

# **Toward a Lifetime of Literacy: The Effect of Student-Centered and Skills-Based Reading Instruction on the Experiences of Children**

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Educators agree that the teaching of reading is of critical importance in elementary classrooms. Debates swirl as researchers and educators alike attempt to determine the most-effective instructional practices in developing student engagement and achievement. One side aligns itself with explicit instruction of discrete literacy skills, the other with a whole language, student-centered approach. Through practitioner-based research within her own classroom, the author examined how two different instructional approaches influenced 19 second-grade students' attitudes and engagement in reading. Surveys, interviews, and observations assessed self-concept as a reader, perceived value of reading, attitudes about reading, and time spent actively engaged in literacy activities. An interdependent relationship was identified between instructional practice, student engagement, and interest in reading. Practices that support student choice, collaboration, and shared control of learning outcomes were linked to self-expressed interest in reading and engaged reading behaviors. The results suggest ways in which teachers can organize reading instruction to develop self-efficacy, competence, and engagement in young students.

*Note: All names are pseudonyms.*

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The ways in which children interpret and experience literacy teaching in the classroom have consequences for their achievement and motivation (Dahl & Freppon, 1995). Literacy curricular frameworks draw upon contrasting views of teaching and learning and often conceive of the roles of educators and students in different ways (Dahl & Freppon; Purcell-Gates, McIntyre, & Freppon, 1995). As researchers and educators, we endeavor to locate curriculum and teaching methods that are effective in both promoting academic achievement and in engaging students as they experience early literacy. The present climate of high-stakes accountability testing and races to the top make the demand for high-quality instruction even more critical (McGill-Franzen & Allington, 2006; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Oakes, Franke, Quartz, & Rogers, 2002). As we strive to meet the needs of learners from diverse settings, the words and experiences of children should help to guide our choices in literacy instruction. A greater understanding of the ways in which children experience differing literacy curricula will lend itself to a more-informed adoption of teaching practices. The consequences of these decisions have direct implications for students of reading.

This study explores the effects of two curricular framework implementations in a second-grade classroom to document learner interpretations of experiences as they relate to reading instruction. Both frameworks represent curriculum widely used in today's classrooms. The debate between student-centered and skills-based instruction is not new and constitutes over 2 decades of research examining cognitive and affective outcomes of different literacy models (Dahl & Freppon, 1995; Wienczek, Vazzano, & Reizian, 1999). While research has focused on the effects of literacy activities on achievement, motivation, and self-concept (Guthrie et al., 2006; Henk & Melnick, 1995; Purcell-Gates & Dahl, 1991; Turner, 1995), fewer studies looked at students' experiences and interpretations across multiple curricular models (Dahl & Freppon; Freppon & McIntyre, 1999; Morrow, 1992).

Through comparative analysis, this study looked at the implementation of two reading instructional curricula within the same classroom. The researcher, who was also the classroom teacher, was uniquely positioned to capture the words and perceptions of students as they experienced changes in instruction. Sociocultural theory explains how social and cultural settings impact children's learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Learners' thoughts, feelings, and actions are heavily influenced by contextual factors within the classroom, including social and cultural norms imparted through instructional activities (Rueda & Dembo, 1995). Using an interpretative approach (Erickson, 1986) to data collection and analysis, the researcher sought to discover the ways in which students assigned meaning and values to phenomena within the context of reading instruction. These collective responses, when considered in relationship to specific curricular frameworks, constituted learner interpretations and experiences of those models. The research questions extended across instruction and context to ascertain

the nature of student experiences as they connected to both literacy tasks and environmental constructs associated with each framework of instruction.

The layering of multiple data sources enhanced the depth and quality of the analytical comparison and provided a nuanced perspective of the ways in which students make sense of literacy learning across different curricula (Yin, 1994). The focus of the study's findings suggest ways in which researchers and educators can utilize specific features of learning tasks to enhance students' experiences and engagement in reading.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Two bodies of research informed this study and will be reviewed here. The first relates to sociocultural conceptions of literacy learning as they influence the understanding of student experiences. The second area of research includes studies that have examined the organization and structuring of instructional activities and their impact on student learning and engagement. These areas of literature form the nexus at which this study is situated and provide the backbone for understanding children's experiences as they are impacted by social and contextual factors in the classroom. As the goals of this study included a nuanced and multidimensional view of students' perceptions and behaviors as they occur in an instructional setting, sociocultural and engagement theories were closely aligned to the research questions.

### Sociocultural Approaches to Literacy Learning

From a sociocultural perspective, students make meaning or sense of activities within the context of classrooms where learning takes place (Rueda & Dembo, 1995). Meaning is constructed through transactional exchanges with a number of social and contextual factors, including others present in the learning environment. The norms of the cultural context affect the way in which students learn, think, feel, and actively respond to activities. Ethnographic studies of the past 2 decades examined the social lives of children in classrooms to compare the ways in which different settings valued and shaped students' experiences (Kantor, Miller, & Fernie, 1992; Lewis, 2001). Purcell-Gates and Dahl (1991) posited that learners' perceptions of curricula were influenced by factors including socioeconomic status and background. Similarly, Dahl and Freppon (1995) evaluated innercity students' interpretations of literacy curricula, drawing heavily upon the participants' responses to reading and writing activities in whole language and skills-based classrooms. According to a sociocultural view of learning, both the teacher and students are active participants involved in the coconstruction of meaning within situated contexts (Wienczek, Vazzan, & Reizian, 1999). Interconnectedness exists between cognitive and social dimensions of contextualized systems, which are referred to as activity settings (Rueda

& Dembo). Within these activity settings, tangible features such as objective environmental characteristics, participants' verbal utterances, and individuals' physical actions are considered alongside subjective features such as participants' intentions, experiences, and beliefs. Studies that have examined these features underscore the collective influence of social factors, objects, situations, and events on students' literacy learning (Kantor, Miller, & Fernie; Neuman & Roskos, 1992; Rowe, 1994). Sociocultural theories document the relationship between social context and student beliefs, and thus inform the ways in which this study interprets the relationship between individual learners, groups of students, and patterns of response to instruction.

