

The Effects of Choice On Young Children's Reading Engagement and Stamina

By

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# CHOICE AND YOUNG CHILDREN'S READING ENGAGEMENT

## Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine how choice affects first grade students' reading engagement and stamina. CAFÉ (Boushey and Moser, 2009) strategies and the DAILY FIVE (Boushey and Moser, 2006) structure are used to help students develop their literacy skills. The students are given options to read to self, buddy read, listen to reading, work on writing, and word work. The data collected supported that choice did improve reading engagement and stamina. 20 out of 23 students reported that choice was important to them.

*Keywords:* reading stamina, engagement, choice, primary

## Introduction

In 2012- 2013 our school began implementing the Daily Five structure developed by “The Sisters,” Gail Boushey and Joan Moser. As described by the Sisters in *The Daily Five: Fostering Literacy Independence in the Elementary Grades* there are five basic literacy activities, called “the daily five”: read-to-self, work on writing, word work, listen-to-reading, and read-to-someone (Boushey & Moser, 2006). The book explains how to implement each activity step by step. Gail Boushey and Joan Moser also wrote *The CAFÉ Book: Engaging All Students in Daily Literacy Assessment and Instruction* (Boushey & Moser, 2009). The Daily Five structure incorporates the CAFÉ strategies that help students develop and build their literacy skills.

The Sisters describe and explain each CAFÉ strategy. “C” stands for comprehension. Students are taught many comprehension strategies they can use to better understand a story such as: good readers ask questions while they read, retell the story in sequential order incorporating details, and identify the lesson and author’s purpose. “A” stands for accuracy. Students use the pictures to check for word meanings, blends sounds, flip the vowel sound, chunk letters together when decoding. “F” stands for fluency. Reading fluently is developed through rereading familiar texts at their reading level, practicing common sight words, heeding punctuation, reading with expression, etc. “E” stands for expand vocabulary. Students build their vocabulary by reading. As they read they pay attention to interesting words in a story. These interesting, new words the reader finds are used in their speaking and writing. The Daily Five structure stresses small grouping by skills, one-on-one conferencing with the teacher to discuss students’ progress and development in reading and writing.

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In my classroom I designed my literacy block based on the Daily Five structure and teach mini-lessons using the CAFÉ strategies. I have 20-minute blocks for word work, read-to-someone (which takes the form of leveled or skilled reading groups with four or fewer students per group), read-to-self, and work on writing. From the first day in September the students and I have modeled and practiced the Daily Five literacy activities. The students are familiar with the routines and expectations.

I wanted to improve my students' literacy development and improve their reading engagement and stamina. I reread the Sisters' books and discovered I was possibly missing the driving force behind Daily Five. I was missing choice! The Sisters say that providing choices and allowing students to decide what activity they participate in is the most pronounced difference between Daily Five and other more traditional reading curricula (Boushey and Moser, 2006). Affording students choices in the classroom can increase intrinsic motivation for reading when they are put in charge of their learning and can choose what books they read, whom they read with, and what activities they perform (Reynolds & Symons, 2001). Previously, I was allowing my students to pick the books they would read, who they read with during read-to someone, and what they wrote about; however, I had not allowed them the choice of when they engaged in each activity. The entire class did the same activity when I instructed them to. This reflection caused me to question, "Was my need for control in the classroom diminishing the students' motivation to read?" I understand the importance motivation plays in reading success. I began to wonder if lack of choice was effecting their reading stamina? Having a choice is a motivating factor for many, and I was curious to see if it would motivate my students and increase their literacy learning.

### **Literature Review**

Through looking at the habits of lifelong readers certain characteristics and strategies are consistent and can be modeled and taught to our students. By designing classrooms that encourage young readers to model and practice these characteristics and strategies they internalize these reading behaviors, and increase their reading engagement (Miller, 2012). In order to become skilled readers, students must have many reading experiences to develop reading skills and strategies, yet tragically struggling readers engage in reading three times less often than their peers do (Allington, 2006). Using CAFÉ strategies and the Daily Five structure provides the opportunity for students to practice these skills frequently in ways they choose. The Sisters explain how to implement routines and provide specific lessons that stress the importance of clearly explaining expectations and why the class is engaging in each literacy task in *The CAFÉ Book* (2009).

