is public school instruction, under pressure to attend more and more to state developed curriculum frameworks, less able to include the child's experience in the learning process? For purposes of this study we assume that one of the necessary ways to accommodate the child's experience in the learning process is through the provision of instructional choice. When a child is able to identify content that is of interest or is able to make decisions about particular learning activities, the child is experiencing instructional choice. By exercising choice, the child is bringing his or her own experience into the learning process.

The degrees of freedom a child may exercise over learning can be significant. As an extreme form of this relationship one can identify the various forms of experimental educational practices promoted by A.S. Neill (Neill, 1972). In Neill's approach, almost no topic of study was forced upon the student. The learning activity sprang from the mind and interests of the student. Conversely, we may witness a relationship in which the mind of the student plays almost no role in the learning experience. The learning activity springs from the requirements of the curriculum. Learning that is focused on preparing for a standardized test that one does not wish to take will be learning primarily organized by the curriculum and not the student. In most learning settings there is a tension between the experience of the child and the requirements of the curriculum.

Our interest in the tension between the role of the child and the role of the curriculum gave rise to the study we report here. We were interested in instructional choice and whether instructional choice is still perceived as an important tool. This small, exploratory study lays a framework for studying instructional choice and provides the reader with a survey instrument in its early stages of development.

Theoretical Base

The provision of instructional choice to students was a popular pedagogical practice in the late 60s and 70s. Many critics of education at that time advocated instructional choice. This interest led to a variety of research efforts to determine what happened when choice and freedom were organized in the classroom. We report just a few empirically based studies below. For example, Davis and Griswold (1983) examined the perceptions of graduating seniors of prior learning experiences that emphasized "open education." Built on the British open school concept, "open education" included "student choice of activity." Davis and

Griswold reported that these students felt positively about the open education environment. Other studies reported less sanguine results relative to choice.

In a study of 38 4th and 5th grade students, Blackwell (1976) examined the effects of giving students control over the curriculum. Students in a free choice group were allowed to select problems at whatever level of difficulty they wished. Students in a yoked control group were given pre-selected problems. The results of this study indicated that choice had a stronger impact on affective variables than on cognitive achievement. Another empirical study by Szczesnowicz (1975) found that students in classes taught by restrictive teachers (those who provided little instructional choice) were more attentive to classroom details than students in classes taught by accommodating teachers.

The Tucson Early Education Model (or TEEM) received much attention as an experimental approach to early education. In one study of this approach, Goldupp (1972) compared student behavior when adults were present in the selected classrooms and when adults were absent from those same classrooms. She found that children in TEEM classrooms maintained a stable pattern of behavior in the absence of adults whereas inappropriate behavior increased in non-TEEM classrooms. This finding was used as the basis for supporting increased levels of independent learning for children.

The Plowden Report, a study of the British Open School, generated widespread interest in both the Great Britain and the United States. This large volume is an encyclopedia of information about education and schooling. The authors of the report minced no words when it came to the matter of instructional choice: "all learning calls for organization of material or of behaviour on the part of the learner, and the learner has to adapt himself and is altered in the process. Learning takes place through a continuous process of interaction between the learner

and his environment. Each new experience reorganizes however slightly the structure of the mind" (Plowden Report, 1967, p. 192).

The argument in favor of instructional choice as an important part of a child's learning is not limited to those who sought to restructure the way schooling is organized and controlled. A body of research in the field of educational psychology has also explored the impact of choice on student motivation and learning. Deci (1975) suggested that people have an inherent psychological need for autonomy. When this need is satisfied people will demonstrate considerable effort, enthusiasm, and commitment to a task. When the need for autonomy is not recognized and nurtured, "the human spirit can be diminished or crushed," and both children and adults may become "apathetic, alienated, and irresponsible" (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Autonomy appeared "to be essential for facilitating optimal functioning of the natural propensities for growth and integration, as well as for constructive social development and personal well-being" (p. 68).