### **Instructional Tasks and Student Engagement**

The ways that students experience and make sense of literacy instruction can also be attributed in part to the organization of learning activities (Allington, 1983; Freppon, 1991). Learning activities are often structured into individual tasks, which Doyle (1983) defined as distinct units of academic work. Specific features of these tasks have been found to influence student learning processes and outcomes (Law, 2008; Margolis & McCabe, 2006). Turner (1995) differentiated the cognitive and motivational aspects of literacy tasks assigned to young readers and illustrated the ways in which tasks define students' understanding of the uses for literacy. The selection and structuring of tasks is of paramount importance in reading classrooms because of their role in fusing instruction, learning goals, and purposes for literacy.

Ames (1992) and Thorkildsen (2002) suggest that task design can influence children's participation and engagement in literacy instruction, and even affect the goals they set for themselves. Freppon and McIntyre (1999) compared skills-based and whole-language classrooms' impact on students' reading strategy use and motivational stance. They found that children in whole-language classrooms exhibited greater strategy use and held more-positive stances towards literacy than students in skills-based classrooms. Turner's (1995) study suggested that student-centered activities, which she labeled *open tasks*, were more effective in promoting persistence and strategy use in students than tasks associated with basal instruction. Tasks that incorporate choice-making related to individuals' interests, provide appropriate levels of challenge, and allow for degrees of learner-centered control have been found to positively impact motivation and decrease social comparison between students (Ames, 1992; Turner & Paris, 1995). The methods by which students are evaluated through their participation in tasks also contributes to their experiences and perceptions of learning (Ames, 1992). Social comparison between students has been shown to be particularly influential in affecting students' perceptions of themselves as readers and their evaluations of literacy experiences (Ames, 1984). The design of tasks across student-centered and skills-based curricula has consequences for student learning that pertain to the goals of this study.

Research by Dahl and Freppon (1995) points to differences in students' affective responses to different models of literacy instruction. Students in whole-language or learner-centered classrooms more often identified themselves as readers and exhibited ownership of literacy experiences. Skills-based classrooms did not yield similar affective responses from students. According to sociocultural and engagement literature, the learning structures, social interactions, and normative processes associated with classroom literacy curricula have distinct consequences for students and their participation in school. In efforts to deepen our understanding of children's experiences of literacy, this study, while informed by sociocultural perspectives, is also rooted in well-documented classroom practice. By comparing student perceptions of two common frameworks of instruction, this study addresses questions related to children's experiences of literacy learning that might inform teacher practice and improve classroom literacy culture in ways that promote engagement in reading.

## METHOD

This mixed-methods study addressed the effects of instructional practice and social and environmental constructs on students' experiences of literacy using an action research framework (McTaggart, 1997). Two instructional models were implemented sequentially within the researcher-practitioner's second-grade classroom over the 4-week data collection period. The mid-year implementation replaced the standard reading curriculum of the focus classroom. Each of the frameworks was implemented whole class for 10 school days, after which students participated in concluding focus groups to ascertain their perceptions and observations. The student-centered and skills-based curricula were taught consecutively without intervening instruction. Neither framework directly corresponded to the curricula established by the school, implying that most students did not have substantial background experience with either format. Since student perceptions of reading instruction were closely linked to the research questions, data sources privileging students' voices were considered highly appropriate in order to gain a nuanced understanding of their responses. Other data collection methods included participant observation, surveys, informal interviews, and assignment evaluation.

## Participants and Context of the Study

### Site and participants

The participants in the study included 19 second-grade students enrolled in a K–5 private elementary school in the western United States. The range of students' academic performance in reading was broad, with three students reading significantly above grade level, four students reading above grade level, seven reading at grade level, and five reading significantly below grade level. Of the

19 children, nine were Caucasian, six were African American, three were Asian, and one was Latino. All students spoke English as their first language.

### **The researcher**

The primary investigator was an elementary school teacher in her third year at the school site where the study took place. Formerly a kindergarten teacher at the same school, she was provided the unique opportunity to work with the same group of students for a second academic year. The role of the researcher-practitioner afforded her unique insights into classroom practice and student behavior, particularly as they compared to normative conditions (Richardson, 1994). As a teacher, the researcher had prior experience and training with both student-centered and skills-based curricular models. This background provided a basis for implementing the frameworks as described below.

## **Instructional Context**

### **Student-centered instructional model**

The first instructional framework was comprised of a student-centered reading workshop modeled in part after the program detailed in Fountas & Pinnell's (2000) *Guiding Readers and Writers*. For the purposes of examining student engagement, the framework was also informed by Gambrell & Morrow's (1996) study of motivating literacy contexts. The literacy model was designed to support differentiated instruction based on students' reading abilities and included the following characteristics: (a) literacy instruction in the form of mini-lessons that addressed strategies and skills appropriate to second grade; (b) differentiated and individualized small-group instruction, literature circles, and skill practice based on common needs for development; (c) self-directed periods where students made choices about independent reading goals and reading activities based on their interests and reading levels; and (d) collaborative reading tasks that developed comprehension and literacy response. The role of the teacher in the student-centered framework was one of negotiation and mediation in developing student knowledge and skill through shared discourse. Helping students to think, question, and revise their understandings as they approached concepts meant that the teacher's role in the student-centered framework was dynamic and dependent on the children who coconstructed learning experiences.

