THE IMPACT OF CHOICE AND SELF-DIRECTED INQUIRY
ON STUDENT LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative research study documents the observed and reported experiences of a regular education language arts teacher and her class of thirteen eighth grade students when using the strategies of student choice and self-directed inquiry in a democratic classroom setting. The study examines the use of these strategies and their effects on student learning, including student motivation. Self-directed inquiry is defined in this study as the pursuit of knowledge in a topic chosen individually by the student participants. This study defines a democratic classroom setting as one wherein the student participants actively negotiate together, through whole class interactive discussion, in making the decisions that shape their learning environment. The study suggests that students are more motivated to explore an avenue of inquiry when it pertains to a topic of specific interest to them, but will demonstrate various forms of resistance to learning when the topics are not ones that interest them. The author documents the student participants’ experiences with problem solving, negotiating with peers, researching topics, and practicing verbal and written skills. Finally, the author questions the role of the teacher in student choice and self-directed inquiry and considers how to incorporate student choice and self-directed inquiry in future contexts.
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Thank you, Lord God, for the opportunity to do this work and for giving me the strength to see it through. You knew I would be a teacher before I was even born.

_For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future._       _Jer. 29:11_

Thank you, George, for the support and encouragement that made Muhlenberg and Moravian possible. You told me at least a hundred times, “You can do it. You’re almost done!” Well, now I am. Ti amo molto e per sempre.

_The Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.”_        _Gen. 2:18_

Thank you, John and Irene Bowen. More parents than in-laws, you are such wonderful cheerleaders. Your love and care packages kept me strong. I hope this endeavor brings honor to the family name. Dad, I miss you every day.

_“Look,” said Namoi, “your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her.” But Ruth replied, “Don’t urge me to leave you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.”_       _Ruth 1:16_

Finally, thank you MJ, Jenni Anne, and Baby #1. At long last, your voices have been heard.

_From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise._       _Ps. 8:2_
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RESEARCHER STORY

Researcher Stance

*My heart is stirred by a noble theme...Psalm 45:1*

Ah, the perfect classroom setting. Can’t you just picture it? Around the sun-speckled room, huddled groups of inquisitive learners explore a common area of interest on their laptops (which, of course, all print to the classroom printer with no problems.) Other students write and peer edit the latest of multiple drafts of their individually-chosen research studies, offering each other positive, yet critical feedback on how to improve the writing. Lone readers cuddle into beanbag chairs scattered around the room, intent on their self-selected texts, using Post-It notes and Readers’ Journals to jot notes to themselves to hold their thinking. Every student is enthusiastically on-task. It is evident to any observer that all the students are engaged in serious, self-directed learning. The teacher is present, but is not leading the class so much as she is guiding it, moving between groups and individuals, observing, suggesting, and encouraging students. What a dream!

My reality, more often than not, looks like fifty minutes of class time jammed between standardized testing, firedrills, assemblies, pullouts for extra-curricular lessons, students’ dental and doctor appointments, and guidance sessions. Often, I present lessons to students who are disengaged and disinterested, despite my best intentions to teach the whole child without leaving
one of them behind. Yet, I continue to strive and hope for a better way, for the chance to make my dream classroom a reality.

So, I thought, what would happen if students constructed an environment for themselves wherein their subject material was self-selected, chosen as a result of their own process of creative exploration? What if assessment of student learning was not a teacher-wielded object used to maximize student anxiety and evaluate recall, but was developed by the students as a celebration of understanding? This is the vision I have for my classroom. I believe learning can excite students when they develop as many components of the experience as possible. I do not believe that students are best served in a classroom where I choose what will be taught, where I come up with ways to teach it, and where I decide how and when the students will be assessed. I want to move beyond the model of teacher-defined content and beyond traditional patterns of instructional process. I envision students not as mindless product producers, but as meaningful knowledge investors. Rather than perceiving assessment as an externally imposed bar of measured achievement held over the students' heads, I see students taking charge of their education through their development of action plans, regular self-assessment, and descriptive feedback from peers. I see myself in the role of facilitator and guide in the students’ learning process. I believe when students are provided wide areas of interest they can explore and multiple ways to demonstrate
their knowledge, the evidence of their learning is likely to be more accurate and certainly more authentic.

**Moving From The Sixties Into The Twenty-First Century**

I came upon my classroom vision when I reflected on my own experience with knowledge acquisition. As a child, I primarily engaged in two activities: I read voraciously and I asked questions constantly. The more I read, the more I discovered new things I wanted to explore. My curiosity bordered on insatiable. I drove my hardworking parents crazy. With work and home responsibilities, plus three other children to care for, my parents simply could not handle my incessant chatter, so they taped my mouth shut to silence me. Worse than that, they limited how many books I could take out of the library. I felt cutoff from the world.

I still read, but I withdrew into myself. I had no one with whom I could share the lovely things I discovered in my friends, the books. Other students at school didn’t want to talk about books. Certainly teachers, in the era in which I grew up, seemed to me to be unapproachable. It was not until I started college, at the age of forty, that I entered into a world of academic thought that valued learning. The intellectual discourse both in and out of the classroom uncovered so many topics for me that I had never considered before. My mind opened. I felt like I had discovered a long lost home. I relished the discourse and inhaled the reading like pure air. With great joy, I graduated class salutatorian and became what I was told by my parents I would never be: a teacher. In reflecting on those
lonely, silent years of my childhood, I thought about how my parents’ restrictions had not diminished my curiosity but had only made me all the hungrier to learn and explore. I realized that ideas needed to be discussed and shared in order for them to fully come to life.

**Validation Of A Vision: Sudbury Valley School**

Then, during a meeting of first-year teachers conducted as part of my induction process three years ago, my principal showed his new hires a videotape of a *Sixty Minutes* television broadcast entitled *Sudbury Valley School*. I watched the video aghast with rising indignation, my nails literally digging into the conference table. This was NOT my idea of school. School, I thought, is a place where students learn, not play all day. School can be fun, but it is a place to get work done, the very serious work of *learning*. College may be a place of discourse, I thought, but not a school of *children*. The new teacher part of me forgot about how much I wanted to have my own voice heard as a youngster.

Sudbury Valley School is a democratic school run by a school meeting of all the students, ages five to eighteen. All Sudbury participants, including staff, each get one vote on all matters of substance, including the school rules and hiring/firing of staff. Based in Framingham, Massachusetts, the school has no grades, tests, or scores. In fact, it has no set curriculum. The video showed students snow boarding, playing video games and cards, and socializing. A few shots actually did show students reading or working with a teacher, otherwise
known as a staff member because the Sudbury School community voted the title of teacher as too elitist. I dismissed Sudbury Valley School as a temporary fad that could never last.

However, the memory of that induction meeting became an ingrained part of my psyche. I borrowed my principal's tape so I could make my own copy. Something about the school intrigued me while angering me at the same time, and I didn't know why. I researched the school online and found that it is one of many schools of a similar model around the country in states as diverse as Colorado, Pennsylvania, California, Oregon, Virginia, Texas, New York, Illinois, Connecticut, Maine, Vermont, and Hawaii. International locations range from Canada to the Netherlands, Denmark, and Israel. As for a fad - Sudbury Valley School has been in existence for over thirty years (http://www.sudval.org). The Sudbury Valley school website outlines its fundamental premises:

That all people are curious by nature; that the most efficient, long-lasting, and profound learning takes place when started and pursued by the learner; that all people are creative if they are allowed to develop their unique talents; that age-mixing among students promotes growth in all members of the group; and that freedom is essential to the development of personal responsibility. In practice this means that students initiate all their own activities and create their own environments. The physical plant, the
staff, and the equipment are there for the students to use as the need arises (http://www.sudval.org).

This all sounded very student centered to me, very individualistic and expressive. As much as it disturbed me, Sudbury’s vision also struck a cord in me from my own late-sixties youth, a memory of a social movement focused on freedom and peace and hope for a different, more positive, world.

A tension grew in me as a result of my exposure to the Sudbury Valley School model. I began to look at my practice with new eyes and became deeply aware that I work in a standards-driven school system where students are constantly assessed and where curriculum is not student-centered, but test-focused. Funding seems to push the educational wheel forward, and money comes from achieving good test scores. Society seems to educate heavily for uniformity. Students are told to think outside the box, but are measured by a one-size-fits-all standard. Many, including teachers, bemoan that students aren't creative thinkers, but we teach them prescribed curriculum so they will do well on state tests. We numb them in school everyday and wonder why they choose to spend their free time continuing the process with TV and video games.

Students are taught to think reproductively. Exposed to content they do not select themselves, they are assigned to a process by which they produce an often meaningless product, thereby "demonstrating" that they have acquired the prescribed content. Their product, then, is assessed on a standard they did not
develop, and students are assigned a grade of which they have little or no voice. The system is demoralizing.

Somehow, the students have been lost in the shuffle and, I believe, they know it. It shows in their behavior. Students often forget homework, don't study for tests, don't do assigned reading, and make minimal efforts on projects. I watch them move from class to class — bored, disinterested, disconnected, and disenchanted. Now, after only three short years of teaching, it is the school model that I am in that I find appalling, not the Sudbury Valley School. My heart breaks as I watch so many students come into eighth grade with their minds already disengaged from how they will spend seven hours of their lives every day for the next one hundred and eighty days. That kind of life is as far from individual freedom as you can get. I see an utter waste of talent and of our future.

I think of the famous Dickens novel, A Tale of Two Cities, wherein one of the main characters, Dr. Manette, was locked away in a tiny garret prison for eighteen years, alone. When he was finally freed, the code phrase for his release was RECALLED TO LIFE. This is how I perceive my classroom and what I hope for my students — that they will be recalled to life (at least to some extent) by the freedom they are likely to find when they are released from the constraints of the current classroom model of teacher dictated content/process/product/assessment. What will happen to student learning if all students are given the freedom to explore as their inquiry leads them? How will students react when they are
allowed to construct their learning environment, choose their materials, assess themselves, and monitor their own learning? What will happen if their learning becomes purposeful play?
LITERATURE REVIEW

Student choice and the curriculum of the traditional classroom

While searching the literature for my study, I found an examination of student choice from the perspective of curriculum done by Allan Ornstein (1998), educator and researcher at Loyola University in Chicago. Ornstein deemed much of today’s curriculum as “irrelevant” (p. 26). Irrelevant curriculum, in his opinion, is any course of study that does not meet the needs of society or the student. It is overwhelmingly product oriented and excludes any vestiges of student choice. In Ornstein’s opinion, irrelevant curriculum is the modus operandi of many traditional classrooms.

Ornstein scrutinized the educational value of four types of irrelevant curriculum and categorized them as fixed, antiseptic, trivial, or right-answer oriented. He posits that it is due to the nature of their structure that these curriculum types breed boredom and disengagement in so many students. Students are afforded few opportunities to choose the direction of their learning. The traditional classroom links little to real life. Such curriculum needs to be modified to focus more on the process of learning and less on producing a meaningless product.

For example, fixed curriculum does not keep pace with the fast paced knowledge explosion of today's world. Since “knowledge increases
exponentially” (Ornstein, 1998, p. 27), a staid medium like printed text cannot keep up with this constant change. Curriculum that is text-based is already obsolete by the time the latest edition finds its way into the hands of students. The author maintains that “70 to 95 percent of the total curriculum” in a traditional classroom falls into this category (p. 30).

*Antiseptic* curriculum dovetails closely to fixed curriculum since it is also text-based. Texts utilized in an antiseptic curriculum are bland and politically correct so as not to offend anyone, thereby leaving the students with a skewed perspective. Curriculum that is subversive or raises too many questions away from what is acceptable (topics such as sexuality, religion, death, disease, violence, and obscenity) are often not addressed in the classroom. Students, then, do not learn to think critically about topics that are part of the real world, making the antiseptic curriculum irrelevant. Ornstein contends that classroom material that is “sterile and safe…can lead to student boredom” (p. 30).

*Right-answer-oriented* curriculum is a course of instruction wherein the teacher is the primary source of information that he disseminates to the students. Workbooks and textbooks are the primary instructional materials. Little critical thinking is required and rarely do students share discourse with each other. The teacher talks, the students listen. “For students to achieve understanding,” notes researcher David Ackerman, “students need to do more than press the record button in class and subsequently play back the teacher’s words” (Ackerman,
In a right-answer-oriented curriculum, students are simply required to please the teacher, pass the test, and/or meet the standard by providing the right answer when called upon. Teacher researcher Courtney Cazden (2001) describes this very traditional pattern of classroom interaction between teacher and students as the oldest and “the most common discourse pattern at all grade levels” (p. 30). It is a participant structure that is in complete contrast to the inquiry dialogue model (p. 31).

Another type of curriculum evaluated by Ornsten is called trivial curriculum and is comprised of rote learning and memorization of irrelevant facts and figures. Little is learned because little is retained from this kind of instruction. Too much time is wasted in classrooms by emphasizing information that is unrelated cognitively to anything in the students' lives or to their previous training. He states that, in contrast, “meaningful learning takes place [when] the curriculum relates to what the learner already knows, deems personally useful, and considers relevant to his or her personal experience” (Ornstein, 1988, p. 31).

These variations of curriculum characterize so much of traditional classroom instruction and exemplify what Frank Smith (1988) calls “the official theory of learning and forgetting” (p. 4). All four strongly focus on tests, on repetitive exercises, and on memorization. The official theory of learning and forgetting is so invasive in traditional classrooms that it may be hard to imagine another model, but much that is learned in such settings if forgotten because of
the ineffectuality of the methods used. They reinforce the educative mindset that learning is difficult. However, as Smith (1988) states, “The main thing we learn when we struggle to learn is that the learning is a struggle” (p. 13).

**Student resistance in the traditional classroom**

In many traditional classrooms, these curriculum models exemplify teacher control of the learning environment. Students have no real need to assume responsibility for their learning when teachers make all the learning decisions. Pascarella, Walberg, Junker, and Haertel (1981) suggest “teacher structuring of and control over classroom activities [is] negatively associated with continuing motivation” (p. 450). Students end up bored and disinterested towards learning new things both in and out of school. When learning is not connected to anything fun or applicable to their lives, students often make the choice to stop striving (Pascarella et al., 1981). Denied opportunities to contribute to the choices made regarding their learning environment, students often choose the response of disengagement as a coping mechanism.