Deci and Ryan (1985) pointed out that giving students choice and opportunities for self-direction have been found to increase intrinsic motivation by enhancing their sense of autonomy. Autonomous motivation has been associated with increased student engagement (Connell & Wellborn, 1991), higher level processing (Grolnick & Ryan, 1987), better scholastic performance (Miserandino, 1996), positive attitude toward learning (Schraw, Flowerday, & Reisetter, 1998), and better teacher ratings (Hayamizu, 1997). During the course of extensive teacher interviews, Flowerday and Schraw (2000) found that classroom teachers believe giving students instructional choice increases motivation and performance. Additionally, in a series of studies focusing on classroom teaching styles, it was determined that an autonomy-supportive teaching style has a positive impact on student motivation, emotion, and performance (Reeve,

Bolt, & Cai, 1999). Students with autonomy-supportive teachers are more likely to stay in school (Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997), and reported more confidence in their academic abilities (Deci, Schwartz, Sheinman, & Ryan, 1981). Greater levels of creativity (Koestner, Ryan, Bernieri, & Holt, 1984), and higher academic achievement (Flink, Boggiano, Main, Barrett, & Katz, 1992) were also closely related to an autonomy-supportive classroom environment. In a recent study on motivation for writing, Bruning and Horn (2000) included provision of choice and student control as important strategies for decreasing anxiety and increasing student willingness to engage in the writing task. All of these studies present evidence for the positive impact of instructional choice on student engagement and academic performance.

The exploratory study reported below did not seek to determine the learning outcomes that result from instructional choice. Rather, in a reform climate that appears drive school districts to appropriate more time for curriculum requirements and afford less time for the experience of the child, what are teacher perceptions regarding instructional choice? To what degree do teachers subscribe to a philosophy that permits instructional choice? What benefits or liabilities do teachers perceive to be associated with the practice of giving students instructional choice?

Methodology and Design

In Nebraska a statewide consortium of school districts participated in the Annenberg Rural Challenge, a national rural school reform movement. Annenberg grants were used to help teachers create place-based curriculum projects and present these projects with their students at state and regional conferences. The guiding criteria in selecting curriculum projects were that students and community be linked in some way. Teachers participating in the Nebraska project

served as a convenience sample because all were recipients of grants to undertake particular curriculum projects. As part of their grant evaluation, teachers were asked to complete the survey on instructional choice.

Our expectation was that we would find strong support for instructional choice in this particular group of teachers. The philosophy of the Rural Challenge had been to encourage classroom learning that was active, hands on, and involved students out in their local communities. Thus, teachers who received grants were virtually required to create learning activities that directly or indirectly included student instructional choice. The nature of these choices varied widely. In some instances, students might be told to take photographs of their hometown. Their choice centered about what photos to take. In another instance, students might be told to figure out how to map a thirty-acre nature preserve. Exercising a wide degree of choice, students collaboratively designed their learning experience.

In the academic year of 1999/2000 School at the Center granted 93 teachers in various Nebraska districts money for such projects. These 93 teachers formed the population of a survey study aimed at assessing their beliefs about providing students with instructional choice. A survey containing 43 items was sent to these 93 teachers requesting that they complete it.

The 43-item survey on instructional choice was designed based on Flowerday and Schraw (2000). After interviewing forty-seven teachers about their beliefs about instructional choice it became apparent that teachers shared many beliefs about instructional choice and consistent themes emerged.

First, the majority of teachers interviewed (75%) believed there is a trend toward more student choice. The types of choices teachers believed were being given were organized into

six categories: topics for study, reading materials, methods of assessment, activities, social arrangements, and procedural choices.

The second theme emerging from these interviews was that teachers voiced explicit beliefs about why instructional choice was a productive strategy. Teachers indicated they believe that choice increased student learning, cognitive engagement, depth of processing, and content retention. Teachers also believed that choice increased positive affect and students who are allowed to make choices tended to exhibit better motivation, interest, and attitude toward learning.

A third theme centered about the implicit beliefs of teachers that choice promotes better decision making on the part of students. In keeping with this, older students more versed in decision-making are afforded more choices.

The fourth theme indicated that teachers believed that certain content areas lent themselves better to instructional choice than did other content areas. Subjects well suited to choice included history, literature, art, music, and science. Providing choices was perceived to be more problematic in mathematics.

These types of beliefs formed the basis for the development of a 43-item survey instrument used in this study (Appendix A). While the instrument has yet to be administered to a large sample or to be factor analyzed, the intent of the authors was to capture perceptions in the following areas. Eight items deal with choice as an instructional strategy that may promote learning and self-regulation. Eight items deal with choice as a factor increasing positive affect and improves attitude toward the learning task. Three items addressed the relation of choice with classroom management. Twelve items address issues that influence teacher decisions

regarding the provision of instructional choice. Twelve items deal with how choice fits in with different content areas and with teaching philosophy.