### **Skills-based instructional model**

To provide a basis for comparison, the second reading program reflected characteristics commonly associated with a basal reading curriculum, whereby students engaged in whole-class instruction in a literacy environment marked by the following: (a) skills-based literacy instruction in decoding (including

explicit phonics lessons), comprehension, vocabulary development, spelling, and grammar; (b) systematic whole-class activities targeting essential concepts; (c) teacher-directed identification of learning goals, specific presentation to students, teacher modeling of desired skills, followed by student practice and assessment; and (d) teacher-directed reading and writing activities that connect explicitly modeled skills with shared texts. For the purposes of the study, this program phase was referred to as *skills-based instruction*. During skills-based instruction, the teacher explicitly guided students as they engaged with literacy concepts. The teacher retained greater control over the delivery and scope of lessons than during the student-centered framework, but learning objectives were identified and sequenced according to basal curriculum materials.

Across both frameworks, the researcher strove for fidelity in treatment by utilizing curricular source materials for instruction and student practice work. School administrators and professional developers were also called upon to observe and support each treatment and to monitor for fidelity.

## Data Collection

### Classroom observations

The class was observed daily for 4 weeks throughout language arts instructional periods. A research assistant was involved in recording written observations detailing student comments, behavior, and interactions as they related to reading. Sound recordings of small-group instruction were also collected to facilitate analysis and to capture student voices. Observations lasted between 1.5 and 2 hours each day. During observation of active instruction, the research assistant documented rubrics tracking student engagement. During student activity periods, both the researcher and the research assistant tracked engagement behavior to establish interrater reliability. Samples of on- and off-task behavior were collected for 30 minutes each day in different instructional situations, including teacher instruction and student activities. Rubrics scored students' engagement behavior on a scale from 1–4, with 1 defined as active on-task, 2 as passive on-task, 3 as passive off-task, and 4 as active off-task. This scale was adapted from Kemp & Carter's (2006) study of task-related behavior. Data was collected for each student 10 times throughout the daily 30-minute period.

### Semi-structured and informal interviews

Initial interviews were conducted with all students to gauge motivation related to narrative text and general reading habits and interests. This conversational interview was adapted from the Motivation to Read Profile (MRP) (Gambrell, Palmer, Codling, & Mazzoni, 1996). The MRP informal interview is designed to elicit authentic insights through conversation between student and teacher, and its flexible format was deemed appropriate in the context of this study.

Conversations with students and between students inside and outside of the classroom were audio recorded. As students reflected on classroom reading activities and their reading practices, this information was included as part of the analysis for each instructional framework.

### **Student questionnaires**

The researcher administered three distinct questionnaires with all participants throughout the course of the study. To assess students' predisposed attitudes about reading and their self-conceptions as readers, the researcher used the MRP designed by Gambrell et al. (1996) prior to the onset of the study. The MRP combines information from a written survey and an individual interview to measure the personal dimensions of reading motivation.

After each of the framework implementations, all students completed self-reporting, group-administered questionnaires. The questionnaire (Figure 1) was created by the researcher and measured student responses on a 3-point likert scale (1 = agree, 2 = kind of agree, 3 = disagree). It included 13 items gauging student reactions to specific aspects of literacy instruction as they pertained to the respective framework. The items focused on students' valuing of literacy activities as they pertained to choice, collaboration, shared-control in learning outcomes, and appropriate level of challenge.

### **Assignment evaluation**

Assignments included any written student work completed in class or as a part of homework that related to the reading curriculum. Assignments were coded as student-selected, meaning that the student chose the written activity from more than one available activity, or teacher-selected. Social orientation of assignments was coded as completed collaboratively or completed independently. These evaluations were used to ensure that a similar number of tasks and opportunities for student learning were measured in each of the framework implementations and for each of the task orientations. They were not intended to compare student outcomes or specific skill instruction between the phases of the study.

### **Focus groups**




As part of assessing student responses related to the two reading programs, whole-group interviews were conducted in the classroom on the last day of each framework's implementation. The researcher explained that she was interested in how the children perceived the reading activities and classroom reading environment respective to each program. Questions measured students' reactions to task organization and structure, opportunities for choice making, collaboration with peers, and overall impressions of literacy instruction within each framework. The entire interview was analyzed and coded for content relating to these constructs and students' general perceptions about themselves as readers.



**Figure 1. Literacy Activities Questionnaire**




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*Ex: I like being with my friends at school.*




		
I agree	I kind of agree	I disagree




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- The reading activities I did in class this week made me want to read more.*




		
I agree	I kind of agree	I disagree
- Choosing my own reading activities made me want to read more.*




		
I agree	I kind of agree	I disagree
- Working on reading activities with my friends this week made me want to read more.*




		
I agree	I kind of agree	I disagree
- Working on reading activities by myself this week made me want to read more.*




		
I agree	I kind of agree	I disagree
- The activities we did this week made reading more fun for me.*




		
I agree	I kind of agree	I disagree
- The things I learned this week made me a better reader.*




		
I agree	I kind of agree	I disagree
- The things I learned this week helped me think about things in a new way.*




		
I agree	I kind of agree	I disagree
- I was able to make choices about my reading activities this week.*




		
I agree	I kind of agree	I disagree
- This week's reading activities were "just right" for me, not too easy or too hard.*

		
I agree	I kind of agree	I disagree
- I like getting grades on my reading activities because that shows I am a good reader.*

		
I agree	I kind of agree	I disagree
- Compared with my friends, I did well in reading this week.*

		
I agree	I kind of agree	I disagree
- I worried about what other people thought about my reading this week.*