Furthermore, when the academic emphasis is on absorption of facts distributed by the teacher as the dispenser of knowledge, students’ attitude frequently is one of resistance. Resistance is “the students’ attempts to reposition themselves in the face of conditions they defined as intolerable” (Field & Olafson, 1998, p. 42). Resistance if often manifested by a lack of mental investment and emotional involvement. In short, when they become bored, students often act out
inappropriately. Researcher Jean Anyon (Finn, 1999) found many examples of such behavior when she studied several traditional teacher-controlled fifth grade classrooms where students were given no opportunities to be active participants in the positive construction of their learning environment. She found that the “dominant theme was resistance” (p. 12) and states:

Students vandalized school property and resisted the teachers’ efforts to teach. Boys fell out of chairs; students brought bugs in the classroom and released them; children lost books or forgot them; students interrupted the teacher. They showed no enthusiasm for projects into which their teacher put extra effort. They refused to answer questions and were apparently pleased when the teacher became upset. There was less resistance to easy work, and so assignments were rarely demanding. (p. 12)

The actions of these students suggest any attitude of, “Why try?” In many ways, they reflect the behaviors I witnessed in the traditional school settings I have been in both as a student and as a teacher. When provided little or no choice about what they are learning or how they are learning it, students will redirect their energies elsewhere and, more often than not, toward negative behaviors.

When this kind of acting out takes place in the traditional classroom setting, it often translates into disciplinary action against the student. In the game of school, the conditions in which students’ traditionally find themselves consists of a “dichotomous story line, one of resistance/compliance, that traps them in an
old institutional power play that involves escalating levels of authority, discipline, punishment and resistance” (Field & Olafson, 1998, p. 50). Rather than consider that it might be the curriculum and lack of student choice contributing to students' disfranchisement and resistance, Field and Olafson state:

The dominant story line locates the problem in the individual student (never in the teacher), leaves the worth of the required tasks and learning activities unquestioned, and traps people in cycles of reciprocal offense, claim and counter-claim, resulting in more and more drastic implications for the moral character of each participant. Within the school, resistance is attributed to negative character traits of individual students, such as irresponsibility, immaturity, lack of motivation, negative attitude, or learning disability. Resistant behavior is often defined as disruptive, attention-seeking, uncooperative, or impulsive. Such institutional readings as these frame the ‘problem’ individually leaving little room for examining the social conditions that contribute to becoming resistant. Under such conditions, it becomes difficult to rewrite the script and imagine the possibility of other ways of being. (p. 51)

In such a system, students often lose their desire to learn and understandably resist the educators who try to teach them.
Student choice as a positive motivator

One way to remedy the negative ramifications of the traditional classroom is to provide opportunities for student choice. Repeatedly, researchers hold to the premise that student choice is a core component to successful learning (Field & Olafson, 1998; Levin, 2000; Wang and Stiles, 1976). Even the smallest opportunity for student choice appears to motivate students to participate more in their learning. For example, I found a small study done by researchers Wang and Stiles (1976) involving a five-week examination of two homogeneously grouped second grade classrooms. One student group operated under a prescribed teacher-directed system in which all learning activities in a specific subject area were assigned by the teacher to be completed during a set time each day. If students completed the learning activities before the end of the designated time, they were given additional assignments in the same subject area, or some “quiet seat work to occupy their time until the end of the period” (p. 160).

The second group of students was assigned the same learning activities, but these students were not required to complete the activities at any set time. They were given opportunities to choose when and how to complete the assignments, even though the subject area was teacher-defined. Furthermore, the second group of students was able to select independent learning projects representative of their own interests to demonstrate their understanding of the subject material.
Wang and Stiles (1976) utilized three data collection methods with both student groups over the course of the study: interviews with students at the beginning and end of the study period; a questionnaire administered upon completion of the study period; and student tasks correctly completed and calculated weekly in order to gauge any increases over time. The students in the second group who were given greater freedom provided interview responses that seemed to indicate an increased level of self-responsibility over the students in the first group (Wang & Stiles, 1976, p. 166). An analysis of the task completion data revealed a significant difference between the two groups, with the second group of students scoring much higher than the first. The implication is that the increase may be due to the higher level of self-responsibility assumed by the students in the second group because of their opportunities to make the choices for themselves. As a result of their study, Wang and Stiles (1976) suggest that students can “develop the ability to take responsibility for their learning” (p. 167). When the teacher relinquishes control of some of the classroom decisions, the students accept the challenge. Teachers convey a message of trust and respect to their students when they provide opportunities for students to make choices.

Providing opportunities for students to self-direct their learning need not be confined to elementary school. Consider the work of teacher-researcher Nancie Atwell (1988) who conducts regular reading and writing workshops with her middle school students. She found that, “allowing readers to select their own
books has a major impact on students’ fluency, reading rate, and comprehension” (p. 37). When students are responsible for choosing their own reading materials and are allowed to read what interests them, Atwell contends, they become more engaged readers (p. 76). Similarly, in the context of the writers’ workshops, students may choose the direction of the written pieces and dialogue with peers in the development of their work. Atwell creates a setting of purposeful writing by setting specific boundaries regarding noise level, feedback, and organizational structure, but the students’ ability to self-direct their work and explore their individual interests is the key to the success of the workshops.

**Student interest as a positive motivator**

Note the importance of choice and interest in the Wang and Stiles (1976) study and the Atwell (1998) classroom. Often overlooked in many traditional classrooms where the course of study is teacher directed, student interest is considered a key component in motivating students (Glassman, 2001; McCombs, 1991; Schiefele, 1991; Tobias, 1994; Vygotsky, 1997). German philosopher and founder of modern scientific pedagogy, Johann Herbart, believed that students’ pursuit of a wide range of academic interests should be one of education’s goals (Schiefele, 1991, p. 300). Herbart’s research led him to believe the pursuit of knowledge in areas of self-selected interest “leads to meaningful learning, promotes long-term storage of knowledge, and provides motivation for further learning” (Schiefele, 1991, p. 300). John Dewey
believed the exploration of students’ interest was at the core of education (Glassman, 2001). Vygotsky (1997) also saw interest as “an expression of the child’s organic needs” (p. 87). Interest, in his view, acts as an “inherent characteristic of the individual, and is perhaps the primary driving motivation” (Glassman, 2001, p. 10). Barbara McCombs (1991) echoes similar sentiments when she states that the motivation to learn is an “internal, naturally occurring capacity of human beings that is enhanced and nurtured by quality supportive relationships, opportunities for personal choice and responsibility for learning, and personally relevant and meaningful learning tasks” [italics added] (p. 120). Clearly, so many researchers point to interest as a key motivator in learning. Researcher Sigmund Tobias, City College, CUNY, goes so far as to say that “interest and intrinsic motivation are virtually synonymous” (Tobias, 1994, p. 38). He suggests that “interest contributes to learning [because it] invokes deeper types of comprehension processes, leads to greater use of imagery, and may stimulate a more emotional, more personal, and more extensive network of relevant associations” (p. 50). Student-directed inquiry into a study of interest can lead to a greater overall learning experience (Tobias, 1994, p. 38).

Despite these arguments that suggest interest is a positive motivator in student learning, many traditional public schools still tend toward teacher-centered, administration-driven curriculum. Student directed learning and the process of free exploration are objectives often overlooked in today’s classroom.
There is such a push in today’s educational arena to cover content and achieve the yearly testing benchmark (Metzger, 1985; Ohanian, 1999). Devon Metzger (1985) writes:

There are, in reality, few instructional objectives reserved for process, and usually no grand instructional designs or systematic efforts given to teaching students how to learn. The ground covering mindset [is] so insidious that teachers cannot imagine students becoming involved in learning without first having a knowledge base, and the knowledge base usually translates into a chapter in the textbook. (p. 116)

In contrast by its very nature, students’ pursuit of learning based on interest is process-, not product-oriented, and is a course of instruction that cannot fit neatly into a standardized package.

Free inquiry is often expressed through project-oriented learning and is an educational philosophy founded firmly in Dewey (Katz and Chard, 1989). Long-term projects provide educational opportunities for exploration over time, allowing students to raise deeper and more provocative questions about their topic of interest. Dewey (1938a) perceived doubt as the natural by-product of such questioning, just part of an educative experience that has no set end in view.

When students set off on an exploration of inquiry based on topics that interest them, the focus is not on the journey’s end (a predetermined product), but on the exploration itself (the process). A fixed goal in and of itself “is relatively
unimportant and can be changed through the combined activity of the [students]” (Glassman, 2001, p. 6).

This is not to say that a student driven, inquiry-based line of study is without specific result. On the contrary, Glassman (2001) points out that inquiry-based learning, expressed particularly through the educational approach of long-term projects, yields:

progressive problem solving that follows [as] a natural outgrowth of vital experience. Key to the educational experience is getting the student to recognize that this cycle of interest-doubt-problem solving is beneficial and worthy of pursuit. The more the [student] confronts interesting indeterminate situations as a result of her own unique experience, the more confident she becomes in her own process of inquiry. This is especially important as activities become more complex and there are difficult barriers between doubt and problem solving. (p. 11)

The cognitive skills purportedly developed over the span of an inquiry-based project have the potential to yield a competency that further motivates students as learners, and the cycle of exploration continues (Harter, 1981). Success breeds success, as well as the desire to continue succeeding.

In my search for supporting literature, I discovered an interesting study done by teacher researchers David and Phyllis Whitin. Increased motivation to learn as a result of student choice and inquiry is exactly what the Whitins
confirmed when they conducted a yearlong qualitative study of inquiry-based learning in their elementary classroom (Whitin, P. & Whitin, D., 1997). They wanted to see how using an inquiry-based methodology to teach science to fourth graders would improve the learning of their students. Their premise was that when students are immersed in a classroom-as-community project over time, the proficiency of the learners increases. The Whitins used empirical notation, questionnaires, journals and parent interviews as their means of collecting data. They established benchmarks through the course of the year as a way to gauge student learning over time. What the authors found was the students' sense of wonder at their natural world increased from the beginning of the year to the end. The children took their study of birds out from their classroom into their lives outside of school. The authors observed that the students grew in their perception of their world because they gained a wider lens of awareness through observation and study. Especially interesting was the children’s raised level of self-esteem. The learners showed a stronger sense of personal empowerment, according to the authors, due to the choices they were able to make as to the direction of their inquiry and the ownership they felt about the project.

In another study I found, high school teacher Heather Brown used a student directed, inquiry-based learning approach in her classroom and achieved similar results to those of the Whitins (Brown, 2004). Prior to using inquiry-based learning strategies to teach research methods in her secondary classroom, the
author worked from a traditional, teacher-centered, text-based ideology. As she explained in her study, she pushed, her students resisted, she became exhausted, and her students' work was poorly done. Something had to change, but Ms. Brown was unsure what to do or how to do it — until she entered into a yearlong teacher research initiative through the Southern Arizona Writing Project. She found that her own research became passionate because it was authentic and meaningful to her life and teaching practice. Thus, her "walk into the unknown" began in her own classroom (p. 48).

Brown’s study describes her experience of using inquiry-based learning strategies in a tenth and eleventh grade classroom of Tohono O'odham Native American students. First, her students brainstormed topics of interest as a whole class within the specific focus of identity. Then each student picked three topics that had personal appeal, later further narrowing the topic list from three to one. The assignment was to create a Web page of research findings, including pictures, original writings and artwork, as well as links to other Web pages related to their topic. Students also conducted interviews, examined resource books, and constructed photo essays. All of these avenues of learning were new to the students and their teacher.

Ms. Brown perceived that the inclusion of these practices was transformational to her practice and the students’ learning. She observed the students develop into a community of learners as they shared the progress of their
research and dialogued with each other. She also noted, “significant changes in
the level of student engagement and subsequent increase in motivation” as a result
of the student inquiry approach (p. 46). Students developed critical thinking skills
as they became experts on their subject. They gained self-confidence as their
projects grew.

Both Brown and the Whitins noted positive benefits of inquiry-based
learning and of students’ choice of study based on interest. They observed gains
in students’ self-confidence and self-esteem. They witnessed a fostering of
community and a development of students’ critical thinking skills. They saw
students’ motivation to learn extend outside the classroom. Their studies suggest
student choice and inquiry-based learning dissolved resistance to learning.

Changes in the relationship between students and teachers can be yet
another benefit to a learning environment comprised of student choice and
inquiry. It is important that teachers, in the classroom of inquiry, become co-
partners of the students in their relations with them” (p. 75). He continues:

The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is
himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being
taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which
all grow. In this process, arguments based on ‘authority’ are no longer
valid; in order to function, authority must be on the side of freedom, not against it [italics in original]. (p. 80)

Exploring together, students and teachers break down the resistance to learning prevalent in so many traditional classrooms.

**Drawbacks to the inquiry model**

This is not to say that classroom environments comprised of student selected, inquiry-based learning projects are not without obstacles. Research suggests that time is the biggest detriment to the implementation of such pedagogy (Memory, Yoder, Bolinger, & Warren, 2004). Classroom time constraints arguably result from a “heavily-weighted emphasis on teaching content” (Metzger, 1985, p.118). Especially in a social, political, and academic atmosphere that leans so heavily on test accountability, “content is more easily chopped and arranged to fit the traditional class time frame” (p. 118). Teaching from textbooks most comfortably fits the need to squeeze content into forty-five to sixty minute time bites because so much content ground can be covered. Ground covering yields exposure to a lot of material over a minimal amount of time and “is a perfect setup for textbook addiction” (Metzger, 1985, p. 118). The specificity of textbooks, not the meandering process of inquiry-based learning, provides the most measurable bang for the buck. Low-level knowledge is easiest to measure; any standardized test will do. Metzger (1985) argues:

The textbook functions well for many students, in part, because it contains
low-level knowledge. Learning this low level information is further
assisted by the information being repeated several times over the different
years in different textbooks. (p. 118)

In contrast, inquiry-based learning, with all its variables and subjectivity,
is much harder to evaluate. Research suggests that difficulty to develop applicable
assessment is the second biggest reason teachers do not choose this style of
pedagogy (Memory, Yoder, Bolinger, & Warren, 2004; Metzger, 1985). Many
teachers possess poorly developed management and procedural skills to
successfully implement, monitor, and assess inquiry tasks in a timely manner.
Teachers “often have not been introduced to process goals and objectives and
hence do not know how to evaluate the skills associated with the process”
(Metzger, 1985, p. 117). Lack of teacher knowledge leads to the pedagogical
path of least resistance: textbook-based, teacher-directed classroom instruction.