### **Importance of Reading Stamina**

In a recent study conducted with first grade students it was found that in order for the students to be driven or take ownership of their work, they needed to know why they were doing it (Butlin, 2011). Choice was found to be a motivating factor that contributed to ownership. Again, this study expressed the importance of students understanding the process of their own literacy development in order for them to be invested in their learning. Another research study described how a teacher helped her struggling students develop as readers by building up their stamina to read (Gulla, 2012). Building stamina to stay focused on their reading needed to be established first. Finishing a book was a goal many of the students in this classroom had never achieved before they had the help and

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support of their teacher, Jennifer. This teacher worked on demystifying reading and writing through clearly explaining what the students needed to do to become better readers (Gulla, 2012). She helped them develop decoding skills, which gave them confidence as readers, and practiced building their reading stamina little by little. Jennifer stated in this article, "The most essential key to improving as readers and writers was stamina. Once the mechanics of reading are understood, if you can stay with the task for gradually increasing lengths of time you will achieve mastery" (Gulla, 2012, p.60). The ability to stay at a task allows students to improve because time is being invested into practicing the needed skills. Students are given the tools to develop as a reader and time to succeed.

### **Intrinsic Motivation to Read**

The Sisters emphasize and explain the importance of choice. Providing choices and allowing students to decide what activity they participated in is the most pronounced difference of Daily Five. Students are motivated when they are put in charge of their learning and offered choices of what activities in which they would like to participate (2006). According to Dr. William Glasser (1993), one needs to "give up boss-managing and start lead-managing. It is the personal power associated with bossing that is the enemy" (1993, p. 2). Research shows that students who develop intrinsic motivation to read do better in school than those who do not (Guthrie, 2006). Students who take part in authentic writing and reading books they choose are intrinsically motivated because what they are learning is interesting and meaningful to them. Linda Gambrell highlights the importance of promoting intrinsic motivation to promote reading and provides *Seven Rules of Engagement* (2011) states students are motivated to read when:

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1. the reading tasks and activities are relevant to their lives
2. they have access to a wide range of reading materials
3. they have ample opportunities to engage in sustained reading
4. they have opportunities to make choices about what they read and how they engage in and complete literacy tasks
5. they have opportunities to socially interact with others about the text they are reading
6. they have opportunities to be successful with challenging texts
7. classroom incentives reflect the value and importance of reading

These seven rules of engagement provide key research-based practices for promoting students' intrinsic motivation to read (Gambrell, 2011). These rules emphasize the importance of allowing students more choices and a voice in the activities in which they participate. Gambrell also cites a study by Jang, Reeve and Deci that showed that students who were allowed choice in how to complete their homework assignments reported higher intrinsic motivation than the other students who were denied choice on their homework assignments (Jang, Reeve & Deci, 2010). McRae and Guthrie reported in *Teacher Practices that Impact Reading Motivation* (2008) that students who are intrinsically motivated spend 300% more time reading compared to students who lack intrinsic motivation. Students fall behind due to their lack of interest.

### **Choices**

By providing choices, students will have a sense of control and ownership of their literacy development. Another action research project describes two teachers findings on motivating readers after setting their cafeteria up like a bistro and encouraging book talks

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(Kasten & Wilfong, 2005). In this study, students were allowed to pick books of their choice. They were also encouraged to discuss what they read with others. Offering students the choice to buddy read in the classroom fosters book talks like this study did (Kasten & Wilfong, 2005). The students began their book discussions by answering a few questions like: Why did you find this book interesting? What touched you about this book? Would you keep this book in your personal library? Why or why not? Did you have a personal connection with this book? Would this book make a good movie? Why or why not? The teachers found that the students became interested in what their peers read after they had the opportunity to share and discuss the books (Kasten & Wilfong, 2005). Hearing their peers' enthusiastic book reviews appeared to cause students to believe that the books were easier to read or to consider a new genre or title that they hadn't before. The surveys given to students also showed a dramatic change in their outlook on independent reading. Their attitudes towards reading independently before the Book Bistro was 96.8% negative, and after the experience it was the opposite, 96.8% positive (Kasten and Wilfong, 2005). This research strongly supports that the enthusiasm one shares for books is contagious and can be a strong motivating factor in encouraging others to read independently.