		
I agree	I kind of agree	I disagree
- I felt good about my reading this week.*

		
I agree	I kind of agree	I disagree

## Data Analysis

Data analysis involved the triangulation of both qualitative and quantitative methods, including student surveys, classroom observations, focus group interviews, and individual interviews. The iterative coding process examined data's relationship to existing theories of student engagement and developed additional codes to reflect aspects of student experience. The first step was to classify the ways in which students referred to the constructs of choice, collaboration, shared control, and learning challenge as they pertained to reading experiences during formal and informal interviews. These constructs were derived in part from existing research that identified classroom structures as they affected student engagement and motivation (Ames, 1992; Gambrell, 1996; Turner, 1995). A child's comment might correspond to two constructs. For example, a child admitted, "I like picking my own books because...well, because I don't like the teacher picking the book out for me, because then I won't read it." This statement signifies the child's awareness of choice as a factor in his reading experience, but also suggests his interest in having control over his participation. The development of codes also reflected a grounded analysis of the data sources, specifically the correlation of interviews and observations to the categories of goal orientation and self-concept. Student interviews were read for content that related to existing theories of goal orientation, from which codes reflecting mastery and ego-social orientation were developed and applied. One child revealed, "It made me feel down when some people got the stickers and other people didn't get to do that. (Getting stickers as a reward) made me want to read more." While wanting to read more suggests engagement or interest, the comment was also coded for ego-social or competitive orientation. Student comments that suggested learning for mastery and those that indicated social comparison or competitive orientation were cross-referenced for the task type.

Data was recoded for student references to interest and engagement in reading. Incidents in which students referred to enjoyment of reading, interest in reading topics or activities, or independently sought additional reading material were categorized as examples of positive engagement. Student references to boredom, disinterest, or avoidance were categorized as negative engagement. Examples of both positive and negative engagement were then situated within the constructs of choice, collaboration, shared control, and learning challenge for cross-analysis. In one student activity period, 11 of 18 participants were noted demonstrating off-task behavior. In a reanalysis of the field notes and audio recordings from the same time, two students referred to the task—a written worksheet—as "boring," thus signifying a lack of interest. Written artifacts produced from the event indicate that a large number of students did not master the concept being assessed, possibly implying an inappropriate level of challenge for some individuals. This multilayered analysis of the data sources provided depth to the findings.

Field notes and observations were coded according to the same three-part scheme and were categorized based on relationship to the constructs outlined above. Additionally, student discourse and exchanges representing affective responses were situated within and across the codes. Special attention was paid to those responses deemed exceptional in comparison to normative classroom interaction. Observations tracking student engagement were cross-referenced with task orientation, according to the designations described by the assignment evaluation (student-selected, teacher-selected, collaborative, independent). Evidence of engagement included indicators of appropriate on-task behavior: body movement and orientation, verbal contribution in discussions and activities, and conversations with other students about reading activities.

## FINDINGS

Data were analyzed to address the two research questions:

1. How do student-centered and skills-based curricula affect students' experiences of classroom literacy?
2. How do changes in the classroom environmental context influence young students' interpretations of reading instruction?

The results of the study were organized across the six constructs of choice, collaboration, challenge, learner control, goal orientation, and environmental context of learning. These themes were derived from existing research that identified salient characteristics of engaging literacy instruction (Ames, 1992; Guthrie et al., 2006; Turner, 1995). They were also selected for their strong correlation to the research questions and the themes that arose during the iterative process of grounded data analysis. The findings focus on children's reflections and experiences of student-centered and skills-based curricula as they correspond to these constructs. Each of the following sections contains an analysis of student behavior, verbal interactions, questionnaire data, and affective responses as they pertained to the two instructional models. The patterns that emerged across data sources are linked to generalizations about children's experiences of student-centered and skills-based instruction.

### Choice

Choice relates to students' ability to select texts and learning activities based on their interest. Choice served as a key variable between the student-centered phase and skills-based phase of the study. The student-centered period promoted opportunities for students to select independent texts at their instructional level, and provided choices between and within activities where students could control the learning processes and outcomes. The teacher was frequently

noted encouraging students to “make good choices as readers,” promoting partnered readings of shared texts as well as small-group discussions between students. During one reading session, 12 students chose to read in partnerships, while 5 selected independent work. When asked about her choice to read independently, Angel explained, “I sometimes like to read with other people, but today I just wanted to read by myself.” In this same period, student engagement behavior was consistently rated on-task, with 14 of 17 students observed either actively or passively on-task throughout the entire 45-minute class.

The implementation of the skills-based curriculum significantly reduced opportunities for student choice. Text selection and learning activities were teacher-directed. Independent and partnered reading, both essential components of the reading workshop phase, were reduced to a minimal role during the scripted reading phase. Choral reading of shared texts replaced small, guided reading groups. One example of a typical choral reading occurred over a 45-minute period in which students were introduced to a 16-page decodable text. The class proceeded to read aloud and discuss each page, stopping for teacher-directed strategy instruction and vocabulary development. Before choral reading, the students were instructed to silently preview the text on the page.

Teacher: Remember, I’m looking for everybody to be reading silently.  
This is your chance to sound out the words and get ready for the read-aloud. [The students read silently for a moment.]  
Let’s get ready to read it together. Finger on the first word.  
Listen to my voice so we stay together. Begin.

Teacher and Students: [reading from text]  
Clare’s secret was that she was faster than Brad. At practice for the short race, Clare was careful to let Brad take first place.

Teacher: Does anyone notice a word on this page where the letter *C* sounds like another letter? [Students raise their hands.]  
Crystal?

Crystal: Place.

Teacher: And how does *C* sound like another letter in the word *place*?

Crystal: [pointing to the word in the book] It just... it sounds like /s/.

Teacher: Exactly! Can everyone point to the word *place*?