Debatably, such a path is the least discordant as far as subject matter is
concerned. Inquiry methodology, by its very nature investigative, tends to
uncovers issues that are controversial. Memory, Yoder, Bolinger, and Warren
(2004) believe the conflict that arises in the lives of teachers and students as a
result of pursuing controversial issues is another major reason why teachers tend
to shy away from the student-selected, student-directed approach. They even
recommend that anyone considering using this method should start modestly,
using only textbook information to garner topics and classroom time to
investigate less complex issues. In fact, they include topic suggestions in their research that they feel are benign enough to avoid conflict and controversy, yet stimulating enough to reflect concerns and issues of adolescents. They include a caveat that states it is difficult to anticipate whether any thinking or inquiry task assigned by a teacher will adequately tap into the concern or interest of all adolescents, yet they offer no solution to this problem other than teachers must design studies, as best they can, by drawing “on what they can learn about individual students and about specific groups of students” (Memory, et al., 2004, p. 3). This point dovetails again with the time component, since close analysis of students’ learning styles requires methodological observation and reflection.

When inquiry learning includes students working together in groups, several other disadvantages to this model arise. I read an interesting study conducted by teacher researchers Williams, Harris, and Hayakawa (1995). They examined the cooperative learning experiences of 499 urban middle school adolescents in grades 6, 7, and 8. Focus was given to answering two main questions: What particular aspects of cooperative learning did the students find favorable or unfavorable, and what were their views regarding conflicts that arose during cooperative learning? The students selected for the study were chosen from the classes of nine teachers of two separate middle schools in the northwest who taught in various academic areas using cooperative learning. Data collection consisted of classroom observations, student essays, surveys using both closed-
and open-ended questions, and audio-recorded interviews. Grade level, gender, ethnicity, special education placement, and reading scores were taken into consideration when the data were analyzed.

Williams, Harris, and Hayakawa found that 79% of the students preferred cooperative learning to working alone. This is understandable considering the social aspects of cooperative learning, and the developmental stage of adolescents in this age group (12-14). What is particularly interesting is the researchers' findings that the average and low scoring readers preferred cooperative learning significantly more than their peers who scored as having a higher than average reading level. This makes sense considering their reasons, gleaned from the student interviews, essays, and surveys. Overwhelmingly, cooperative learning was seen as being more fun than individual study or teacher-led instruction. Students also cited the safety of working in a small group as opposed to risking being wrong in front of the whole class. Many felt it easier to turn to a peer with a question than exhibit "not knowing" in front of everyone. Students also enjoyed getting the different perspectives of their peers while working in small groups as opposed to whole class discussion wherein shy, quiet students may not speak up and voice their opinions.

However, the major concerns students conveyed about working in cooperative groups uncovered several serious issues about using this method of instruction. Bossiness was given as a strong deterrent to peers being able to work
together. Some students seemed to just "take over" and tried to assert authority over the group. Higher achieving students noted that they ended up doing the bulk of the work when bossy students pushed the group around because it was easier to just dig in and get the job done than it was to argue. Equity of grades was another factor; when only a few did the work, everyone else who didn't participate still got the benefit of the group grade. Finally, the time factor was also a detriment. Cooperative work was seen as something that "took longer," especially when the group contained students who liked to "fool around." Not surprisingly, Williams, Harris, and Hayakawa infer from their findings that conflict resolution strategies need to be explicitly taught to students in order for cooperative learning to be successful in the classroom.

Despite the drawbacks to facilitating a student-selected, student-directed inquiry project, the benefits weigh heavily in favor of such an endeavor. Research overwhelmingly suggests that when students are given opportunities to express their voice through self-selected inquiry, what they uncover is a depth of study that cannot be matched in teacher-dominated, textbook-driven educational settings (Ashman and Conway, 1993; Gaughan, 2001; Glassman, 2001; Metzger, 1985; Whitin, 1997). The issues of freedom and purpose are implicit when voice and choice are encouraged. It is critical for twenty-first century students to become process thinkers and change agents in a world desperate for transformation. As bell hooks (1994) writes:
The academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom.” (p. 216)

In the pursuit of knowledge in an area of their own interest, with the teacher as the guide and facilitator, students have the opportunity to grow as learners. The inquiry classroom can be their incubator.
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

_Awake, and rise to my defense!  Psalm 35:23_

Essentially, my study emerged from two fundamental issues: student voice and student choice. Voice has been defined as the “most basic level of youth sharing their opinions [and] collaborating with adults” (Mitra, 2004, p. 651). This context placed voice as the means by which students are active participants in decisions that affect their lives in school and at home, yet I perceived that students’ were given little voice in the general school setting. I could only assume from the stories they shared within the constructs of our classroom that the majority of the students were not afforded many opportunities for their voices to be heard in their homes either.

Therefore, for the purpose of my study, I chose to apply Freire’s (1970/2000) concept of liberation as the verbiage by which I defined voice – as a tool of “action and reflection of men and women [in my case, boys and girls] upon their world in order to transform it” (p. 79). Students were free to explore and choose an avenue of inquiry within the parameters of creating change in their home, their neighborhood, their place of worship, their school, or in themselves as individuals. As Freire (1970/2000) noted,

_For apart from inquiry…individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless,
impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other. (p. 72)

Through their inquiry, students developed and implemented action plans, learned problem-solving and negotiating skills, and honed their abilities to examine and modify their learning processes, re-empowering their voice as learners and as human beings.

Similarly, I defined student choice as the students’ ability to select a specific course of action for themselves, again, both in and out of school. This was a definition interrelated to the idea of voice as a means of transformation. Up to this point in their lives, my students had participated in approximately eight years of school and thirteen years of life. I wanted them to consider, in the process of an inquiry project they chose, just how much of this participation had been one of conscious choosing. I wanted them to think about what they would like to do differently and why — or why not. My goal was for the students to connect with their feelings and experiences through dialogic discourse and personal reflective journaling, thereby linking their choice of inquiry with their voice. I believed that from this emotive space would rise their passion to make changes to how they learned and how they lived.

**Researcher Trustworthiness**

In order to conduct my study in a trustworthy manner, I adhered closely to the ethical guidelines developed for teacher action researchers by Arhar, Holly,
and Kasten (2001). I received approval from Moravian’s Human Subjects Internal Review Board (HSIRB) (see Appendix A.) I obtained the requisite consents from school administrators (see Appendix B) and parents (see Appendix C) before I started gathering data for my study. Consent forms to parents/guardians contained a brief description of the study, assurance of anonymity and confidentiality, and the option for parents to withhold permission without penalty to their child. I included contact numbers for my school administrator, my research supervisor, and my classroom in the consent letter. I wanted to make it clear to the students’ parents/guardians that they were free to discuss this study with me, my research supervisor, and/or my school administrator at any time throughout its duration.

After obtaining the required permission, I shared my research question with my students. I believed the students, as participants in the study, had the right to be made fully aware of and encouraged to participate in the data collection. After all, a large part of the study involved the development of a classroom community. What better way to grow as a community than to be engaged in a common goal? Reciprocal relationships of open communication and trust are considered by some teacher researchers to be fundamental to action research (Ahar, Holly & Kasten, 2001). I hoped these important elements would free all of us to explore the issue of choice and inquiry as co-researchers. To this end, if students felt that they would rather not be part of this study, they were exempt without receiving any reprisals either personally or academically.
Students' rights as human beings were to be preserved at all times, and were of primary importance to me.

Of course, all student input was kept confidential. This meant that unless students revealed information in the data that indicated abuse, neglect, or illegal activities, all participants were assured through a written statement of confidentiality that their work would not be shared with anyone outside the parameters of this project. To further ensure their privacy, student identity was kept anonymous through the use of pseudonyms (Ahar, Holly, & Kasten, 2001).

I also used a variety of data sources so as to gain a wide spectrum of data. Participant observations, surveys, and interviews, as well as applicable student work, were all integral components of my data collection. These multiple sources, collected over time, ensured a more trustworthy cache of information. Collecting a diverse assortment of data types provided me with a wider range of perspectives, analogous to examining a prism (Hubbard and Power, 2003). With each facet of data, I was afforded new opportunities to be surprised, to discover unexpected findings. This not only kept my research fresh throughout this project, but I believed the use of many data sources served to promote a richness and depth to my practice by challenging any assumptions and biases I bore as a result of my personal history.

I maintained a field log was also part of my data collection. My research field log was thick with participant observations in the form of anecdotal records,
starting from the very first week of my study. I recorded my notes during and after each class period on days I collected data. I critically reviewed my observations during the period of data collection and composed detailed analytic memos. Two student surveys were conducted at strategic points during the research period: specifically, at the beginning of the students’ inquiry process and at the culmination of the students’ projects. The results of these surveys were included in my field log. Student written work from persuasive pieces and reflective journals were also collected and reviewed. Finally, I conducted formal interviews with an individual student before and after the study to gain more in-depth understanding of the student’s thoughts and feelings regarding self-selected and self-directed projects. The interview responses were included in my field log. All these data collection methods helped me determine if, and how, students’ learning improved over time.

Finally, I reflected deeply on the material that I collected. By consistent rereading, commenting, journaling, questioning, and discussing with my teacher inquiry support group, I believed I was able to refine and strategically focus my study. The peer reviews and feedback provided by my teacher inquiry support group was invaluable to the validation and interpretation of my data (Maclean & Mohr, 1999). Their input, as well as the triangulation of my data, allowed me to view my classroom and my practice with an eye towards positive change and professional growth.
Field Log

I recorded observational data in a field log using the notation method developed by researcher William Corsaro (Hubbard and Power, 2003). His system incorporates not only participant observations, but also data focused on specific teaching and research methodology. In addition, I included what Corsaro labeled “theoretical notes” or “notations involving theories [personal hunches or research based speculations] about what is happening in the classroom (p. 46). Personal notes were also added in order to round out the more feeling-based thoughts and perceptions of my observations. Taken as a whole, the observational information recorded in my field log was critical to my data analysis and was a vital piece of data collection. Because so much information can be derived from observational data, Arhar, Holly, and Kasten (2001) explain that the process of note taking in the field is “the most common method used by the action researcher to describe what is occurring” (p. 140). Not surprisingly, my field notes comprised the bulk of my data collection.

For the first month of my data collecting, I logged field notes every day. I repeatedly read over my notes and tried to perceive the comfort of my classroom as something strange and new. As Judith Newman (1998) noted, “The trick is to make the familiar and routine, which is largely invisible, visible…by looking at what’s commonplace within our working environment and attempting to see it with new eyes” (p. 17). When I reread my notes repeatedly with my “new eyes,” I
developed codes for different topics that revealed themselves in my data. Ely, Vinz, Downing, and Anzul (1997) view code development as a way “to notice a variety of relationships and patterns” in data (p. 167). I noted these codes in the margins of my field log and gradually my compilation of data grew. As I began to see patterns and themes emerge through my analysis, I cut back my notetaking to twice a week.

**Written Student Surveys**

I conducted two student surveys during the course of my data collection. Surveys were important to my study because of the invaluable class information they provided. Researchers MacLean and Mohr (1999) encourage the use of surveys in data collection because the data collected through surveys “can show you the scope of your question and tune you in to the general understandings of your students” (p. 42). I certainly wanted to know about and understand what prior encounters my students had with voice and choice, both in and out of the classroom setting. Therefore, the first survey I administered was a pre-study questionnaire consisting of fifteen questions that gathered baseline information on the students’ experiences in these two important areas (see Appendix D). The questions ranged from choices students made on such individual issues as dress, friends, and interests to opportunities they had to express their opinions and participate in the development of their classes and schools as learning
communities. Participants completed the initial survey during the second week of school in early September, 2005.

I administered the second survey at the conclusion of data collection during the third week of December, 2005 (see Appendix E). This survey evaluated the student responses to the process of selecting and implementing their own inquiry projects. I analyzed their reactions, their problem-solving abilities, and their preferences to engaging in self-selected, self-directed learning in the future as compared to reverting back to a more teacher-directed classroom environment. I included an analysis of the pre- and post-study surveys in my field log.

**Written Student Work**

I asked the students to keep a field log of their own, a journal wherein they could record their thoughts, feelings, and inspirations as they progressed through their inquiry projects. My purpose in asking the students to keep a journal was for them to become more aware of the metacognitive processes they experienced. The point of all their writing, which they did approximately three times a week, was for students to critically examine what worked for them during their project, as well as what didn’t work for them and why. My goal was for students to develop the capabilities to make positive choices in their future learning. Surely, if asked, my students would tell you that the most often asked question in Mrs. Bowen’s room was, “How can you solve this problem?”
I also required the students to construct a written action plan delineating what they investigated as an inquiry project and how they conducted their investigation. They also composed an analytic argument, in the form of a written persuasive essay that laid out the case for their inquiry, thereby meeting the district standard requirement for a persuasive portfolio piece.

**Student Interviews**

I conducted two formal interviews during my data collection. Both interviews were with the same student; however, one took place at the start of my study (see Appendix F) and the second occurred at its completion (see Appendix G). Teacher researchers Arhar, Holly, and Kasten (2001) define interviews in the context of data collection as “discussions with a purpose” (p. 288) and, indeed, I conducted mine with the goal of gaining a more in-depth understanding about the student’s thoughts and feelings on self-selected and self-directed projects. However, the one-on-one format of our interview and the discussion and clarification process of the interviewing also provided the student with an opportunity to gain a deeper sense of herself as a learner. Eder and Fingerson (2002) see this symbiotic relationship between interviewer and interviewee as one of reciprocity, stating, “Researchers can treat respondents in such a way that they receive something from participating in the study, whether it be a greater sense of empowerment, a greater sense of their own life experiences, or both” (p. 186-187). The student who participated in both interviews was surprised at her growth
as a learner from one who felt it necessary to have the teacher direct the classroom to one who found choice and inquiry fun and educationally beneficial. I added both interviews and their subsequent responses to my field log.
Tucked away in the cabin by the lake, sans spouse, phone, television, and vehicle, three weeks before the start of school, I begin my reflective thesis journey. I’ve spent several months developing what I would do and how I would do it, and my time here in solitude affords me the space to draw up a hard-core time frame of when. I wonder that I shouldn’t be more nervous. Maybe this is the result of three years of teaching: I know that things will go wrong, I know that schedules will not go as planned, and I know that not every kid is going to buy into the idea of a self-selected research project. I also know that this does not mean that I am a failure as a teacher or that my study is not important. I look forward to enlivening my teaching with this project, and each time I look at what I plan on doing, each time I come across a new activity, or site, or reading, I’m filling my bag of tricks and, in that, there is confidence.