### **Choice and Buddy Reading**

Buddy or partner reading is another option in Daily Five. Students pick the book they want to read and they take turns reading aloud to one another. Partner reading has the benefit of keeping both partners alert and actively engaged because of the alternate reading (Stevens, 2006). Partner reading also provides a large quantity of practice needed for students to develop fluency. Teachers found that the students receiving Title 1

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services who requested to partner read made greater gains compared to the other students receiving Title 1 services who did not partner read (Griffith & Rasinski, 2004). Another study done by Griffin supports that first grader readers were able to help one another with the reading process due to their social learning partnership when they buddy read (2002). Helping each other with decoding skills and talking about what they are reading enhances their literacy development and makes reading more enjoyable. Students should be encouraged to share a good book with a friend.

### **Choice of Hands-on Activities Motivate Reading**

Intrinsic motivation for reading would be enhanced if students were given hands-on activities that associated with reading was looked at (Guthrie, 2006). In this research project students were encouraged to learn about owls and given hands-on activities that related to owls. Intrinsic motivation to read more about owls was increased due to their hands- on activities. Students' comprehension was monitored for change due to exposure to these engaging opportunities. When students can touch, feel, explore, interact and discuss with others their interest in a new topic increases. Encouragement to read and discover new information on topics that are being studied in the classroom increases their intrinsic reading motivation (Guthrie, 2006). Guther's study supports the choice of word work during Daily Five because students can explore and interact with the new words they are learning. Giving students that opportunity to work with words in a first grade classroom through building words, studying word families by sorting, or writing words in a salt tray are hands-on activities that encourage intrinsic motivation to increase their vocabulary. Students gain an understanding of the new words and can decode them in the

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books they read. Intrinsic motivation to read is increased due to their expanded word bank knowledge, which enhances their success of reading independently (Guthrie, 2006).

Choices play an important role in all that we do and how we choose to live our lives (Glasser, 1993). According to Glasser, choices are based on meeting the five basic needs all human beings have: love, power, freedom, fun, and survival. We are driven to satisfy meeting these five basic needs, which in turn is the driving force behind all of our choices and behavior. Students must be taught to make good choices and that they are responsible for their behavior. In order for students to make choices they must be given opportunities to choose. By validating reading choices through book choice, where to read, when to read, and who to read with students hear the message that they are validated, their choices matter, and that reading is an important part of life (Glasser, 1993).

### **Validating Reasons For Learning**

Checking in is an important part of Daily Five that requires the teacher to poll each student on what they will be working on during each rotation and record their choices. According to the Sisters, students should answer, "What are you doing today?" because it helps the child gain focus on their work and creates accountability (Boushey & Moser, 2006, p. 93). The students became aware they had a voice in what they were working on. They became aware that they needed to pick a different literacy activity each rotation. If students asked to do an activity twice on the same day they caught onto the expectations and understood why choosing a different activity each rotation was important. The expectations of why a task is important to complete needs to be addressed

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in the beginning of the Daily Five modeling of routines. The students then understand the process and can see the validity in the rotations.

After completing my literature review I was surprised to realize all the research I read correlated back to why I became a teacher. I wanted to inspire and empower my students to learn by providing opportunities and choices in my classroom that allowed them to develop their special talents and interests. This research reaffirmed the importance of choice and having a voice in one's learning. I continue to strive and find ways that encourage my students to develop a love of reading and writing. The research supported practices I am currently doing in my classroom, but also helped me analyze what areas I needed to strengthen. I find I often fall into a routine and need to become more aware of the practices and instructional techniques I am using. We are often given a curriculum and make adjustments to fit our students' needs, but as teachers we need to continually reevaluate our classroom practices to insure they align with the intended purpose of the curriculum. One cannot change the curriculum to the extent that the validity of curriculum is compromised. I wanted to find out if by truly incorporating the Daily Five structure and offering choice would this increase my students' motivation to read. I needed to become more aware of the actual time my students were engaged in their literacy tasks. Furthermore, I needed to validate my students' views on their literacy development through reading conferences and interest surveys.

### **Methodology**

In this study I wanted to find out if offering choices of: read-to-self, work on writing, word work, listen-to-reading, and read-to-someone increased young children's reading engagement and stamina. Was the lack of choice affecting their reading stamina?

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Having a choice is a motivating factor for many and I was curious to see if it would motivate my students and increase their literacy learning.