During this interaction, students were frequently reminded to follow along in their copies of the text. Student comments after the reading indicate that the subject of the text was interesting, but that some students perceived the level of difficulty as inappropriate. One announced, “The reason it was interesting is because Clare was actually fast and good at skating. The reason it was not

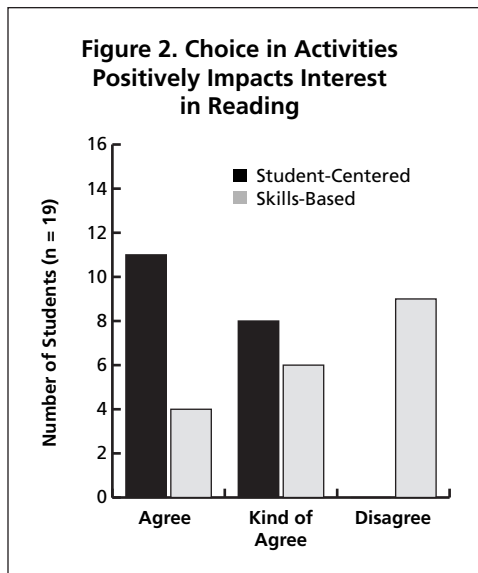
is because the book was too easy for me and it was kind of boring reading it all together.” Seven students demonstrated consistently on-task behavior throughout this activity, while 12 were either variable in their engagement behavior or consistently off-task throughout the 45-minute period.

This study’s data suggest that choice affects students’ perceptions about reading activities and, moreover, that students are cognitively aware of choice as a factor in determining their attitudes about reading. Fifty-seven percent of students surveyed responded that the ability to make choices about reading activities positively

increased their interest in reading. Students also voiced their preference in selecting text independently. Almost two-thirds of the students disliked having the teacher select books for them during the scripted reading phase of the study. In response to choice of text, students referenced their interests as a key component in motivation to read. “I like choosing books because, like, I get to choose it, and when I choose stuff, it’s usually a topic that I’m interested in.”

While the majority of students felt that opportunities for choice positively affected their interest in reading (Figure 2), some students acknowledged that teacher-directed skills-based tasks supported reading development. Commented one student, “When I do the worksheets, there are things I don’t know on them, like the words, like homophones, that makes me a better reader.” In reference to a choral reading experience, Michael explained, “I like reading together, too, because it makes us better readers.” For these students, the format of instruction supported different learning goals.

Data suggest that most students valued the ability to make choices about the content and context of their reading. Constructing tasks that promote choice-making centered on personal interests makes use of individuals’ background knowledge, develops self-direction, and increases autonomy in the practice of reading (Nolen, 2007). Participants in this study confirmed that choice impacts their experiences of literacy instruction. The question arises, then, how best to facilitate skill development within a methodology that privileges students’ interests and promotes choice.



## Collaboration

Collaboration within this study served as a structural device for students' reading of texts and their participation in text-related activities. Choice and collaboration were closely linked throughout both phases of the study, as opportunities for choice-making frequently included collaborative tasks during the student-centered phase. Conversely, skills-based activities were more often completed independently. The structure of collaborative tasks in student-centered instruction involved the sharing of texts by pairs of students, guided reading in groups of four to five students, and literacy-based activities involving multiple students. During one period, students worked in small groups preparing short scripts of fairytales they had selected. Five readers discussed their plans for preparing a presentation of *The Three Little Pigs* (Guided Reading Level F, Findley, 2006). One student voiced his concerns about sharing their work in front of an audience.

- Jack:     What if we forget because we're so excited?  
Angel:    I can help you read it if you can't.  
Rick:     Me, too. Listen, Jack. I can just sit next to you and read it if you get confused.

This example is representative of the scaffolding effect that collaboration played on students' participation throughout the student-centered phase of the study. Students referenced the support of peers in their reflections. Said one, "I like working in partners, so then you can help other people and people can help you." Another positive attribute that children associated with collaboration was in the form of interest-based recommendations. When asked whether or not he enjoyed discussing books, one boy explained, "I get good ideas from [my friends], because if I can't find out what to read ... my friend recommends it and I find out what it's actually about and then I want to read that." The data from the study suggests that students' experiences of collaboration positively impact their interest in reading. Sixty-three percent of students asserted that reading and discussing books facilitated their interest in reading.

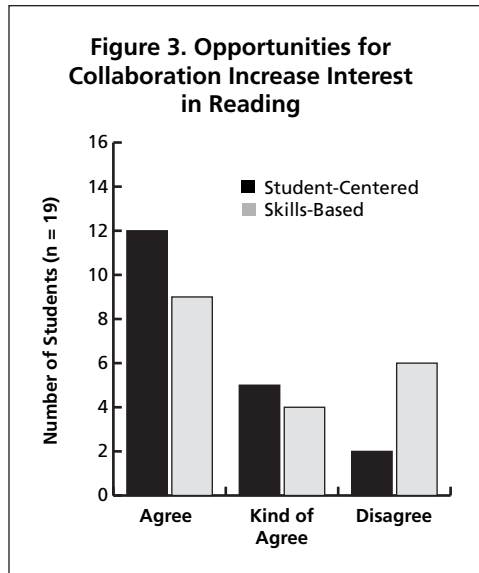
Some students' experiences reflected less-positive associations with collaborative activities, particularly shared readings of texts. Of these students, one struggling reader was observed frequently withdrawing from guided reading experiences. When asked in conversation to explain her choice, she offered, "I actually don't like reading with other people or in front of people." Students who lacked confidence in their reading abilities were particularly sensitive to what they perceived as judgments inherent in collaborative reading episodes. For most participants, however, opportunities to interact with teachers and with each other increased interest in reading in ways that independent reading

events did not. Students reported higher levels of interest in collaborative activities than in independent tasks (Figure 3).

Skills-based instruction provided fewer opportunities to share texts and to work in groups. Of the 24 tasks evaluated during the second phase of the study, only 5 presented choices for students to collaborate. These choices included sharing a book or attending to a worksheet in pairs. Learners appeared to actively seek additional collaboration, repeatedly asking for permission to work together. “Well, why can’t we do [the worksheet] with someone

else?” inquired one child during seat work. The least-proficient readers demonstrated work-avoidant tactics in completing independent written work. These students were observed looking onto others’ papers, fidgeting or playing with objects in their desks, and asking to use the bathroom or get drinks at a greater frequency than more-proficient readers.