Yet, even beyond my study and what it will do to improve my teaching, I hope for the students. I hope it will open their eyes to their possibilities. I hope it will encourage them to question, and then change, the parts of the system that aren’t working for them. I hope this for them and for our world. Sometimes it seems not much has changed since Stephen Stills wrote the song For What It’s
Worth in 1966, but I think that we as a society need to remember how to stand up for ourselves and sing loudly,

There’s something happening here,

what it is ain’t exactly clear,

there’s a man with a gun over there,

telling me I got to beware,

it’s time we stop, children, what’s that sound,

everybody look what’s going down....

School and Classroom Demographics

In order to transform my classroom into the student-directed learning environment I envision, I needed to first take a closer look at the students themselves. I teach in a public school situated near the historic downtown district of a moderately sized urban area in eastern Pennsylvania. Students attending my school came from both affluent neighborhoods located in the outlying township and from low-income and government-assisted housing. White students dominate the student population with a ratio of 7:1 (Hispanic, African-American, Asian.) My eighth grade class load for the 2005-2006 school year consisted of over one hundred students, and I could not include all of them as participants in my study. Therefore, I began by considering the track designation of each of the four student groups on my academic team.
Tracking is the practice of slotting children into homogenous academic groups (Duffy, 1988.) Placements are based on students’ prior academic performance and standardized test scores, specifically in the area of reading and math proficiency, when averaged against national percentiles. For example, the standardized reading average for my ‘A’ track students was 91%, while the standardized reading average for my ‘C’ track students was 63%. This meant that the students in ‘A’ track scored higher than approximately 91% of students in the nation on standardized McGraw-Hill TerraNova reading tests. The ‘C’ track students scored higher than 63% of students in the nation on standardized McGraw-Hill TerraNova reading tests. The standardized reading scores of the ‘C’ track students suggested that they were the students most in need of improvement, so I decided to invite the six male and seven female students in my ‘C’ track class to become participants in my study.

Once I had made this decision, I moved eagerly into taking the steps to obtain all the necessary consent. I drafted and presented an approval letter for my building principal’s signature; I received the signed form in my school mailbox by the end of May, 2005. I applied to Moravian’s Human Subjects Internal Review Board (HSIRB) in order to obtain their committee review of my research plan. After the Board was assured that my study would be conducted in a trustworthy manner, the signed approval was mailed to me in mid-July, 2005. All that remained now was to begin the fun stuff – the actual data collection.
Building the Foundations of a Classroom Community

This year’s inquiry project asked students to choose some aspect of their present school, home, church, or neighborhood environment that, in their opinion, needed to be changed. The educational goals for their inquiry included an improvement in critical thinking and decision-making, reflective and persuasive writing, and oral presentations with a focus on confidence building. Personal goals included improvement of cooperative group skills, as well as interpersonal communication, time management, and self-efficacy.

To start off my study, I devoted ten to fifteen minutes of class time for the first two weeks of school to setting the tone of, and building the foundation for, the classroom as a community of learners. The construction of such a concept was based on collaboration, not only between the students themselves but also between the students and teacher (Olson, 2003). I referred to Alfie Kohn’s definition of a learning community and perceived my classroom as:

- a place in which students feel cared about and are encouraged to care about each other. They experience a sense of being valued and respected; the children matter to one another and to the teacher…they feel connected to each other; they are part of an ‘us.’ And as a result of all this, they feel safe in their class, not only physically, but emotionally. (Kohn, 1996, p. 101)
To facilitate this in Room 204, I included class meetings. On the second day of school, we held a whole class meeting in a discussion format in order to develop the procedures and rules for our classroom. We agreed to be respectful of each other by not allowing name-calling or putdowns and by having only one person talk at a time when we had class meetings. We decided no one would be laughed at or teased. Finally, we said that the decision to share personal information during journal time was optional. The meeting format established guidelines for the group (the students) and gave them ownership rather than having classroom boundaries imposed by an outside source (the teacher).

We held five class meetings during the period of this study. They were, for the most part, rowdy, ineffectual free-for-alls. The majority of the students would yell out their comments and ideas, even to the point of telling each other to “shut up” and jumping out of their chairs to physically silence other loud students by covering their peers’ mouths. The quieter students simply sat and watched the show. At every meeting we held, I had to repeatedly stop the meeting and restate that only one person should speak at a time and that voting was conducting by raising hands and not simply everyone shouting at once. I constantly had to remind the class of our agreed upon guidelines of respect. As the school year progressed and students’ behavior did not change during our meetings, I decided to stop allotting classroom time to the activity.
On the third day of school, I distributed the parent/guardian consent forms to the students for signatures. I explained to the students that they would have the opportunity to participate in a study about how students learn in different situations, specifically by researching topics that they could pick themselves. We read the consent form together as a class. I told them that the information from the study would be written into a book that would be bound and put into a library. The students were very excited and were curious to know who would see this book and if they were going to be famous. I explained that I would be using pseudonyms instead of their names so that people would not really recognize them individually in the write up. They didn’t question the whole subject any further and returned the signed forms without any comments.

During the first week of school, I administered a written survey to the students in order to get some background information about their experiences with choice both in and out of school. Note there were only twelve responses even though there were thirteen participants in the study. The thirteenth student did not come to my class until the following week and was not yet part of the study at the time of this survey. The survey consisted of fifteen questions. The student responses are tallied in Table 1.
### Table 1

**Pre-Study Survey: Student Choice**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Not Sure</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Almost always</th>
<th>Always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1: I choose the clothing that I wear.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: I choose who I hang out with.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3: I choose the food I eat.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4: I choose when I go to bed and when I get up.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5: I choose my own music.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6: I choose the movies/videos I watch.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7: I feel my choices are respected at home.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8: I feel my choices are respected at school.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9: I feel that what I say is important to my teachers.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10: I am able to choose what I read in school.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11: I help my teacher develop tests and quizzes in school.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12: We have class meetings in my classes at school.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13: I am able to choose my own projects at school.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14: I am able to share with my teachers my music, artwork, and other things that interest me.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15: I am a member of a student committee.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When I administered the pre-study survey, I learned that students’ familiarity with student-run committees, class meetings, and other venues for student voice was practically nonexistent. I used this information as a springboard for class discussion. I gave the students a reading from the book *Teens on Trial: Young People Who Challenged the Law – and Changed Your Life* (Jacobs, 2000) that examined a court case involving teens and their school dress code. The students were adamant in their reactions.

“We have stupid dress codes,” Mark declared.

“Yeah!” agreed Debbie. “If our parents like what we are wearing then it shouldn’t be a problem. Why don’t they buy us our clothes if they don’t like it?”

“I want to change the dress code,” said Angela. I asked her how she thought that could happen.

“I don’t know,” Angela responded. “The student body has no say in what we are not allowed to wear, like flip flop, or pjs, or anything the teachers have a problem with. We can’t help it that the stores I shop at have those clothes. No one has the right to tell us that we can’t wear certain things. This is how we are.”

Danny piped in, “Yeah, because the reasons they say we can’t wear this or that are bulls**t for real. It’s retarded to say boys can’t wear baggy pants to school because what if every pair of pants we own are baggy? Plus, if you’re used to it, then put on some booty huggers to school, you would feel uncomfortable and we have the right to express ourselves.”
I saw our discussion as a perfect time to connect what we read and what we were saying to the change projects. The students’ sharing led to an examination of our own current student code of conduct that considered violations of the school’s dress code as causes for detention and suspension. I asked them if they ever heard of students being part of a group that helped write the code of conduct and dress code. No student was ever part of any student committee to establish or change codes for the school. I explained to the students that rather than complaining about the school’s dress code, perhaps they could start a student committee as a project. The majority of the students rallied around this idea with further comments and examples of their own previous experiences with the school dress code, and the seed appeared planted for future student inquiry.

I also conducted my first student interview during this early period of the school year. I chose Cindy from the group of participants. Cindy was a lively student who was constantly jumping out of her chair in class to get up and dance. She usually didn’t raise her hand when she had something to say in class, but chose to yell out – usually loudly! She laughed easily and loved to lean back in her seat to kick her legs up in the air. In short, Cindy exuded energy and was passionate in her beliefs about things we discussed in class. I met with her during a free period to ask her ten questions that focused on her feelings regarding self-direction and research projects.
Cindy shared that she did like investigating things on her own, particularly things that interested her, such as music. She said, “If I’m curious about it, I don’t want to hold back because if I do I’m never going to get my answers.” Her statement resonated what I read in the research literature: that interest is considered a key component in motivating students (Glassman, 2001; McCombs, 1991; Schiefele, 1991; Tobias, 1994; Vygotsky, 1997).

Cindy also said that she enjoyed working on projects, and preferably with her friends. Her reasons for her preferences reflected the social learning theories of Vygotsky who believed, “In any heterogeneous group of children, there will be an opportunity for a more capable child to assist a child who is academically less able (Dixon-Krauss, 1996, p. 79). Cindy stated:

I like working with my friends ‘cause then it’s like if I don’t know something and I miss it, they’ll catch it and tell me, and the same thing for them. I’d rather work with others ‘cause I’m very nice and last year I was working with Jenny and Sarah and I was smart and just wanted to help them. I already knew I was passing the year, but I wanted to help them get their grades up so they could pass. I’d help and tutor them.”

Cindy’s answers to the interview questions confirmed for me that the inquiry projects were the way to go in my class. I felt optimistic that the students could have fun choosing and self-directing their change projects, and I was eager to get them started.
I also began using cooperative games and team building activities during the first two weeks of class to reinforce the classroom as community concept. We needed to develop the skills to work together, to break down any barriers of bias, miscommunication, and hierarchy. Cooperative games and team building activities move individuals from independent problem solving to a more collective mindset because the group assumes ownership for success (Fletcher, 2002). My hope was that the time spent in building this basis for our work together would be an investment that would yield big rewards as the school year unfolded.

I started on the very first day of school. It was a very hot 98 degrees in my room by the afternoon. After the students filled out their information cards and made nametags for themselves, we did a team building activity called The Right Family from Project 540 (see Appendix H). Standing in a circle, the students listened as I read the story of The Right Family. Every time the words “right” or “left” were read, the students passed the markers they used for writing their nametags to the person on the appropriate side next to them. Students appeared to have fun with the activity because they laughed and joked as they participated, but they were sluggish. It could have been the heat, or perhaps the transition back to school. Students got confused with their right and left. When they had to pass to the right, several passed to the left, and vice versa.
As the activity continued, Angela asked, “What is the point of doing this?” I explained to her and the class that this and other games we’d be playing in this class for the next two weeks developed us as a team. Steve asked to no one in particular, “I want to do work. Aren’t we gonna do any work?” Even though he questioned the activity, he continued to participate.

Over the next six days, we did several other activities of this type, including the Line Up By Your Birthday (Appendix I) and the Human Knot (Appendix J). All the activities were successful despite the daily average heat index in our room of around 97 degrees. The students completely bought into the team building and worked on tasks with enjoyment, laughing together as they worked. I was very impressed how they problem solved, how natural leaders emerged, and how they worked together. Even Danny, who said the first day that he “hates” school, fully participated in every activity enthusiastically. I felt very happy that the class had started off this way and I felt hopeful for what was to come.

The observation notes I recorded in my field log over the first few weeks of school are reflected in the following journal entry. It is a composite of all the students’ responses to our team building activities and is written through Pete’s eyes, one of the students in the group. It conveys the mixed feelings the students expressed as we moved from the games into the foundational work of the inquiry projects.
Okay ‘Til Now – September 13, 2005 – Pete’s Journal

Mrs. Bowen’s Language Arts class is awesome! It seems like all we’ve done since the beginning of school is play games and other fun stuff. Like she had us do this Human Knot thing where we all had to stand in a circle and hold hands. Well, not hold hands like regular, you know, like we were goin’ out or something, but we had to put our left hand in the circle and grab somebody’s left hand, and then put our right hand in the circle and grab someone’s right hand. We turned into one big knot and we had to figure out how to untie ourselves. I was laughing so hard I almost fell down! Cindy started telling everybody what to do, but that was no good; we just got tangled up more. Then Danny jumped in and everybody listened to him and we got all straightened out ‘cause we all worked together. That was like the fifth time we’ve done that Human Knot thing and each time we do it better and better, so it’s all good.

Well, at least I thought it was until lately. Mrs. Bowen gave each of us a brand new journal book and we’re supposed to write in it. I hate to write. Mrs. Bowen talked to us about doin’ some kind of project that would change stuff, like in school or at home or church or our neighborhood. We had to talk about how we’ve made choices about stuff in the past, like in school or with our friends. She said we were gonna read stories about other kids that made changes to stuff they didn’t like, like things that they thought were wrong in the world and everything.
Like, one story was about some girl who had anorexia and she had to go to the hospital and when she got out she started a support group at her school for other kids that might have the same problem. Some girl started a SADD group at her school because a drunk driver killed one of her friends. Where does Mrs. Bowen find all these losers? Like there was this boy who sold yellow ribbons to fund some teen suicide prevention program. Another story was about a girl who started her own store with clothes that people donated, and she gives them away to people on welfare. The longest story was about a whole class of kids in Utah that started some big nuclear toxic waste cleanup thing. They even went to the state government with that one! Who cares about Utah anyway?

Worse than reading these stupid stories was having to write in our journals when we’re done, like telling how we felt about the stories and if we could see ourselves doin’ some of these same kinds of things. I couldn’t relate to the stories at all. What do I care if other people have problems? I don’t have time to get all up into somebody else’s grill...I got enough problems of my own. What other people do is their business. I got other things to worry about, like in math today, we had this big test and I know I failed it. My mom is gonna ground me for sure and probably take my cell...
Opportunities to Look Inward and Outward

The Journals and Readings

I wanted the students to consider, through discourse and reflective journaling, just how much of their life narrative has been one of their own choosing. For example, their choices in school have played a big part in their level of success. If they made the choice to disengage, they missed out on some of the material and experiences that could have enriched them as learners and as people. Rather than approach life from the perspective of, “I can’t help it” or “I don’t know what to do,” I wanted the students to consider how they could empower themselves and become problem solvers. I wanted them to think about what they would like to do differently, and why — or why not. My goal was for the students to connect with their feelings about their experiences with choice in the past, for I believed that from this emotive space would rise their passion to make changes to their futures.