The participants in this study are from a small town in a Midwest state. They are first graders. They are from a classroom that is comprised of fourteen boys and nine girls, ages six-seven years old. 25% of the population is Jamaican, Native American, or Mexican, and the other 75% are Caucasian. They come from diverse economic backgrounds. The school has a population of 49% free and reduced lunch. I zoomed in on four students to get a more complex view of how their reading stamina was affected by choice. The first grade students participating in this study are of various reading levels: one above, two average, and one struggling reader based on a variety of classroom assessments and observations. The participants were two males and two females who represented the diverse population in the classroom. These students were closely monitored and their activities noted, including reading conferences and personal comments noted in my field notes. The materials needed for this research project were: diverse (genres and book levels) classroom library, book bins, writing utensils, word-work supplies, headphones, CD players, books on tape, stop watch and graph paper. Each day began with a round of Daily Five. The first ten days of the study students were given limited choice of either reading or writing. The following ten days of the study students were given multiple choices and chances for peer collaboration. The five choices consisted of: read to self, work on writing, listen to reading, word work, and buddy writing. To encourage ownership of their choice students verbally committed to what task they were going to work on. The entire class was monitored for stamina during the twenty days of this study. The four students were monitored for their stamina too.

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Stamina was interrupted when four or more students were off-task. The timer was stopped when four or more students were talking, walking around, or not engaged in the task they chose. Visual stamina charts were kept and field notes were taken throughout this study. Surveys were given before and after the first ten days, and when the study was completed to gain an understanding of how choice affected the students' views of reading and writing (Appendices A & B). Did they like reading and writing more after choice was offered? Did they feel they had enough time to complete their work? Did choice really matter? The questionnaires had smiley faces that depicted how they felt about reading and writing. The survey needed to be simple enough for first graders to understand and short. The surveys were read aloud to ensure the students comprehended the questions being asked. Field notes provide an idea of outside forces that affect daily routines, give insight to students' motivations or lack thereof. Reading conferences help depict growth and opportunities for students to share their feelings about choice in the classroom.

In a pilot study, I tried only offering reading and writing as a choice. For the current study, I wanted to see how reading stamina would grow if given all five choices as advised by the Two Sisters. In the pilot, I did not focus on field notes and left out the personal aspect of this study and depended on quantitative data to support my findings. When the pilot was completed I realized I missed the heart of the matter, hearing my students' voices and their thoughts. I needed qualitative data. How can we increase reading stamina if they are never heard? I needed to hear what drives them. Without motivation there would be no stamina.

### Data Analysis and Findings

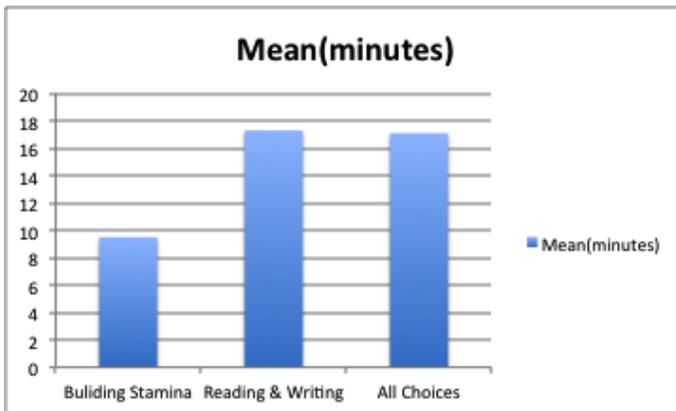
I collected data for four weeks during the fall of 2013. I analyzed the class' stamina charts: before choice was offered, when reading and writing was offered and when all five choices were offered. I surveyed my students and took field notes throughout the study.

#### Reading Stamina and Survey Data

Figure 1 shows the class' stamina chart for time on-task during Daily Five. The chart reveals a significant jump in stamina when choice was offered. Stamina improved by 7.5 minutes when choice was offered, but it did not matter how much choice was offered. There was little difference between having five choices and only having the choice of reading or writing when it came to stamina.

Figure 1:

*Class' Reading Stamina*



As shown in Figure 2 below, 87% or 20 out of the 23 students said choice was important on the survey given after the choices and activities were implemented.