The data points to collaboration as a meaningful element in children’s experiences of literacy. While opportunities to collaborate were typically deemed positive in facilitating interest in reading and promoting prosocial interactions, additional consideration should be given to the ways in which collaboration can be modeled to address the concerns of struggling readers and students whose affective filter negatively impacts their interest in shared reading experiences.



## Challenge

Challenge refers to the level of difficulty students encounter in completing tasks. Optimal challenge is specific to each student based on reading proficiency and skill development level. Student-centered activities were structured around the idea that learners actively construct literacy knowledge in meaning-centered and functional ways (Dahl & Freppon, 1995). The teacher’s role is to support individuals’ learning through instruction specific to their needs. As a result, students were divided into flexible reading groups aimed at addressing those shared for development. Students participated in mini-lessons both as a whole group and in small groups to facilitate learning in phonics, comprehension,

grammar, and fluency. During one session, four groups of students worked on different literacy tasks aimed at different phonics skills. Emergent reading activities focused on the consonant blends /tr/ and /gr/.

- Teacher: This page has a few words that share the same beginning sound. Does anyone see it?
- Max: *Trip?*
- Jack: *Trip* and *trick*.
- Teacher: And what sound do both of those words have at the beginning?
- Jack: /chr/
- Teacher: That's very close! The *T* and the *R* come together and say /tr/ in both the words *trip* and *trick*. Can you think of any other words that have that same sound?
- Angel: *Train*.
- Rick: *Tractor*.
- Teacher: Exactly. [writing the words on a small white board] All of these words, *trip*, *trick*, *train*, and *tractor*, have the /tr/ sound at the beginning.

Students in other groups shared activities aimed at developing different phonics skills including diphthongs and common long vowel spelling patterns. The differentiation of instruction and materials appeared to positively impact student participation. During multiple guided reading activities, student questions and comments pointed to connections and inferences based on their understanding of the text, rather than word knowledge. In reference to an adaptation of *Cinderella* (Guided Reading Level M, Ehrlich, 2004), Gwin pointed out a point of contrast she noticed between texts.

- Gwin: Our book, my book, *Cinderella*, didn't start with "Once upon a time." It was kind of in there, but not in those words.
- Teacher: What words did they use instead?
- Gwin: I think it was like, "A long time ago..." or something. It means the same thing, just like in the other books, but different.

These types of observations and interactions suggested that students were actively involved in learning about written language and story conventions through instructional tasks. Learners were frequently engaged in noticing patterns and pointing out differences between texts that they shared. Students also commented on their ability to make sense of books they were reading. During one instance, an emergent reader stopped his group to address a point of confusion.



- Rick: Wait. That says, The second little pig ran away before he before lunch. Huh?
- Teacher: What's your question? I'm not following you.
- Rick: It doesn't make sense. Before he before lunch?
- Ollie: Before he *became* lunch.
- Rick: [rereads the words] Ohhh. OK.

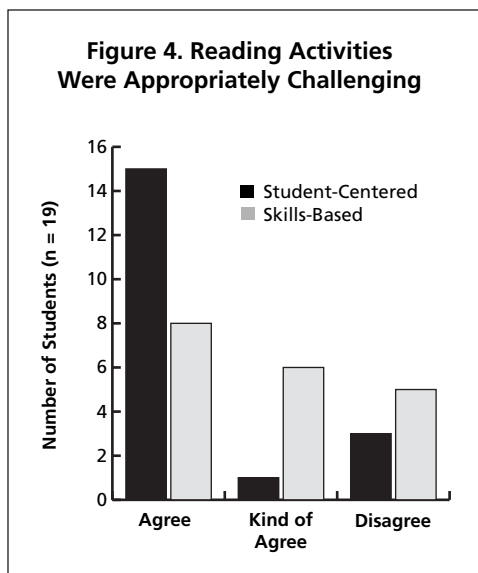
In a whole-class setting, this type of interaction may not have transpired. Small-group work presented opportunities for questioning and discussion between group members. Seventy-eight percent of participants agreed that reading activities during the student-centered instructional phase were perceived as appropriately challenging for them as individuals (Figure 4).

The skills-based curriculum consisted primarily of whole-class instruction, including shared readings of selections from students' anthology textbooks and decodable books. Phonics, grammar, and spelling were presented in worksheets targeting vocabulary and vowel patterns derived from the anthology selection. Materials and the presentation of learning objectives were the same for all students. Of the tasks and activities in which students participated, choral reading presented

the clearest evidence related to the construct of challenge. Observations of choral reading found that, across multiple incidents, more than 75% of students were documented off-task at some point during the period. In one occurrence, only 3 of 19 students were consistently on-task throughout the reading.

Analysis of field notes suggests that some students saw uniform tasks as too difficult or unapproachable. After an independent seatwork period, one student had not completed the worksheet.

- Rick: I didn't finish it.
- Teacher: How come? Was it difficult?
- Rick: Yeah. I couldn't understand the sentences.
- Teacher: Sorry I wasn't able to answer your questions. Did you raise your hand?



- Rick: No.  
Teacher: Why not?  
Rick: I dunno. I just didn't.  
Teacher: Okay. Well, I'll take it anyway and you can finish it another time.  
Rick: Am I gonna have to do another one?  
Laura: At some point, you need to finish it.  
Rick: Even though I can't read it?

Rick's attitude suggests that he is not invested in completing the work. Other spontaneous utterances by students throughout instruction suggested that struggling readers, in particular, were not invested in completing work that they perceived as inappropriately challenging. Fewer than half of all students felt that reading activities during the skills-based program were appropriately challenging for them.

Despite these responses, within the context of interviews, some students indicated that the skills-based activities supported their work in reading. In reference to worksheets designed for skill practice, Max responded, "It's a little not so fun, but it does help me understand some meanings and learn some more meanings that I can use that I might not have thought of... [like] the connection between the two words."