In this study, teachers were asked to rate their level rate their level of agreement using a five point Likert scale: 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = somewhat agree; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree. The survey was administered to 34 teachers. Cronbach's alpha indicated that the reliability for this instrument was .91 in this study setting.

Teachers returned their surveys over a two-month period. No follow up contact was made because the research study was part of a larger documentation effort collecting data from these teachers about the specific processes and products of their funded curriculum projects. A 37% (34 out of a possible 93) return rate was obtained. For a complete list of means and standard deviations on all items, see Appendix B.

Summary of Findings

First, the teachers in our sample report using instructional choice. Six items measure these beliefs.

Table One: Teacher Reported Use of Instructional Choice

Item	X	sd.
I give students lots of choices	3.56	.86
I give my students choices about homework	2.85	.99
I give my students choices about classroom activities.	3.59	.78
I give choices of reports or essay topics.	3.59	1.13
I give my students choices of assessment.	2.77	.92
I give my students few choices	1.88	1.13

The data in Table One indicate that these teachers do perceive that instructional choice is a part of their classrooms. The mean scores on these six items suggest a perception that instructional choice is being used in the classroom. There is, however, enough variation in the standard deviation of these mean scores to note that these teachers perceive less utilization of

instructional choice than we anticipated. These teachers do not perceive their classrooms as places where students make most decisions about what and when and how to learn. Rather, choice is one part of the classroom instructional environment.

We used four items to examine general teacher beliefs about the contribution of choice to learning. This set of responses was the strongest in terms of supporting instructional choice.

Table Two: Teacher Beliefs about the Impact of Choice on Learning

Item	X	sd.
Giving choice increases learning	4.38	.70
Giving choice increases depth of learning	4.09	.83
Giving choice increases interest in learning	4.41	.82
Giving choice increases motivation to work harder	3.88	.91

The empirical research on the contribution of choice to cognitive growth is mixed. But these teachers believe that choice does have a positive impact on learning. The data in Table Two portray a small group of teachers with strong beliefs that instructional choices increase learning, depth of learning, and interest in learning. Furthermore, they believe that student motivation to work is enhanced by choice. These data are not surprising, given the probability of the ideological commitment to instructional choice we assumed to be present in the group.

Six items were used to capture perceptions about the relationship of choice to student behavior.

Table Three: Teacher Perceptions about Choice and Classroom Behavior

Item	X	sd.
Giving choice increases student self-regulation	3.68	.95
Choice is a strategy for minimizing management problems	3.21	1.07
Choice improves student attitudes	3.91	.90
Choice helps students become more responsible	3.79	.88
Choice improves student/teacher relationships	3.88	.84
Students given choices like school better	3.91	.97

These teachers subscribed to a general belief that instructional choice is of use in developing better student attitudes and relationships. There is enough variation about these mean scores to note that these teachers are moderate in such beliefs. Choice is of some help; it is a means of improving student behavior. But, choice is not seen as a powerful mechanism for regulating student attitude. Note, for example, that there is substantial variation in the item asking about choice as a strategy for minimizing management problems. The responses average above the midpoint with a 3.21. But, a standard deviation of 1.07 indicates disagreement among these teachers about the utility of choice as a disciplinary practice.

We asked three questions in order to solicit perceptions of whether choice was to be equated with "good" teaching.

Table Four: Teacher Perceptions of Choice and Good Teaching

Item	X	sd.
Teachers with more autonomy give more choices	3.47	.90
Good teachers give students lots of choices	3.24	.90
All students benefit from choice	3.35	1.04

Again, teacher perceptions from this group fall into a moderately positive range. Stronger teachers with more confidence and autonomy are perceived as providing more choice. Good teachers are perceived as affording more instructional choice. But, as with earlier results, these data are not overwhelming, particularly given the nature of the pool of teachers. Finally, we asked questions about general perceptions of choice. We wanted to know if teachers perceive choice to be more effective across different groups of students.