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Figure 2:

*Is Choice Important?*

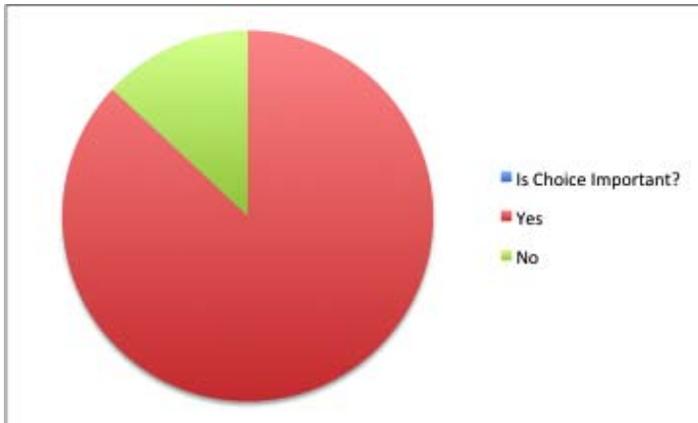


Figure 3 and Figure 4 illustrated that students' attitudes improved towards reading and writing when they were offered five choices. Their attitude about enough having time to work on reading and writing improved.

Figure 3:

*2 Choices: Do you like reading?*

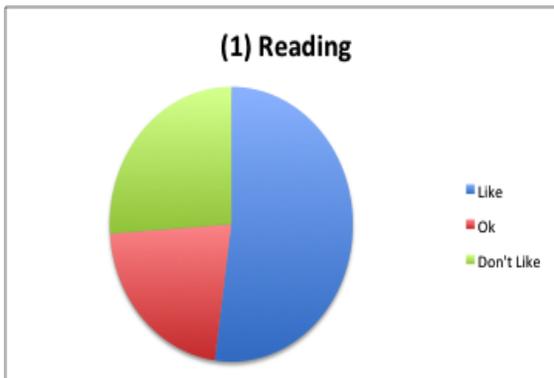
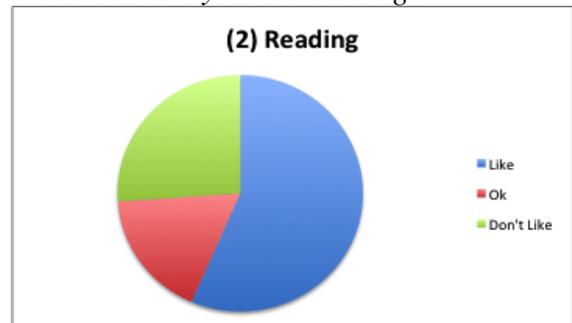


Figure 4:

*5 Choices: Do you like reading?*



Their attitude about enough having time to work on reading and writing improved as illustrated in Figures 5 and 6 below.

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Figure 5:

*2 Choices: Do you have enough time to work?*

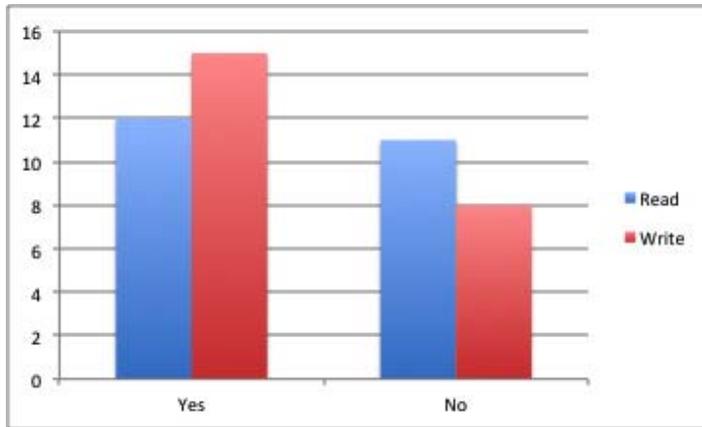
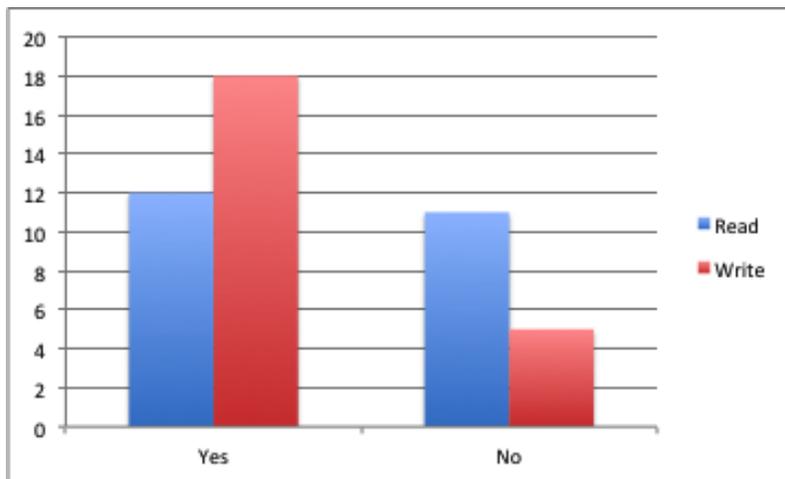