Whole-class instruction and standardized learning tasks affected reading behaviors, particularly in struggling students and students with low self-image in reading. Some students perceived uniform challenges as a means of comparing ability or performance in reading. Students often commented on the level of difficulty of shared texts, remarking that books were "too easy" or "baby-ish." More-fluent readers became disengaged with shared reading tasks and required frequent redirection to remain on task. Struggling readers hesitated to read aloud, silently "mouthing" the words to avoid the attention of their more-fluent peers.

Differentiating instruction to provide students with appropriately challenging tasks in small-group settings positively impacted students' experiences by opportunities for success regardless of reading level. Students shared their opinions and strategies more readily when they felt they could demonstrate proficiency in a given task. The perceived difficulty and quantity of work were both indicators of challenge that students observed. Standardized activities and assessments did not appear to have the same effect on students' experiences of instruction. Off-task and work-avoidant behavior were more frequently observed during skills-based tasks. Students' comments and interactions also reflected higher levels of concern regarding issues of social comparison.

## Shared Control

The feature of control represented opportunities for students to make decisions that impacted their learning. The teacher's role in student-centered instruction was, in part, to support literacy independence through shared control with students. Readers made decisions about the processes and outcomes of literacy activities. Examples of shared-control included allowing students to select books for independent reading; providing choice between partnerships or independent work; and offering a range of skill-building tasks from games, puzzles, and other written activities. During a typical workshop period, students might have selected from a word knowledge bingo game, a synonym matching card game, and a story starter with missing adjectives. The teacher provided an explanation of the choices before sending students to select an activity. Students' informal conversations surrounding shared-control tasks were centered on their plans and strategies for effective reading. Students often turned to each other for suggestions or support in reading. Two children engaged in a discussion about "just-right" books.

Rose: You gotta use the five-finger rule before you check it out [from the library].

Dom: Yeah, you read a while and once you hold up five fingers... you hold up a finger each time you don't know a word. Once you have five fingers up, you put the book away.

Rose: 'Cause it's too hard.

Dom: Uhuh. This one's *way* too hard!

When students were provided a degree of control in their learning processes and outcomes, they often chose to read more than the requisite amount, voicing recommendations to their friends and making observations about differences between different versions of stories. There were 28 noted incidents of students dialoguing about books or book-related topics outside of the designated reading period. Shared control encouraged students to consider their skills and interests as readers. When asked why she selected a nonfiction comprehension folder game, Shantaya responded, "I like learning about nature and this [text] is about nature so it's interesting to me. And the pictures are cool."

The skills-based phase of the study emphasized teacher controlled learning experiences in the form of whole-class instruction. Students participated in explicit phonics and spelling lessons based on routines defined by the program. Students had little or no influence on the process or product of their learning.

Students were presented material and guided to learning outcomes sequentially. The teacher directed lessons aimed at developing discrete skills. Specific

tasks were assigned as vehicles for skill development. Opportunities for students to practice explicit skills included identifying and isolating prefixes and suffixes; labeling sentence types (declarative, interrogative, exclamatory); and combining two words to make compound words. These worksheet-based activities were structured to elicit a desired set of responses.

During one activity, students examined the prefixes *over-* and *un-*.

- Teacher: When there's something before the base word, we call it a prefix. Everybody say prefix. [Students repeat.] A prefix changes the meaning of the word. Like if I say happy, and then I add the prefix *un-* to the word, what is the new word?
- Students: *Unhappy.*
- Teacher: Exactly. And does *unhappy* mean the same thing as *happy*? [Some students say no.] How is it different?
- Pedro: Because *unhappy* means like, not *happy*. It's the opposite.
- Teacher: Right. The prefix *un-* means the opposite of.

When asked, some students were unable to articulate learning objectives for specific tasks they had completed. "I don't know why [we learned about prefixes]. Maybe because they're words from the book?" Students were reluctant to ask clarifying questions, potentially due to ego-social concerns about getting the wrong answer. Other students sought opportunities to collaborate for support.

- Michael: We can't use partners?
- Teacher: We're going to do this work independently.
- Michael: Why can't we work in partners? Is this a test?

Shared control or lack thereof manifested itself in myriad ways throughout the study. Student orientation towards literacy tasks varied from highly engaged to indifferent. When the teacher retained the locus of control, some students employed competitive learning strategies, in effect controlling their experience through ego-social outcomes. Others applied work-avoidant tactics, either because the work was inappropriately challenging or lacked completion incentives. When students were able to exert control over the learning process, their reading behaviors reflected engagement in learning tasks.

### **Goal Orientation**

Within the context of this study, goal orientation was evaluated as it related to students' engagement in activities and student talk about reading motivation. Prior to commencement of the skills-based program, students were asked whether or not they believed being compared to others in reading would moti-

vate their reading. Most agreed that comparing readers would negatively affect interest. One student replied, “I don’t think it would make me want to read more, because I don’t think I would like anybody comparing my reading to someone else’s. I would feel bad for the other person because they wouldn’t be as good as me.” For another student, a struggling reader, the potential for comparison was equally negative. “It would make me feel bad that someone would say, ‘This boy is doing better than you.’” Both high-achieving and low-achieving students responded that comparing individuals’ performance would negatively impact their feelings about reading.

Evidence of a shift in student goal orientation emerged early in the skills-based phase of the study. Students referred openly to themselves as “good” or “bad” readers and were visibly discouraged as they struggled to complete whole-class assignments.

Ian: I’m a bad reader. I can’t do this.

Teacher: You’re not a bad reader. Let’s just look at each word, one at a time, and see what fits.

Ian: But everyone else is already done.

In contrast to the student-centered literacy model, the skills-based curriculum provided few opportunities for small-group instruction. Whole-class instruction heightened ego-social concerns for some students. Student engagement and participation were variable, particularly during choral readings, when struggling readers were often observed anxiously scanning the room to gauge others’ behaviors and perceptions.