Table Five: Teacher Perceptions of Across Groups

Item	X	sd.
Older students benefit from choice	3.74	.86
K-5 students need lots of choices	2.50	.90
6-9 students need lots of choices	3.38	.82
Senior high students need lots of choices	4.09	.75
High achievers need more choices than low achievers	2.97	1.19
Low achievers need more choices than high achievers	2.47	.96
Students who perform well should have more choice	3.12	1.32
Students who perform poorly should have more choice	2.41	.89

The utility of choice is not seen as uniformly appropriate for all groups of students. These teachers believe that instructional choice is more appropriate for older students. There is disagreement about the use of choice when applied to low and high achieving students. And there is less support for giving choice to low performing students. These teachers indicate a belief that instructional choice should be used with discrimination, that it is not an instructional strategy they support in all cases at all times.

Discussion and Implications

Assuming that these perceptions are even partly representative, there are lessons to be gained from what these teachers reported. There is probably no reason to believe that instructional choice is disappearing from classrooms in states where local districts still control instructional practice. It is true that teachers in many states are hard at work developing curriculum standards against which school practice and student learning may be arrayed. But most project-based activities that provide instructional choice can be aligned with state standards and curriculum framework. The data we report above indicate no teacher perceptions that their classrooms are dramatically different. Teachers are still in charge. When they think it appropriate, they create learning opportunities in which students exercise instructional choice.

Still, time in schools is scarce and teachers and students never have enough of it. Each of the teacher decisions that allocate time to the basic task of learning and instruction must be viewed with an extremely critical eye. When teachers design learning experiences that include

instructional choice, they are intentionally making decisions about how students will spend time and energy. When policy makers mandate certain activities oriented about new state standards and accountability procedures, they too are making decisions about how students will spend time and energy. Which, we wonder, of these two approaches, is likely to result in greater interest in learning and produce better results over the long term? Given that the optimal learning setting for a student is one that is adjusted to the needs and interests of that student, instructional choice will always serve as a valuable teacher strategy. If classroom instruction evolves to a point where instructional choice is severely limited, learning will assume a very different character. We believe that efforts to reform schooling must be mindful of the importance of affording instructional choice as an important part of learning.

The instrument used to gather teacher perceptions about choice is in its formative stage. We believe that it is important for educational leaders in districts to engage in discussions about learning and how it is best accomplished. This instrument was designed to be a tool to stimulate such discussion and is available from the authors.

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Appendix A: Teacher Beliefs about Giving Instructional Choices to Students

Please respond by circling the appropriate number; using this 5-point scale:

1=strongly disagree 2=disagree 3=somewhat agree 4=agree 5=strongly agree

1.	Giving students choices increases their learning.	1 2 3 4 5
2.	Giving students choices increases positive emotions.	1 2 3 4 5
3.	Giving students choices increases depth of learning.	1 2 3 4 5
4.	Giving students choices is important because it teaches decision-making.	1 2 3 4 5
5.	Giving students choices increases their interest in learning.	1 2 3 4 5
6.	Giving students choices helps them become self-regulated.	1 2 3 4 5
7.	Choice gives students a sense of autonomy.	1 2 3 4 5
8.	Choice gives students more control of their learning.	1 2 3 4 5
9.	Choice is important because it motivates students to work harder.	1 2 3 4 5
10.	All students benefit from being given choices.	1 2 3 4 5
11.	Older students need more choices than younger ones.	1 2 3 4 5
12.	K-5 students need lots of choices.	1 2 3 4 5
13.	6^{th}- 9^{th} graders need lots of choices.	1 2 3 4 5
14.	Senior high students need lots of choices.	1 2 3 4 5
15.	High achievers need more choices than lower achievers.	1 2 3 4 5
16.	Low achievers need more choices than high achievers.	1 2 3 4 5
17.	Choice motivates high achieving students.	1 2 3 4 5
18.	Choice motivates low achieving students.	1 2 3 4 5
19.	Students need some background knowledge to benefit from choice.	1 2 3 4 5
20.	Choice is only beneficial if students make wise decisions.	1 2 3 4 5