Figure 6:

*5 Choices: Do you have enough time to work?*



When asked to rank which literacy activity they liked the most, students picked reading and buddy reading. The day-to-day activities of what students picked for the first round of Daily Five varied, word work and buddy reading were most commonly picked. Figures 7 and 8 show their daily choices for the first Daily Five rotation.

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Figure 7:

*2 Choices*

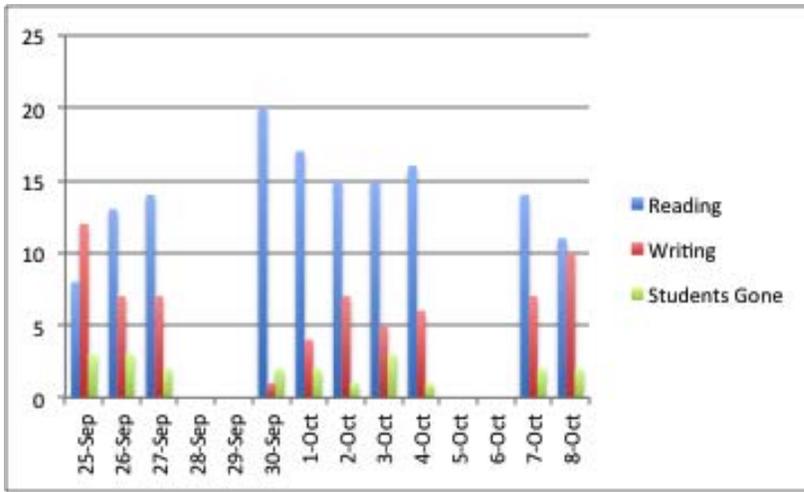
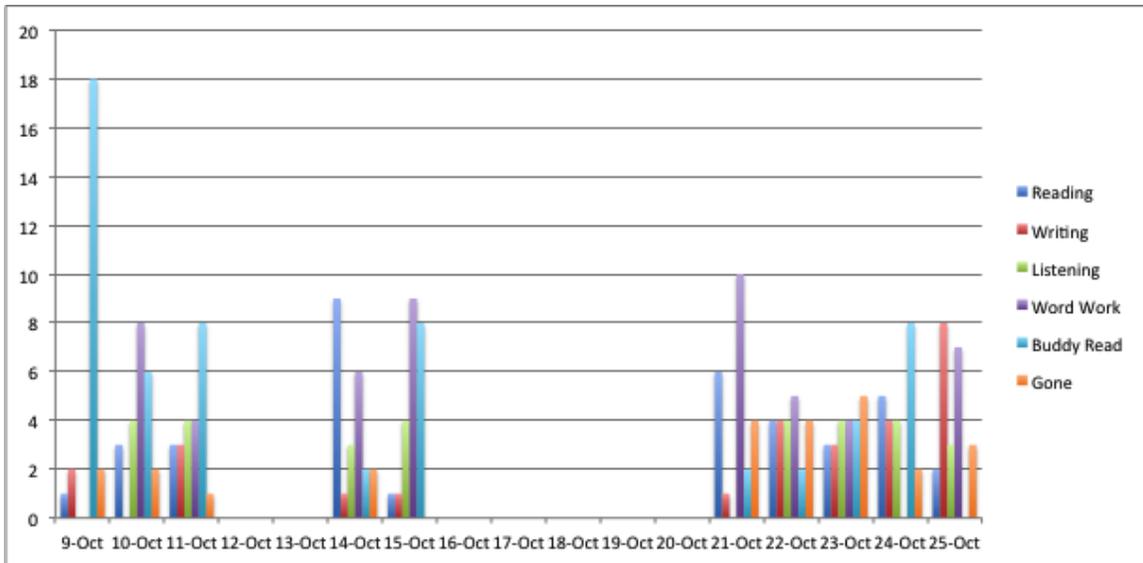