Students’ work was numerically graded and returned to them during the skills-based phase of the study, a point of contrast to the student-centered model. Prior to the inception of this practice, 57% of students responded that receiving grades would encourage them to read more. At the conclusion of the study, this question was posed again, and only 26% of respondents still held this belief. More notably, 47% of students felt that earning grades negatively affected their motivation. Student comments reflected negative and ambivalent responses to graded performance as it related to reading motivation. “It just makes me feel bad to get grades,” one student admitted.

Another teaching practice intended to affect students’ goal orientation involved the posting of a chart that monitored independent reading output. Upon the completion of an independent text (one read outside of the curricular requirements), students were encouraged to complete a book report detailing explicit story elements including book title, author, setting, characters, story conflict, and resolution. When these conditions had been met, students were awarded a sticker to mark their progress on the prominently positioned chart. The practice was referred to by the title, Rock Star Readers!

The ego-social ramifications of this practice were particularly evident for struggling readers and readers with low self-image. Angel, a self-conscious reader, assumed a competitive stance through Rock Star Readers! She read five books independently and raced to fill out reports to receive commendation and stickers. However, her mastery orientation in reading was negatively affected. Asked to summarize or recall information corresponding to any of the five titles, Angel replied that she “couldn’t remember” the books and “didn’t know” what they were about or if she enjoyed reading them. Another student whose goal orientation evidenced a shift away from mastery was Luca, an above-grade level reader whose independent choices were typically lengthy chapter books. Perhaps in response to the competitive orientation of Rock Star Readers!, Luca began reading emergent level texts, significantly below his independent level. He responded and received stickers for three books in one day of the study. When reminded to select books appropriate for his reading interests and level, he conceded that the books he had read did not meet these qualifications.

Findings suggest that student goal orientation was variable and impacted by classroom practices and specific types of learning structures. Activities and instruction that encouraged students to view their achievement in comparison to others were correlated with ego-social behaviors and interactions. Practices that incorporated noncompetitive collaboration and authentic assessment positively influenced the incidence of behaviors consistent with mastery orientation.

## CONCLUSIONS

The goal of this study was to extend our understanding of young students’ experiences across two frameworks of literacy instruction. The results suggest that the design and implementation of instruction in both student-centered and skills-based curricula impact students’ experiences of literacy in measurable ways. Patterns in the data reflect students’ ability to modify their participation and engagement based on their interest in literacy tasks. Student perceptions were generally more favorable when instruction and individual tasks provided opportunities for students to make choices, collaborate, and share in control of learning processes and outcomes. Tasks reflective of these characteristics were associated predominantly with the learner-centered curriculum.

Major findings of this study point to differences in students’ affective responses between the student-centered and skills-based frameworks. Student interactions and reading behaviors demonstrated a shift toward ego-social and competitive orientations when instructional tasks limited opportunities for choice making, collaboration, and control. Struggling readers in particular voiced concerns about their abilities, openly referring to themselves as “bad readers” and shying away from challenging activities. Proficient and high-achieving students were observed selecting lower level texts in order to read a

greater number of books than their peers. The number of students who were concerned about peer evaluations of their reading abilities more than doubled after the skills-based instructional phase.

Engagement and persistence were two examples of the ways in which student participation varied throughout the study. Both qualitative and quantitative data sources suggested more-consistent evidence of learner engagement during student-centered tasks than skills-based tasks. Students' actions and utterances also pointed to their attitudes surrounding literacy. Students recommended books, spoke freely about their enjoyment of reading, and engaged in unstructured literate talk more frequently during the student-centered phase of the study. According to surveys, triple the number of students felt that student-centered activities contributed to an enjoyment of reading in comparison to skills-based activities. Attitudes about reading and student self-concept constitute what Dahl and Freppon (1995) referred to as one's "disposition for learning" (p. 70). This disposition is significant in the consequences it has for student achievement over time. Motivated behavior in reading has been linked to comprehension and academic achievement (Guthrie et al., 2006). Students who demonstrate a disposition for learning engage more frequently in literate behaviors and see reading and writing as serving purposes in their lives (Dahl & Freppon). The ways that students in this study experienced literacy across the two curricular frameworks exemplified the impact of instruction on students' attitudes and participation.

### Limitations

This comparison of student-centered and skills-based instructional models was focused within the constraints of one second-grade classroom. The role of the teacher-researcher placed certain restrictions on the collection of data, particularly field note observations. As the primary classroom teacher, the researcher also shared a personal relationship with students that may have impacted their responses to instruction and their willingness to provide feedback. This relationship to students and background knowledge of normative classroom patterns may have also contributed to bias on the part of the researcher. The role of the research assistant in collecting field notes, documenting student engagement, and recording audio served to establish interrater reliability.

The ordering of the framework implementation may have influenced students' experiences and feedback. The study relied upon the resources available within a single classroom. A reverse-order implementation with an additional set of participants would provide a useful comparison model. Nonetheless, this study presents valuable findings in the impact of differing literacy curricula on students' experiences.

## Implications

The results of this study have practical and methodological implications. From a practical perspective, understanding the experiences and attitudes of young readers across different domains of curricular instruction informs the ways in which educators design and implement instruction. The salient characteristics of choice, collaboration, shared control, and instructional challenge should be regarded in the structuring of activities that engage students in authentic and valuable literacy experiences. The study suggests the possibility that students' experiences of literacy across curricular frameworks could influence their disposition for learning and their willingness to engage in literate behaviors over time.

As researchers, we must also come to a greater understanding of how young children experience and respond to frameworks of literacy instruction. This study provides a unique model for comparative research in that both curricula were implemented within the same classroom. The stability of the participant population and the positioning of the teacher-researcher afforded valuable insights about the children's beliefs of literacy learning. The contrasts in children's experiences and perceptions of student-centered and skills-based instruction point to directions for future research in the long-term effects of each framework on students' participation and engagement. Understanding what children believe, how they come to value literacy, and the role of instructional design in shaping their experiences will help guide the ways in which we invite students toward a lifetime of literacy.

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