To this end, and as a way to more formally introduce the change project idea to the students, I gave each child a new composition book to write their reflective responses to a variety of short readings from *The Kid’s Guide to Social Action* (Lewis, 1991). Each reading focused on a student of approximately the same age as my eighth graders. All the stories pertained to the changes made by these students when they experienced something in their lives that caused them to reach out beyond themselves – a loved one who had breast cancer, a friend killed
by a drunk driver, an eating disorder shared by other peers, a relative’s debilitating depression. Just a few of the students’ responses to these very serious situations ranged from starting a peer support group at school to bringing a chapter of SADD to their neighborhood to arranging a fundraiser for cancer.

I gave readings to my students every other day for two weeks. After handing out the day’s story, we either read it together as a class or the students read it silently. I wrote journal writing prompts on the board for them to respond to in their journals, asking such things as, “Is the change project in today’s story one you might consider doing yourself?” or “Can you relate this story to something you might try to do?” The idea was not that my students had to experience the same situation as in the story, but that they might connect to the idea that the person in the story opted to take action rather than remain helpless in the face of such dire circumstances. I wanted them to see, through these stories, that others their age had gone beyond surviving to thriving, and to reaching out beyond themselves to benefit others with their experiences.

The social consciousness that I hoped would be raised from the readings was slow to materialize. Students did not appear to connect emotionally or intellectually with the students in the stories. When I read through the students’ responses in their journals, the general consensus was one of, “This has nothing to do with me.”
For example, we read a story about a fourteen-year-old girl who struggled with anorexia. I chose this story for the students to read because I regularly observed the struggle of some of my students in relation to eating issues. I also knew that 33% of reported cases of eating disorders start between the ages of 11-15 and is not limited to only girls (http://www.anad.org). The student in our story overcame her battle with this disorder and started a support group for other students at her school who suffered from the same or similar problems. After we completed the story, I asked the students to consider if they could see themselves starting something similar in their school or neighborhood. A sample of the student responses reads:

- **Mike:** I would like to start a Mountain Dew group. We would meet three times a week and have an all you can drink. This is like a fan club.
- **Pete:** I can’t relate to this at all in any way or form.
- **Cathy:** I wouldn’t start this cause I don’t know what it’s like and can’t relate and won’t understand them as good. I wouldn’t know what to say to them. I wouldn’t really understand their problems ‘cause I never went through anything like this and never really thought about it.
- **Tammy:** This problem (anorexia) doesn’t have nothing to do with me. I guess anorexia doesn’t interfere with me and anyone I know. I am a healthy girl and proud of it.
I thought that it was just the topic of this story that was a problem for the students, but the majority responded similarly to a story about teenage depression, to one about a girl whose friend was killed by a drunk driver, and to another about a boy whose mother died of breast cancer. I did not just pick these stories out of some sense of morbidity. Rather, in the few short years I’ve taught, some students in my classes have experienced situations similar to these stories and I’ve witnessed their confusion and sadness. I didn’t see these stories as a huge stretch for my students since almost all of them had shared horrendous stories with me about their own personal lives: stories of loved ones shot, on drugs, in jail, or dead from AIDS, stories of abandonment by birth parents, loss of a sibling, or of a close relative fighting in Iraq. These students had seen tough times and were truly survivors. Yet I perceived that the students were not seeing beyond the literal aspects of each of the readings. The majority of their journal entries reflected their idea that they had to be just like the students in the stories and they were not. In fact, the class discussions and the journal entries all reflected an overall lack of empathetic response. After seven separate stories, I stopped subjecting the students to reading stories about change projects they obviously were not eager to pursue and tried another tack.
The WebQuest

*Figure 1.* The item depicted is the homepage of the Change Project WebQuest.

In preparation for my study, I had spent considerable time during the summer of 2005 developing a WebQuest for the students to explore once the school year started (http://teacherweb.com). A WebQuest is an inquiry-oriented research task that uses computer technology to link students to Internet resources specifically pre-selected by the teacher (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2002). In the case of my Bowen Create Change WebQuest, the Internet

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resources consisted of twenty-three sites from which students could choose a research area that interested them. These included philanthropically oriented organizations on a local, national, and international level. The WebQuest was up and running by the time we reserved the school’s computer lab in early October. Since the readings seemed to be unfertile ground from which the students could grow their research, the WebQuest was the next step in moving the students to select a change project of their own. I reserved the computer lab in the library for a day when we had an extended eighty-minute block period and took the students to the lab to explore the WebQuest. The following poem provides a composite of the students’ responses to using this inquiry tool.

Poem: Part I. WebQuest Exploration With The Students

Cool! We’re goin’ to the library!

Remember, we walk quietly through the halls.

Bring your journals, bring something to write with.

Quiet!

Can we sit anywhere? What are we gonna do?

Jimmy, sit here…

Please don’t change your screen background.

We’re going to go to many web links today that might help you find a topic for your change project.

I’m not sure what you mean by a change project.
(What has he been hearing me say for two weeks?)

Here is your WebQuest handout; follow along…click on Explorer…make a list of sites that interest you.

_I don’t know how to write stuff down._

(Will my teacher glare strike her dead or only maim her?)

_I don’t have a pen._

(Will my teacher glare become grooved into my brow?)

_Were we supposed to bring our journals?_

(Breathe, breathe, breathe.)

(Jim is just sitting there again with his head in his hands.)

(Debbie is playing with Tammy’s hair.)

_I’m confused._

_These sites are stupid._

_I found one!_

_I’m calling Wal-Mart and asking them to give me water to send to Africa._

(What could he be looking at? Save the Children! How does Wal-Mart get into that picture?)

How will you pay to get it shipped there, Steve?

_I’ll ask my mom for money._

_My mom gives me money for anything I want!_

_Shut up, Mark, you’re a liar._
You shut up.

No, you shut up.

It will cost a lot of money to ship water to Africa.

Why? Water only costs a buck at the Dollar Store.

Everything’s a dollar at the Dollar Store, you idiot.

Hey, did ya ever see that commercial for the Dollar Store?

Mrs. Bowen, I found something...

Good, Jenn. What do you have?

PenPals!

I’m gonna do that too!

Me too!

My cousin used to have a penpal who sent her money from, I don’t know, some country.

(I give up.)

Part II. WebQuest Exasperation With A Colleague

Maybe I didn’t supply enough scaffolding.

They were the same way for me last year. They can’t handle anything creative.

Maybe I’m not being clear.

Go down the seventh grade hall and see where they come from. All the seats in rows. The C tracks are taught with packets. It’s all they know.

Maybe the kids don’t really know how to make the leap.
They just don’t get it. They don’t know how to think.

Maybe things will go better with the school walkthrough.

Maybe if I try harder.

Maybe they just need another chance…

The WebQuest really did not prove a successful source from which the students wanted to select their change project. A review of the student journals at the end of the lab time revealed bits of web addresses, lots of doodles, and mostly empty pages. Now I felt I was caught in a bind. Five weeks of school had already passed by and still the students had not chosen an area of interest from which to investigate and implement a change project. None of the readings had intrigued them. The WebQuest hadn’t captivated them. If I selected a topic for them, I would be defeating what I perceived as the goals of student self-selection and self-direction. I saw my role as guide (Olson, 2003); to interfere with the students’ process would usurp this position. As it was, I struggled with the fact that I had set the parameters of the change project by choosing the readings and the twenty-three sites on the WebQuest. Still, the student apathy could not continue and only one more hopeful source of student inspiration remained.
The School Walkthrough

Reflective Memo: School Walk-Through
Wednesday, October 5, 2005

For several weeks the students have been reading and journaling about other teens who have initiated change projects in their community. The student response to these readings was lukewarm at best. Many of the students said that the readings had nothing to do with their lives and they could not relate to the topics. Consequently, many students were unable to think up a change project of their own. The scaffolding of teacher-selected readings did little to nothing to motivate students to self-select their own project from the sample suggestions.

This week, the students investigated a WebQuest in which twenty-three teacher-selected sites linked to national and international organizations offered suggested change projects for teens. Once again, the students were unable to connect what they saw on the WebQuest to an idea they could use for a change project of their own. My assumption was that the suggested projects were too broad and expansive for the students to connect the topics of the sites to their own lives. Consequently, the majority of the students could not understand how the suggested projects were ones that they would be able to complete. The scaffolding of teacher-
selected links, again, did little to nothing to motivate students to self-select their own projects from the pool of suggestions.

Today, however, the students completed a school walk-through in order to come up with change project ideas. Students considered the physical environment of the school both inside and outside. We went through the hallways, stairways, library, cafeteria, boys’ and girls’ bathrooms, auditorium, and around the school grounds. We stopped periodically and often to take notes in our reflection journals.

Before we began our walk, I asked the class how many of the students had attended our school since sixth grade. Just about everyone’s hand went up in affirmation. So I explained to them that it was human nature to not see things as clearly when they see the same thing day after day. Since they were in 8th grade, this meant that they have seen the same school setting for roughly 300 days. They were so accustomed to seeing the school as it is that they may have dulled their ability to see it as it might become. I asked them to consider an egg that I was holding. Taken at face value, it looked like a plain white egg, nothing extraordinary. However, when I cracked the raw egg into a bowl, the whole appearance of this plain white egg changed. Now it held the potential to become an omelet, an egg salad sandwich, or even a beautiful cake. I asked them to think about that as they walked through the school. “Don’t just look at the
“face value of your school,” I asked them. “Look at the school with new eyes, as if you were a new student here, and think what your school could become.” Then we began our walk.

The comments I overheard were very astute. “This is disgusting!” one student exclaimed when he looked at the dirt in the hallway.

“I never knew this hallway was green!” said another student. Note this was not a newly painted hallway, but one that had been the same color for years.

“I never saw THIS before!” one student said, looking at the blank wall in the stairwell he used everyday.

“We should have a Clean The School Day!” was the idea of one of the girls as she noted in her journal how dirty the floors were in the hallway. Other students, hearing her, piped in, “Yeah!”

One student who has been resistant to the change project idea since the beginning, said, “Well, I think I know what I’m doing for my change project!” and scribbled lots of writing in his journal.

Another student who had also been resistant to the change project idea, however, remained staunchly unmoved. He wouldn’t write any notes in his journal. “Nobody ever listens to me, so what’s the point?” he complained. Even when I tried to coax him into thinking he could accomplish even a small change, he still balked.
Yet another student, although he made notes, commented, “This stuff won’t matter because we won’t be here next year anyway.” When I told him that he would be making positive changes to his school that would live on past his time here, he just shrugged his shoulders. A legacy didn’t seem very important to him.

However, the majority of the students seemed excited about doing a project that involved changing something in their school. Their enthusiasm suggested that when a project goal was something more closely related to their own lives, they were more motivated to participate in selecting, and even thinking about, a change project. Because the focus was closer to their own reality, the self-selection appeared to be easier for the students compared to when the suggested topics were more world related. It seems as though the students did not see themselves as part of the larger world context and therefore did not see the world at large as something relevant to their lives, but school was more immediate and more accessible to an idea for change.

**Developing the Action Plan**

The school walkthrough was the impetus to get the change projects rolling. Of the thirteen students, eleven chose projects that involved changes to the school building and grounds. Of the remaining two students, one decided to
ask his mother to give him money for a donation to a homeless shelter, while the other student decided to start a petition to allow skateboards on school property.

The next step was to draw up action plans, listing all the steps necessary to implement the change projects. I met with each student individually to discuss their ideas and get them started on making the lists of steps they would need to complete their project. The students worked several days on developing their plans. They dialoged with each other in pairs and small groups as they wrote and exchanged drafts. The students gave each other suggestions about how to make their action plans stronger, then presented the action plans orally to the whole class for feedback, thus fulfilling the district’s requirement for an oral presentation. They used the plans as springboards to drafting persuasive essays. The persuasive essays satisfied the district’s portfolio writing requirement and the action plans met the requirement for a narrative procedure-writing piece. I was proud of how the students handled the responsibility for these tasks, since I had to miss over a week of writing time with them due to the death of my father-in-law during this period. When I returned from my bereavement leave, the majority of the students had their action plans completed and a solid working draft of their persuasive papers ready for me to read. I interpreted the momentum of the students as a positive indicator that they were ready to start implementing their action plans.
Over the next three weeks, students worked on putting the steps of the action plan into motion. I provided several class periods for them to do whatever they needed to get their change project done. The students had access to the classroom telephone, to phone books, to the computer lab and library. They were able to join with other peers who were working on similar projects. I did not interfere with their process, but I was available to answer any questions they had, as well as pose questions to them that guided their steps in the direction their action plan had them heading. For example, since the majority of the students selected projects that involved making a physical change to the school, they needed to obtain permission from the principal before they raised money for supplies, contacted stores, or enlisted the help of relatives. The students thought that they could just go down to the office spontaneously and talk to the principal at any time, but I encouraged them to not only make an appointment, but to choose two or three representatives to present the action plans at one time for his review. I also prompted them to think about what would be needed at such a meeting and we discussed as a class how one goes about meeting with an administrator or any other person who is in a position of authority. However, inability to obtain a meeting time with an administrator was, according to eight of the thirteen students, the primary reason they ultimately did not continue in their projects.
As I looked through my field log and reflected on the students’ work, I realized that the majority of the students were at a point in their projects where they could start working on their implementations in small groups. I thought about my earlier interview with Cindy and how much she enjoyed working with her friends. I also thought about the research literature I had read that supported the social components of learning (Brown, 2004; Dixon-Krauss, 1996; Gaughin, 2001; Glassman, 2001; Katz & Chard, 1989; Vygotsky, 1978). Since so many of the students were doing projects that involved changes to the school, and since so many of the projects were similar, I decided to group the students together by project instead of keeping them separate and working individually. The students responded happily when I told them they could work in pairs and groups. They immediately grouped together in twos and threes, except for Jim and Pete. When I spoke to them individually, they both told me that they preferred to work alone so I did not interfere with their choice.

However, to think that the students enthusiastically embraced class time as an opportunity to dig into their change projects would be a mistake. Jim used class time to write a petition allowing skateboards on school property. The petition was the first step on his action plan needed to implement his project. An avid skateboarder, he argued the case in his persuasive paper that bikes were allowed on school property so boards should also be permitted. One day, while he was working on his petition, the principal came into our classroom to see what we
were working on, and he chose Jim’s petition for one of his observations. He told Jim that other students in the past had tried to get permission for skateboards to be brought to school, but hadn’t gotten very far with it.