21.	Giving choices is a strategy for minimizing management problems.	1 2 3 4 5
22.	I give my students many choices.	1 2 3 4 5
23.	Giving choices can lead to classroom management problems.	1 2 3 4 5
24.	Choice gives students a sense of control.	1 2 3 4 5
25.	Choice improves student attitudes.	1 2 3 4 5
26.	I give my students choices of assessment	1 2 3 4 5
27.	Some subjects lend themselves more readily to choice.	1 2 3 4 5
28.	Math classes are not well suited to student choice.	1 2 3 4 5
29.	Students who have performed well should be given more choices.	1 2 3 4 5
30.	Students who have performed poorly should be given more choices.	1 2 3 4 5
31.	Giving choices of reading materials is an important strategy.	1 2 3 4 5
32.	There is a trend toward giving more choice in the classroom.	1 2 3 4 5
33.	There is a trend toward giving less choice in the classroom.	1 2 3 4 5
34.	Teachers who have more autonomy give their students more choices.	1 2 3 4 5
35.	Good teachers give their students a lot of choices.	1 2 3 4 5
36.	Most students want lots of choices.	1 2 3 4 5
37.	Choice helps students become more responsible.	1 2 3 4 5
38.	Choices help teachers and students develop positive relationships.	1 2 3 4 5
39.	Students who are given choices like school better.	1 2 3 4 5
40.	I give my students choices about homework.	1 2 3 4 5
41.	I give my students choices of classroom activities.	1 2 3 4 5
42.	I give choices of report or essay topics.	1 2 3 4 5
43.	I give my students very few choices.	1 2 3 4 5

Appendix B

Statement	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Giving students choices increases learning	3.00	5.00	4.38	.70
Giving students choices increases positive emotions	3.00	5.00	4.47	.66
Giving students choices increases depth of learning	2.00	5.00	4.09	.83
Students choice is important because it teaches decision making	3.00	5.00	4.44	.66
Giving students choices increases their interest in learning	2.00	5.00	4.41	.82
Giving students choices helps them become self-regulated	2.00	5.00	3.68	.95
Choice gives students a sense of autonomy	2.00	5.00	3.94	.81
Choices give students more control of their learning	2.00	5.00	4.06	.95
Choice is important because it motivates students to work harder	2.00	5.00	3.88	.91
All students benefit from being given choices	1.00	5.00	3.35	1.04
Older students need more choices than younger ones	2.00	5.00	3.74	.86
K-5 students need lots of choices	1.00	4.00	2.50	.90
6-9 graders need lots of choices	2.00	5.00	3.38	.82
Senior high students need lots of choices	3.00	5.00	4.09	.75
High achievers need more choices than low achievers	1.00	5.00	2.97	1.19
Low achievers need more choices than high achievers	1.00	5.00	2.47	.96
Choice motivates high achieving students	2.00	5.00	3.88	.81
Choice motivates low achieving students	2.00	5.00	3.68	.88
Students need background knowledge to benefit from choice	2.00	5.00	4.32	.77
Choice is only beneficial if students make wise decisions	1.00	5.00	3.03	1.09
Choice is a strategy for minimizing management problems	1.00	5.00	3.21	1.07
I give my students lots of choices	2.00	5.00	3.56	.86
Giving choices can lead to classroom management problems	1.00	4.00	2.85	.99
Choice gives students a sense of control	3.00	5.00	3.94	.78
Choice improves student attitudes	2.00	5.00	3.91	.90
I give my students choices of assessment	1.00	5.00	2.77	.92
Some subjects lend themselves more readily to choice	2.00	5.00	4.24	.82
Math classes are not well-suited to student choice	1.00	5.00	2.94	1.01
Students who perform well should be given more choices	1.00	5.00	3.12	1.32
Students who perform poorly should be given more choices	1.00	4.00	2.41	.89
Giving choices of reading materials is an important strategy	2.00	5.00	3.91	.93
There is a trend toward giving more choices in the classroom	2.00	5.00	3.71	.76
There is a trend toward giving less choice in the classroom.	1.00	4.00	2.09	.67
Teachers with more autonomy give their students more choices	2.00	5.00	3.47	.90
Good teachers give their students a lot of choices	2.00	5.00	3.24	.90
Most students want lots of choices	2.00	5.00	3.15	.93
Choice helps students become more responsible	2.00	5.00	3.79	.88
Choices help teachers and students develop positive relationships	2.00	5.00	3.88	.84
Students who are given choices like school better	2.00	5.00	3.91	.97
I give my students choices about homework	1.00	5.00	2.85	.99
I give my students choices about classroom activities	2.00	5.00	3.59	.78
I give choices of reports or essay topics	1.00	5.00	3.59	1.13
I give my students few choices	1.00	3.00	1.88	1.13

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