After that day, Jim stopped working on his project and just sat in class with his head down on his desk on days we used class time for change projects. I tried to entice him into continuing with his petition despite what the principal had said, but he told me, “What’s the point?” I offered other suggestions for projects. Jim owned a pet gecko named Fred who he talked about a lot in class. I thought maybe Jim might like to do a project involving animals, but he told me no. He said that nothing else interested him. His friends, Mark, Steve, and Mike, also tried to talk him into working with them, but he refused. Unfortunately, my idea that by pushing him I infringed on his right to choose kept him in his place of nonparticipation.

Dawn and Debbie worked through two class periods and wrote letters to two teachers asking for help with their Clean the School Day project. They also used one whole class period at the guidance office trying to get an appointment with an administrator for permission. After these initial efforts, Dawn and Debbie spent the rest of the change project class periods playing with each other’s hair, writing poetry and notes to each other, and exchanging lip-glosses. For the majority of the students, opportunities to work in class on implementing their
action plans, journaling progress notes, or using school resources was just time spent socializing.

I wrote the following pastiche to reflect the voices and actions of the students in just one day’s class period. A pastiche is a narrative form that interweaves bits of data into a composite whole that “directs the readers’ attention to multiple realities” and provides a “structural framework of comparison” (Ely, et al., 1997, p. 97). My pastiche portrays the students’ overall approach to the self-direction of their project during the three weeks I provided class time for change project work.

**Pastiche: Students Under the Influence of Unbridled Freedom**

Pete: *wrestling, taking the bus to wrestling, 45 minutes to go...this is hard...I don’t know what to do.*

Mike: *wrestling, taking the bus to wrestling, give me Mountain Dew, Mountain Dew, Mountain Dew*

Cathy: *laughing, laughing, Cindy*

Cindy: *laughing, laughing, Cathy*

Tammy: *loves Steve, Tammy and Steve, Mrs. Steve, T&S*

Steve: *loves Tammy, Steve and Tammy, She’s my honey*

Mark: *boring, boring, I’m goin’ to the lav*

Jim: *(staring at his paper) “I don’t know what to do.”*

Debbie: *just drawing circles oooooooooo
All students appeared bored and disengaged. Unless I went to them individually and asked, “What’s the next step on your action plan? What do you need to do to get your action plan done?” they did nothing on their own in class. Clearly, I could not continue to devote class time to the change projects. As the Thanksgiving break was fast approaching, I used the upcoming holiday as the demarcation for in class work and told the students that for the time remaining they would be working on their own at home. They had until the second week of December to complete their change projects.

**Actively Pursuing Inertia**

My school operated on a six-day cycle, meaning that each school day was counted numerically from one through six, and then the cycle began again. Days two, three, five and six were regular full academic days, but on days one and four the students participated in an activity period of their choosing. These activities ran the gamut from building rocket models to silent reading and from basketball to knitting. Teachers decided what activity they wanted to supervise and students selected the activity in which they wanted to participate.

Anticipating that the students would, at some point, not be given any more class time to work on their projects due to other curriculum constraints, I initiated an activity period to support the students’ endeavors. I wanted to provide opportunities for students to use the school facilities that they might not have had access to at home, namely my input and school technology resources.
To my disappointment, only three students out of the one hundred and nine in all my sections signed up for the change project activity. No students came to me before or after school for help on their projects. The change project activity did not run and I was assigned to cover another activity. I assumed two things: either the students were sufficiently able to work on the projects without me and did not need my help, or the students were not working on their projects and had no need for my help. I very soon found out that, in most cases, the latter was the reason.

When the second week of December arrived, we scheduled class-time for the students to present the results of their action plan implementation. It was not essential that the students were successful in achieving the goal of their plans, but that they had taken the necessary steps they had outlined in their action plan and, when they encountered roadblocks, they sought ways to problem-solve. The following table reveals the results of the students’ attempts to implement their action plans.
### Table 2

*Change Project Action Plan Implementation Results*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Change Project</th>
<th>Actions Completed</th>
<th>Plans to Continue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jim</td>
<td>skateboards to school</td>
<td>wrote a petition, did not circulate it</td>
<td>no plans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dawn</td>
<td>Clean the School Day</td>
<td>wrote letters to two teachers asking for help, tried to make appt. with principal w/o success</td>
<td>no plans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>money to animal shelter</td>
<td>sold some shirts and a jacket to his cousin for $30</td>
<td>look in the phone book for shelter address, no date set for this action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debbie</td>
<td>Clean the School Day</td>
<td>wrote letters to two teachers asking for help, tried to make appt. with principal w/o success</td>
<td>call Wal-Mart for supply donations, no date set for this action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pete</td>
<td>paint the hallways and lockers</td>
<td>Dad will get paint, called Home Depot for materials donations</td>
<td>clean uncle’s basement for more materials, no date set for this action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tammy</td>
<td>paint the school</td>
<td>called Wal-Mart for donations, number was busy</td>
<td>get school dimensions, no date set for this action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angela</td>
<td>paint the school</td>
<td>tried to make appt. with principal w/o success</td>
<td>no plans</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When I reflected on the results the students presented, I was disappointed to realize that only five of the thirteen students in the study actually had plans to continue with their change projects. Even though the students who did plan to continue had no solid dates set for continuing their action plans, they at least had the intention to do so. However, they constituted only 45% of the class. I needed to make a decision about how to continue with the projects.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Change Project</th>
<th>Actions Completed</th>
<th>Plans to Continue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tina</td>
<td>paint a mural in the 8th grade hall</td>
<td>tried to make appt. with principal w/o success</td>
<td>no plans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cindy</td>
<td>paint the 8th grade wing</td>
<td>picked colors, asked a teacher to supervise, tried to make appt. with principal w/o success</td>
<td>no plans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danny</td>
<td>new football uniforms</td>
<td>tried to make appt. with principal w/o success</td>
<td>get catalogue from gym teacher, no date set for this action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>new sign for front of school</td>
<td>asked grandma to bake stuff to sell, got cost info. from Internet</td>
<td>no plans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cathy</td>
<td>paint the school</td>
<td>tried to make appt. with principal w/o success</td>
<td>no plans</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I decided to administer the written post-study survey in order to get a better sense of the students’ feelings towards their projects even though it appeared that the students were stalled in fully implementing their change project action plans. All thirteen students completed the written survey. While twelve of the thirteen students said that picking their own projects was preferable to teacher assigned projects or to taking tests, nine of the thirteen answered that working on projects was, well, too much work. Astonishingly, nine of the thirteen said that these change projects had made them feel successful when, in fact, not one student had successfully completed even the most basic steps on his or her action plan. All thirteen students stopped work on their projects when they hit a wall, whether it was reattempting to schedule appointments, calling back phone numbers that were busy, or even setting specific dates to take their next action plan step. There seemed to be a disconnect between how the students responded to the survey and what they actually had completed with their action plans. The results of the post-study survey are reflected in Table 3.
### Table 3

*Post-Study Survey: Inquiry Projects*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Not Sure</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Almost always</th>
<th>Always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1: I enjoyed picking my own project.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: I feel I did a lot of thinking to complete my project.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3: I think doing my own project was complicated.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4: I would rather have the teacher assign a project.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5: I would rather just take a test than do a project.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6: Doing a project is too much work.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7: Doing my project make me feel successful.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8: I feel my school is a better place because of my project.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9: I had trouble doing my project.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10: I learned a lot about myself doing my project.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11: I learned to think differently about things while I was doing my project.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12: I feel more respected by my peers because of my project.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13: I think I work better with people because of my project.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14: I think I will do another project like this in the future.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15: I learned how to solve problems by doing my project.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
After the survey, I also conducted a second interview with Cindy. There was a confusing disconnection in her answers to the interview questions similar to the responses of her classmates on the post-study survey. Cindy stated that what made the project interesting for her was that she “got to change something in my school” when she actually didn’t. She also said in the future she would do a “different project because there are so many things that need changing.” Yet, she answered the question, “Would you like to explore another research project? Why, or why not?” with the statement, “No, I would stick to my same project because it’s a really good one to do.”

Cindy did tell me that she was surprised that “we were really going to put these projects into action.” She said, “I learned that I could actually go through with something without messing it up. I actually asked my hip-hop teacher for help with the project.” Her statements suggest the sense of ownership and pride similar to what teacher researchers found when they implemented inquiry projects in their classroom (Brown, 2004; Whitin and Whitin, 1997). Even though Cindy did not complete her action plan, she indicated that she had enjoyed her process when she told me, “I learned it can be fun to think about something and put it into steps.”

Still, after careful consideration of the students’ implementation results and their survey responses, I called a class meeting. I explained that the overwhelming majority of students had done little to nothing on their action plans.
I told the students that they were free to stop working on their projects, but that if they chose to continue on their own, I certainly encouraged them to do so. However, I made it clear that no further work was required. Over the next two weeks, up to holiday break, no students ever approached me about continuing their projects on their own. In fact, after this class meeting, we never discussed the change projects again.

Needless to say, I felt sad and disappointed over what I perceived as the failure of my study. I had hoped that an opportunity to pursue something that students chose themselves would be heartily received and enthusiastically explored by the students. I chastised myself for perhaps not providing enough structure and for not being a better facilitator, but then struggled with what I saw as a major focus of my study: that is, would the students be able to self-motivate their learning once they made their change project selection. I was disheartened because I perceived that the students had not exhibited growth in their ability to problem-solve, had not expanded their critical thinking skills, and had not shown advancement in their ability to work together. In short, I felt that choice and inquiry, at least in the way I had presented it to my class, did little, if anything, to improve the students’ learning.

So how can I explain what the students did when I was absent from school following the death of my father-in-law? The following memo from the school’s guidance counselor details their behind-the-scenes actions on my behalf:
Your students wanted to do something to show how much they appreciate you as their teacher. They were especially concerned because they knew about the death of your father-in-law and that you have not been feeling well and how you always care about them. Tina, Tammy, Debbie, Angela, Cathy, Dawn, and Steve came to me with their plans. They wanted to have a party for you when you returned to school from your bereavement leave. They chose a day for the party when they had block period, knowing that they could set up Room 204 while you were at team meeting in another room. On their own, this group collected donations for soda, pizza, and a cake from the rest of the class. They came to me to ask about donations for paperware. They also wanted to purchase a stuffed bear and asked me to help. The students approached the secretary and the principal about arranging this party and the money they collected was brought down to the office for safekeeping.

During the planning phase, they also spoke to me about having music and saying or writing things about you and how much they appreciate you. They used their activity periods to work in my office to write a rap song and a poem for you.

On the day of the party, boys and girls came in early with their goodies and bags after collaborating with another teacher on your floor to store their stuff in her room. They went down to the kitchen to talk with the cafeteria ladies about storing and heating the pizza in time for the party. They obtained passes from my
office in order to have twenty minutes from their first period class to set up your
room for the party. They also handmade invitations to administration to invite the
principal and vice-principal and me to attend this party in your honor.

You can be very proud of how the students in Section Y handled them-
selves in planning this party for you.

Figure 2. The item depicted is the memo from guidance office that details the students’ arrangements for a
class party.

In my study, I wanted to see how choice and inquiry could impact student
learning. However, I realize now that by mandating a change project, I actually
limited the students’ choice to pursue something that really mattered to them.
Changing something was really my agenda, not theirs. Consequently, when faced
with the problems of implementing their change action plans, the projects did not
really matter enough to them to preserve through adversity.

Did I fail? Did they? Perhaps the students did not repaint the school, or
send money to Africa, or get a new, flashy sign for the school’s front lawn. They
did, however, decide as a whole class to show their love to their teacher and they
problem-solved together to overcome the barriers they encountered to making that
expression a reality. The students in Room 204 soared on the day they threw my
return party for me. They were so proud of themselves and what they had
accomplished. Certainly there was a great deal to be learned in the “failure” of the
change projects as they were designed and implemented and in the profound success encountered in the students’ move to action to show their teacher their appreciation.
METHODS OF ANALYSIS

The purpose of my study was to examine if and how choice and inquiry impacted student learning. While my field log was certainly thick with participant observations of our classroom activities, I believed the best source of information was found in the voices of the students themselves in the form of their own writing. Therefore, I frequently reread the data I included in my field log, especially focusing on the students’ responses to written surveys, reflective writing prompts, and interview questions. I made notes in the margins of my field log, and then created a coding structure from my analysis (Hubbard and Power, 2003). For example, since student voice and student choice were two important areas of my study, I carefully sifted through my field log to find out how these topics were a part of my classroom environment. Wherever I found examples of student voice and student choice in my field log, I marked either an SV (student voice) or an SC (student choice) in the margins. I began developing my coding structure three weeks into my data collection, but reread and reanalyzed my notes and codes at least once a week throughout my study. While at times this analysis was a bit overwhelming and tedious, Ely, et al. (1991) states:

There is no escape. Making categories means reading, thinking, trying out tentative categories, changing them when others do a better job, checking them until the very last piece of meaningful information is categorized and, even at that point, being open to revising the categories.” (p. 145)
Once I had a month’s worth of coded data, I began analyzing the codes in order to uncover recurrent trends, patterns and/or concepts related to my study. I created an index from the categories I developed. Researchers commonly use categorizing and indexing to uncover emergent themes within data (Hubbard and Power, 2003). Themes within data can be defined (Ely, et al., 1997) as the “threads or patterns” that run through “the fabric of the whole” and the analysis of these themes is the process by which a researcher lifts them out of that fabric, piece by piece (p. 206). As a novice quilter, the analogy of threads and fabric to data analysis was one I readily understood. Piecing together my codes into a graphic organizer helped me in creating a more layered and complex picture of my data. This visual representation was a way for me to put my codes/categories into titled “bins” that aided me in my theme development (Ely, et al., 1997).

As the bigger research picture unfolded through all this information, I drafted analytic memos examining the connections between the emergent categories/codes/themes. Hubbard and Power (2003) define these memos as “a way of capturing … thought processes as you collect data and [are] beginning to think about how to present your findings to others” (p. 111). In other words, by drafting analytic memos, I took what were only words or phrases in my categories, codes, and themes and further developed them into a textual form that unified my findings. A particularly beneficial analytic memo was an analysis of the figurative language, or metaphors in my field log. According to Lakoff and
Johnson (1980), “metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action” (p. 3). In order to be a trustworthy researcher, it was important for me to look closely at the significance of figurative language in my data collection. Drafting a figurative language analytic memo helped me gain insight into the operative cultural model I brought to my study via metaphor.

I also wrote several reflective memoranda analyzing my teacher action research data from a multiplicity of perspectives. I examined the components of the traditional and progressive classroom in my data through the writings of John Dewey (1938a; Dewey, 1938b). Delpit and Dowdy (2002) provided a collection of writings through which I reflected on the cultural, linguistic, and feminist aspects of my study. Vygotsky (1978) shed light on the social constructivism of my classroom, especially in the area of knowledge acquisition. However, it was Paulo Freire (1970/2000) who really provided the strongest connections to my research, particularly in his discussion of dialogic discourse, as this so closely related to the issues of student voice and student choice in my study. Through the writing of these reflective memos, I was able to see my affiliation with the professional community that had gone before me and feel proud of the work that I had done (MacLean and Mohr, 1999).
FINDINGS

Though it cost all you have, get understanding. Proverbs 4:7

By conducting my study and analyzing the data, several interesting themes emerged. I found that students’ learning was impacted by much more than my simply providing opportunities for choice and inquiry.

Democratic Classroom Environment

In order to establish an environment in which all students feel free to take risks and make choices, students’ individual and collective voice must be respected and valued in a dialogic democratic classroom community. These are lofty terms that simply mean students actively participate together, through whole class interactive discussion, in making the decisions that shape their learning environment. They work in collaboration with their teacher and each other to develop an ownership toward their learning (Olson, 2003). This kind of environment is the antithesis of what Paulo Freire (1970/2000) called “the banking concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing” information and decisions the teacher deposits into the students (p. 72). In Freire’s banking model, students were simply empty vessels to be filled, suggesting that students were not able to make meaningful choices for themselves.

I found that the majority of the students readily welcomed and responded to opportunities to voice their opinions and feelings. Their ability to do so
respectfully, however, was not innate and required continual scaffolding from me.

For example, when analyzing survey data, I realized over 50% of the students had never participated in class meetings before our class. Their lack of background knowledge perhaps explained, in part, what happened when we tried to hold class meetings. Without having any experience with how one appropriately contributes verbally to a structured meeting, students all shouted out a once. No one individual’s voice was respected or valued because no one person could be clearly heard over the din. I also noticed that the quieter students did not speak up during the class meeting time. The students who took the leadership positions during the team building activities were the same students who spoke out the loudest during class meetings. There definitely appeared to be a hierarchy of leaders and followers.

I realized the essential element of respect in a dialogic democratic setting had to be firmly established if such discourse was to be successful. The team building activities were fundamental to fostering a whole class respect for each other in terms of sharing leadership responsibilities to solve problems. However, such cooperation did not flow from the interactive games into the dialogic democratic meeting format. Despite repeated reminders of the guidelines, students still got so excited to speak their minds during class meetings that we rarely got anything accomplished. Students shared ideas for activities, but we couldn’t arrive
at a group consensus as to how to put the ideas into action because of how the majority of students kept talking over each other.

Furthermore, just because students welcomed opportunities to express their individual and collective voice, this did not mean they made the wisest choices regarding the direction of classroom activities. When we did hold class meetings, for example, the class’s desire to have a party was invariably the topic brought to the floor, with a close second being a movie shown each Friday. From the perspective of the students’ majority vote, we could have had a party once a week with mostly movies in between. While this may have resulted in a social classroom environment, making such choices would not have ensured academic growth.

The students’ outbursts and their limited ability to make wise academic choices for themselves reminded me of John Dewey’s discussion regarding the educative experience (Dewey, 1938b). What the students exhibited when I implemented class meetings was simply the natural response of thirteen-year-old children who had little to no exposure to the democratic process. Dewey (1938b) states that while such responses are natural, they are only a “starting point” (p. 64). He continues:

There is no intellectual growth without some reconstruction, some remake, of impulses and desires in the form in which they first show themselves. The old phrase ‘stop and think’ is sound psychology. For
thinking is stoppage of the immediate manifestation of impulse until that impulse has been brought into connection with other possible tendencies to action so that a more comprehensive and coherent plan of activity is formed.” (p. 64)

In other words, at some point the students had to come to the realization that their impulsivity was not yielding the results they wanted, and subsequently stop yelling out. Yet, the majority of the students did not make this connection. They continued to shout over each other and nothing much of real academic value was accomplished. Quiet students never reconstructed their reticent behavior to become active participants. Verbose students didn’t show evidence that they saw their outbursts as unproductive.

In frustration I decided to stop providing time to hold class meetings, but that was actually as counterproductive as the students’ impulsive behavior. Only in hindsight have I considered the Vygotskian perspective of Dixon-Krauss (1996), “It is only through dialogue that a social context is established to guide the learning environment” (p. 156). The students were still learning how to negotiate their social interaction within the confines of the class meeting format I established. I wonder now how successful our meetings would have been if we had worked together to modify the ground rules when it was apparent that the initial ones were not working, especially in light of students’ development and language. Vygotsky (1978) states that speech is the means by which children
learn how to “plan, order, and control their own behavior as well as that of others” (p. 126). With an agreed-upon revamping of the meeting structure and a more sustained effort on my part in guiding the students’ dialogic negotiations, I now realize the potential of continuing classroom meetings in the future.

**Student Choice and Academic Success**

*Students need help in making the choices that can determine the success or failure of their learning.* When some students chose to cheat during two of the team building activities, they missed out on the opportunity to improve their collaborative skills with their peers. When we engaged in reading activities and the poorest readers often chose not to read, they limited the growth of their reading and comprehension proficiencies. I found that the majority of students were often short-sighted in their learning decisions. More often than not, they chose what felt good at the time, i.e., winning by cheating, sitting back and not reading, without seemingly realizing the long-term academic consequences.

When I analyzed my data, I realized the part I played in the students making these choices. Herbert Kohl (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002) writes that the way teachers present themselves to their students extends beyond the words they say. Kohl states, “The presentation of self in the classroom is a major part of the effectiveness of connecting with students and enhancing their learning” (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002, p. 151). Although I thought I was providing opportunities for them to make choices for themselves, the students, on some level, may have interpreted
my hesitancy to challenge them as a laissez faire attitude on my part, and
responded accordingly. In other words, they simply made the choices that most
thirteen-year-old students make when the teacher appears not to care.

The majority of the students exhibited similar behavior when it came to
their change projects. Journal entries revealed the students made few to no
connections beyond the literal to the readings about other teens who had
successfully completed change projects. When we worked with the WebQuest,
the students chose to explore few to none of the provided sites, or to take
advantage of teacher-provided extra help. These choices limited the scope of the
learning they could have achieved. Furthermore, because they chose to not
proceed past the initial steps in their action plans, the students did not get to the
higher order level of problem-solving and critical thinking that they would have
had they continued in their projects. Their choices from the offset determined the
success of their learning, but it was up to me to move them toward achievement.

The students needed my guidance to help them make the connections to
the readings, to the WebQuest, and to their action plans, but I did not intervene
because I thought I would be impinging on their freedom to choose. Dewey
(1938b) points out the ludicrousness of such thinking when he writes:

Why, then, even supply materials, since they are a source of some
suggestion or other? It is impossible to understand why a suggestion from
one who has a larger experience and a wider horizon should not be at least
as valid as a suggestion arising from some more or less accidental source…[it is] not for the adult to withdraw entirely. (p. 71)

I considered the things I provided as the only tools necessary to help the students steer themselves towards choosing a topic. I realize now that I would have helped them more by not abandoning them in their process.

It would have been more beneficial to them had I not allowed them the choice to give up. By doing so, I gave them what Ladson-Billings calls “permission to fail” (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002, p. 110). When I failed to demand success, I “conveyed to students that it was perfectly all right for them to stay where they were because no one, especially their teacher, expected very much from them” (Delpit and Dowdy, 2002, 117). The reality is that the students did choose – they chose to disengage from my agenda. I may have said verbally that I wanted them to succeed in implementing a change project, but I miscommunicated this to them by my own disengagement from their process.

The students needed additional scaffolding that I failed to provide. Even though research supports inquiry based on student interest (Glassman, 2001; McCombs, 1991; Tobias, 1994; Schiefele, 1991; Wang and Stiles, 1976), I restricted student choice and inquiry by limiting the topics and imposing my own program. I mistrusted the students’ ability to choose an inquiry topic on their own. Ironically, as much as I believed I valued what the students had to say, as much as I wanted them to take on the task of self-directed inquiry, I never asked them what
they might be interested in exploring. I overlooked the vital variable of the students’ authentic interests. No amount of leading the students to the proverbial wells of knowledge, i.e., the readings, etc., made them want to drink because the topics were not ones that interested them in the first place.

I could have scaffolded off of the students’ interests to make the projects more meaningful and authentic for them. This would have certainly given purpose to the work we were doing and a real opportunity for students to be active participants. Dewey (1938b) said that there is nothing more important in the democratic classroom than “the participation of the learner in the formation of the purposes which direct his activities in the learning process” (p. 67).

In reality, by selecting the change project topic, supplying the readings, and developing the WebQuest, I was perpetuating the banking concept of education as explained by Freire (1997/2000):

This is the ‘banking’ concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits. They do, it is true, have the opportunity to become collectors or cataloguers of the things they store. But in the last analysis, it is the people themselves who are filed away through the lack of creativity, transformation, and knowledge in this (at best) misguided system. (p. 72)
Self-perception and motivation

Students’ perceptions of themselves as learners strongly impacted their motivation to pursue self-directed learning. Students in this study were well aware what track they were in and that it was not ‘A’ track. They made this clear to me in our class discussions. Some students said they were in a lower track because they needed extra help and didn’t understand school things as well as higher track students. They did not consider their real extenuative factors such as being new to the school, living with a parent on drugs, having no adult supervision at home, being concerned over a loved one in jail, or missing a brother recently shipped to Iraq as reasons why they might perform poorly in school. They did not see these things as circumstances that could get in the way of their desire to take on the uncertainties of self-directed inquiry. The majority of these students did not realize that their emotional acting out through disengagement from learning activities was what perhaps hindered their success more than their intellectual capability.

Dr. Carl Paternite, professor of psychology at the Runs Center for School-based Mental Health Programs in Oxford, Ohio believes that “mental health issues are often the biggest barriers to student achievement” (“Removing the Emotional Roadblocks in Education,” 2005). Repeated unsuccessful learning experiences may cause students to internalize the erroneous message that they are academically deficient. In fact, the students in this study were incredulous when
they did receive praise for making positive strides in class, whether it was reading aloud without error, completing a task before their peers, or achieving a more than passing grade on a test. When one student asked to see his test score on graded assessments that hadn’t yet been returned to the whole class and he saw that his test paper was marked with a 100% (A+), he asked if he could “just touch it” because he had never received a 100% in his life. He asked me several times if it was real, and he was serious.

Such self-depreciation is a characteristic of someone who has internalized the message that he is less-than and deficient. It is, according to Freire (1997/2000) a “characteristic of the oppressed” (p. 63). The ‘C’ track students in my study, by saying they were in the track they were because they needed extra help and didn’t understand things as well as higher track students, were verbalizing their internalized message of inferiority. Consider, for example, how surprised Cindy was in her post-study interview when she said she learned she could “actually go through with something without messing it up.”

Freire (1997/2000) writes that as long as the oppressed maintain their depreciating mindset, they will lack confidence, will respond with passivity to the system they perceive as the oppressor, and will alienate themselves when faced with opportunities to replace their negative self-perceptions with affirmations. Such characteristics are similar to those of the participants in my study towards the change projects. The projects were my idea, not theirs, and while my students
demonstrated fondness for me, I still represented “teacher,” part of the system that had contributed to their self-depreciation. Furthermore, I was asking them to take action against this same system – and meeting with the head administrator was Step One! It is no wonder they disengaged.

**Teacher-student relationships**

*Interactions between teacher and students build a bond of mutual trust and respect that supports student choice and inquiry.* Although students did not show the level of engagement in their change projects that I had hoped, the initiative and teamwork they exhibited as a class in planning my return party cannot be ignored. Through that activity they met every goal I set for this study. Students chose a topic of interest on their own to explore (i.e., having a party). They constructed their learning environment by reflecting on what they needed to make the party a success (i.e., they planned a day when we would have block, they planned the best place to store food and materials in close proximity to our room). The students assessed themselves frequently to see if they were meeting their goals (i.e., how much more money they needed, what other administrator they needed to talk to, what other materials needed to be gathered). As they met obstacles, such as how to get food delivered, how to secure the money until the day of the party, how to get to the store to buy a gift, etc., they brainstormed as a group on how to proceed. They thought critically about what they needed to
accomplish their goal and they made inquiries about resources (i.e., use of
guidance, permission from administration).

Arranging this party for me was something that was outside the system of
“school” and all the failures that system represented to my students. The success
of my return party was due, in part, to the complete freedom the students had to
pursue something of meaning to them – expressing through action the care they
felt for me.

I believe their perception of themselves in relation to me as a person, not
as their teacher, was what motivated them in their endeavor. From the very first
day of school, I demonstrated a caring concern towards my students. I praised
them often, verbally encouraging them individually and as a class, and wrote
positive comments on their homework and tests. I called them on the phone at
home when they missed school. I also called their parents with good reports
instead of complaints. I inquired about their personal interests in music and
hobbies. I asked for their opinions and listened to them respectfully when they
spoke to me both in and out of class. I treated them as people of worth, not as
deficient ‘C’ track students.

Through my demonstrated actions and words, the students perceived that I
respected them and they could trust me. Because I respected them, they respected
me. They saw me respond with joy when they were happy, and watched me react
with sadness when they faced difficulties. Consequently, when I experienced the
loss of my father-in-law, they shared in my sadness because we had established a positive, caring relationship between each other. Their choice to hold a party for me and their aggressiveness in inquiring how to arrange it was a response to our bond of mutual trust and respect. In short, we dialogued with one another, something Freire (1997/2000) says is critical in overcoming oppression. When we shared our feelings and experiences together, we reached what Freire calls, “the point of encounter [where] there are neither utter ignoramuses nor perfect sages; there are only people who are attempting, together, to learn more than they now know” (Freire, 1997/2000, p. 90).

**The Ultimate Finding**

This study really helped me see my role as a teacher more clearly. I realize now that I perceived any form of boundary setting as a negative thing, to the point that when situations arose for me to intervene, I chose to disengage myself or stop the given activity altogether. This is an important insight for me as it relates so fundamentally to my childhood experiences of control and authority. Students do need guidance, but providing it is not an all or nothing proposition. They are, as Ladson-Billings states, “dependent upon caring adults to act in responsible ways” (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002, p. 120). I take that to mean I must find a balance between passive and aggressive teaching if my students are going to be active participants in a truly educative experience. As Dewey (1938b) points out, there is little benefit to my being the older adult if I don’t use it to encourage
those less experienced: “There is no point in [the educator] being more mature if, instead of using his greater insight to help organize the conditions of the immature, he throws away his insight” (p. 38).
WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

I do not want to give up on incorporating student choice and inquiry learning in my teaching, but there are things I will do differently next time. When I include inquiry in my classroom again, I will still use the team building activities at the beginning of the year. These activities did build a stronger sense of community within the classroom than I witnessed in previous years when I did not use any team building at the start of the school year. However, I will scaffold off these activities and their resultant sense of community by encouraging more pair and teamwork. During this study, I only allowed the students to work with partners in the change projects after they had chosen what project they wanted to do and had already developed their individual action plans. My initial decision to have them work individually clearly went against the research of Vygotsky (Dixon-Krauss, 1996) and others (Brown, 2004; Gaughin, 2001; Katz & Chard, 1989) who all point out that social interaction and collaboration are critical to learning. In fact, “without social interaction, meaning of context and content would not exist” (Dixon-Krauss, 1996, p. 78). Since it is important to me that students derive meaning from the work they do in my class, I will incorporate more social components in the future.

I will also ask the students more questions about what they want to explore. One venue from which to do this is the I-Search (Macrorie, 1988; Zorfass and Copel, 1998). I do not pretend to fully know how to implement an I-Search;
my entry into the realm of inquiry learning only started with this study. However, a brief overview of I-Search materials reflected the kind of learning experience I hope to achieve with inquiry. One thing does seem clear: inquiry learning has a definite focus and should not be viewed as learners simply doing what they want ("Facilitation," http://www.thirteen.org/edonline).

I will encourage the students to extend their inquiry. During this study, the students had only a few weeks to develop and implement their action plans because I constrained their efforts into the time parameters of my data collection. However, active researchers do not engage in inquiry for a limited time and then stop. Their inquiry uncovers new areas and raises new questions (Zorfass and Copel, 1998). This takes time, and time is the one major factor that makes inquiry classrooms so messy compared to traditional classrooms (Memory, 2004). Inquiry evolves, but needs time to do so. I want to provide that kind of time, so I will need to look intensely at how the state and district standards can be met through the process of inquiry.

Finally, I will continue looking at issues of motivation, especially examining brain-based teaching research. While I do accept the responsibility of what I bring to the learning environment as the teacher, I am fascinated with the emotional and psychological development of young adolescents. I want to learn more about where students are developmentally at thirteen and fourteen of age.
By learning more about how the students think, I believe I can learn how to be a better teacher.
REFERENCES


   Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.


APPENDIXES
Appendix A: HSIRB Approval Letter

MORAVIAN COLLEGE

July 12, 2005

Mary J. Bowen
4465 Lehigh Drive
Walnutport, PA 18088

Dear Mary J. Bowen:

The Moravian College Human Subjects Internal Review Board approved your proposal: Moving beyond the content/process/product/assessment model: How can student choice and inquiry improve student learning? Given the materials submitted, your proposal received an expedited review. A copy of your proposal will remain with the HSIRB Chair.

It is requested, however, that you consider the following points before continuing your research.

Please remember that all students in the classroom, regardless of whether they participate in the study, must be given equal opportunity to provide feedback to the classroom teacher. Allowing this opportunity prevents those who do not participate from being identified as such. It is possible to report upon data only from those who become the focus of the study. The opportunity for all to provide feedback should be clearly stated in your informed consent forms.

Please note that the form currently entitled "Parent Consent Form" should be addressed to Parents and Guardians.

Please note that the "minor details" that you indicate may be altered may not change the context, implications, or tone of any subject responses.

Please note that your Informed Consent form contains a number of grammatical errors.

Please note that if you intend on venturing into other topics than the ones indicated in your proposal, you must inform the HSIRB about what those topics will be.

Should any other aspect of your research change or extend past one year of the date of this letter, you must file those changes or extensions with the HSIRB before implementation.

Copies of this letter have been sent to you through e-mail and campus mail. Please retain at least one copy for your files. Good luck with the rest of your research.

Debra Wetchwer-Hendricks
Chair, Human Subjects Internal Review Board
Moravian College
610-861-1415 (voice)
medwh02@moravian.edu
Appendix B: Principal Consent Form

August 25, 2005

Dear (principal’s name),

During the 2005-2006 school year, I will be taking courses towards a Master’s Degree in Curriculum and Instruction at Moravian College. These courses will help me stay in touch with the most efficient ways of teaching in order to provide the best learning experience for the students.

Moravian’s program requires that I conduct a systematic study of my own teaching practices. The focus of my research this year is on the strategies that can be used in my eighth grade Language Arts classroom to improve student learning through inquiry and student choice. In doing this, I hope to inspire students to think critically and apply problem solving techniques to their work in Language Arts, as well as in their other academic and related arts classes. I hope to improve student intrinsic motivation, as well as increase parent and teacher communication. This study will take place August 30, 2005 to December 22, 2005.

As part of my study, I will be observing students in their process of researching a project of their own selection. I plan to have students investigate ways they can improve their learning environment, development and implement an action plan, and reflect on their learning before, during, and after their research process. Students will maintain reflective journals, as well as compose writing pieces that meet the criteria for their portfolio required by the district standards. I will be interviewing interesting students about their thoughts and feelings regarding a self-selected and self-directed inquiry research process. In addition, I will also be collecting and analyzing student writing and conduct surveys prior, during, and after my study. There are no anticipated risks in this study to any of the students. Established IEPs and instructional modifications will be adhered to throughout the study.

All students involved in this study will participate as part of my regular Language Arts program. However, participation in the study is entirely voluntary. Any child may withdraw from the study at any time. If a student is withdrawn, or the parent or guardian chooses not to have them be part of the study, I will not use any information pertaining to that child in my study.

All the participant’s names will be kept confidential. The name of any student, faculty member, cooperating teacher, or cooperating institution will not appear in any written report or publication of the study or its findings. Only my name and the names of my sponsoring professors will appear in this study. Minor details of student writing may be altered to ensure confidentiality. All research materials will be secured in a protected location.

My faculty sponsor is Dr. Joseph Shosh. He can be contacted at Moravian College by phone at (610) 861-1482 or e-mail at jshosh@moravian.

If you have any questions or concerns about my in-class project, please feel free to contact me at school or e-mail me at mbowen@ptd.net. If not, please sign and return the bottom portion of this letter. Thank you for your help.

Sincerely,
Mrs. Mary J. Bowen

I attest that I am the principal of the teacher conducting this research study, that I have read and understand this consent form, and received a copy. Mary Bowen has my permission to conduct this study at (school name).

Principal’s signature: ____________________________________________
Date: __________________________
Page dimensions: 612.0x792.0

Appendix C: Parent/Guardian Consent Form

August 25, 2005

Dear Parent or Guardian,

During the 2005-2006 school year, I will be taking courses towards a Master’s Degree in Curriculum and Instruction at Moravian College. These courses will help me stay in touch with the most efficient ways of teaching in order to provide the best learning experience for the students.

Moravian’s program requires that I conduct a systematic study of my own teaching practices. The focus of my research this year is on the strategies that can be used in my eighth grade Language Arts classroom to improve student learning through inquiry and student choice. In doing this, I hope to inspire students to think critically and apply problem solving techniques to their work in Language Arts, as well as in their other academic and related arts classes. I hope to improve student intrinsic motivation, as well as increase parent and teacher communication. This study will take place August 30, 2005 to December 22, 2005.

As part of my study, I will be observing students in their process of researching a project of their own selection. I plan to have students investigate ways to improve their learning environment, development and implement an action plan, and reflect on their learning before, during, and after their research process. Students will maintain reflective journals, as well as compose writing pieces that meet the criteria for their portfolio required by the district standards. I will be interviewing interesting students about their thoughts and feelings regarding a self-selected and self-directed inquiry research process. I will also be collecting and analyzing student writing and conduct surveys before and after my study. There are no anticipated risks in this study to any of the students. Established IEPs and instructional modifications will be adhered to throughout the study.

All students involved in this study will participate as part of my regular Language Arts program. However, participation in the study is entirely voluntary. Any child may withdraw from the study at any time. If a student is withdrawn, or the parent or guardian chooses not to have them be part of the study, I will not use any information pertaining to that child in my study.

All the participant’s names will be kept confidential. The name of any student, faculty member, cooperating teacher, or cooperating institution will not appear in any written report or publication of the study or its findings. Only my name and the names of my sponsoring professors will appear in this study. Minor details of student writing may be altered to ensure confidentiality. All research materials will be secured in a protected location.

My faculty sponsor is Dr. Joseph Shosh. He can be contacted at Moravian College by phone at (610) 861-1482 or e-mail at jshosh@moravian. The Principal, (principal’s name), has approved my study and can be reached by phone at (610) 866-5781.

If you have any questions or concerns about my in-class project, please feel free to contact me at school or e-mail me at mbowen@ptd.net. If not, please sign and return the bottom portion of this letter. Thank you for your help.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Mary J. Bowen

I attest that I am the student's legally authorized representative and that I read and understand this consent form, and received a copy.

Legal representative signature: __________________________________________________________
Child's Name: ________________________________
Date: ________________________________
### Appendix D: Pre-Study Student Survey Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>not sure</th>
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<th>sometimes</th>
<th>almost</th>
<th>always</th>
<th>always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I choose the clothing that I wear</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I choose who I hang out with</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I choose the food I eat</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I choose when I go to bed and when I get up</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I choose my own music</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I choose the movies/videos I watch</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I feel my choices are respected at home</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I feel my choices are respected at school</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I feel that what I say is important to my teachers</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. I am able to choose what I read in school</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. I help my teacher develop tests and quizzes in school</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. We have class meetings in my classes at school</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. I am able to choose my own projects at school</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. I am able to share my music, and other things that interest me with my teachers</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. I am a member of a student committee</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix E: Post-Study Student Survey Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>not sure</th>
<th>never</th>
<th>sometimes</th>
<th>almost</th>
<th>always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I enjoyed picking my own project</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I feel I did a lot of thinking to complete my project</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I think doing my own project was complicated</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I would rather have the teacher assign a project</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I would rather just take a test than do a project</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Doing a project is too much work</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Doing my project made me feel successful</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I feel I my school is a better place because of my project</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I had trouble doing my project</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. I learned a lot about myself doing my project</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. I learned to think differently about things while I was doing my project</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. I feel more respected by my peers because of my project</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. I think I work better with people because of my project</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. I think I will do another project like this in the future</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. I learned how to solve problems by doing my project</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix F: Pre-Study Interview

1. Do you like to ask questions about things you are curious about?
2. Do you ever research something just for the fun of it?
3. Would you rather take a test or do a project?
4. How do you feel about picking out your own project to do?
5. Are you able to work on your own on a project without the teaching prompting you?
6. How do you feel about grading yourself on a project?
7. Describe what you like most about working on a project.
8. Would you rather work on your own or with others in the class?
9. What is the biggest thing you dislike about school? What do you like the most?
10. What makes you try your best when you work on a project for school?
Appendix G: Post-Study Interview

1. Describe what you enjoyed most about this project.

2. Will you complete this sentence: “I was most surprised when I learned…”

3. Will you complete this sentence: “If I did this project again, I would…”

4. What did you learn about yourself that you didn’t know before this project?

5. What made this project interesting for you?

6. Would you have preferred more or less help from the teacher? Why?

7. Did you find that keeping a journal was helpful for you? Why, or why not?

8. What did you do outside of class for your project?

9. What did you learn about the way you learn things from working on this project?

10. Would you like to explore another research project? Why, or why not?
Appendix H: Team Building Activity: The Right Family

Materials needed:

story of the Right family; one passable object per participant

Directions:

Have the participants stand in a circle. Explain to them that every time they hear the word “right,” they are to pass the object in their hands to the right. Every time they hear the word “left,” they are to pass the object in the hands to the left.

Practice a few times so people get the hang of the idea.

Read the following story to the players.

“This is the story of the Right family. Last night, the Right family went to see a baseball game between the Boston Red Sox and the Minnesota Twins. They left the house at six o’clock, right after the family finished dinner. Mr. Right drove everyone to the game in the red family van, which is always parked on the left side of the garage. In the van were Mrs. Right, Bobbie Right, Katie Right, and Joey Right. As they drove down the street, Mrs. Right waved to Lisa, their neighbor, who lives two houses down on the left. She was watering her garden on the right side of her house. As the Right family approached Fenway Park, Mr. Right exclaimed, “I can’t remember where I left the tickets!” Joey Right said, “Dad, I saw you put them in your right hand pocket.” Mr. Right checked, but they were not there. Katie said, “No, Dad, that isn’t right. You left the tickets with me
for safekeeping. I have them right here in my purse.” “What a relief,” said Mr. Right as he turned left into the stadium parking lot. Joey almost left his baseball glove in the van, but right when Mr. Right was about to lock the doors, he remembered he had left it under his seat. The Right family had to wait in line for a bit, but finally made it to their seats in left field. As they sat down, Mr. Right looked to his left at the whole Right family and smiled. He had made the right decision in getting tickets for this game.”

If time permits, ask the following detail oriented questions about the story to see what the group remembers:

Where are the Rights going?
What teams are playing?
Where are they playing?
What are their names?
At what time of the day was the game?
Who almost forgot the baseball glove?
Who had the tickets?
How did the Rights get to the game?

Approximate time for activity: 5-10 minutes

Source:
Appendix I: Team Building Activity: Line Up By Your Birthday

Materials needed:

none

Directions:

There are many variations on the “Line Up By…” challenges. The basic idea is to have the group line up in a straight line according to some specific criteria and with some type of restriction on their actions. For this activity, without talking or making any vocal sounds, the students must line up according to birthday, January 1 at the front and December 31 at the back.

Approximate time for activity: Dependent on number of participants

Source:

The Freechild Project: Guide to Cooperative Games for Social Change

http://freechild.org/gamesguide.pdf
Appendix J: Team Building Activity: The Human Knot

Materials needed:

none

Directions:

Get the group in a tight circle. If the group is very large, divide into groups of no less than five. Have the members of the group reach in with their right hands and grasp one of the right hands available. Repeat with the left hands. Then ask them to unravel the knot. People may not let go. The circle of hands is to remain unbroken. However, it may be necessary to change grips due to the angle of arms and bodies. One variation is for the group to remain silent during the entire activity.

Approximate time for activity: Dependent on number of participants

Source:

The Freechild Project: Guide to Cooperative Games for Social Change

http://freechild.org/gamesguide.pdf