Figure 8:

*5 Choices*



An analysis of my field notes collaborates that the class was motivated by charting their daily stamina. They did not ask for more time until they were given five choices. If the class was off-task and needed a reminder they would ask, “Can we give it

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another try?" They never asked to have more time when just reading and writing was offered. This showed they were engaged in their literacy activities, but being first graders they needed gentle reminders to quiet down and the few that were off-task a little redirection.

Our classroom discussions improved after more choices were offered. Students were more excited to share what they were working on, excited to work with a friend, or try a word work activity. Students shared books with each other; a pair commented they were sharing a book because they both liked it and were taking turns, one would get it for a day then the other would get it. If reading or writing were the only two options, this conversation might never have taken place. This is a conversation lifelong readers have. They share and discuss books. When our class stamina was less than the previous days students offered suggestions to improve it. It was suggested that we should do word work at our desks to eliminate all the wandering around. Another student mentioned limiting word work choices and not working with a friend you just want to talk to. This showed me they did not want to give up their choices, but took ownership of their learning and how to improve time on-task.

### **Case Studies**

There were four students of varying abilities whom I zoomed in on for this action research project. Claire, Dean, Brittany, and Carl (pseudonyms) were interviewed and observed for their reading stamina.

Two of the students had average abilities, Claire and Dean, and were always on-task during literacy time. They were engaged in their activities. Claire often chose to read alone, and Dean often chose to buddy read. Claire was less confident in her reading

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ability and said she preferred to read alone. Claire shared her thoughts on reading with me. She said, "I read every morning because it is fun. You can pick out your own stories. I read books I know, ones that have been read before or I have read." Claire had a clear understanding of "good fit" books and felt the success of reading on her own because of this independence. Dean also mentioned how he knew how to find "good fit" books. Dean said, "I found more new books I can read. I check the pages if it looks hard or easy." He also discussed how he feels about buddy reading. Dean remarked, "I like to read with a partner. I usually pick from three friends to read with because they have some things in common and we aren't too far apart on how we read. I like people who read like me, so they are not too far ahead or behind me." This comment made me realize Dean was also aware of his abilities and those of others. He needed to feel comfortable with the friend he chose to read with. Allowing him to pick whom he read with allowed him to feel in control and motivated him to buddy read. If I had paired him with a struggling reader, I think that would have discouraged him to buddy read and possibly dislike it. While interviewing Dean I also realized how he was able to articulate his goals and reflect on how he had grown as a reader and writer because of choice. Dean mentioned, "I liked writing before, but now I like reading. I liked making the picture better before, and now I can read better than I used to because I know a lot more things I can do to help you read better. I'm working on cross checking, eagle eyes in reading, and in writing I'm working on trying not to forget periods and stuff. I feel like they are my goals."

Brittany was a struggling reader and often was off-task. She needed to be moved or reminded to focus on her work after only a few minutes. She often chose writing or word work. She commented, "Writing is more fun. You get to write your own sentence.

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The salt trays help me learn new words.” As this study progressed Brittany’s skills improved, and she did engage in buddy reading and said how it helped her. “I like buddy reading because they can help you with words. I pick people who are nice and help me sound out words,” said Brittany. Again being able to choose who she read with helped her feel comfortable and work on her reading. If she was only reading alone she would not have had this support. Buddy reading has helped her to become a better and more confident reader. Brittany remarked why choice was important to her. She stated, “I get to choose whatever I do. It makes me feel happy because I like to sometimes read and sometimes write.” I think this reiterates the importance of choice.

Carl was an above-average reader. He is very social and often needed reminders to not talk, but quickly got back on-task. Carl would always choose writing. He loved to write about cars. Carl stated, “I like making my journal BIG, so when I take it home at the end of the year I can look through it I can find my memories. Reading is okay; I like writing better because I can learn more and draw things. I like to draw things.” Carl was challenged to write about different topics, write three or more sentences, and use an editing checklist since he demonstrated a higher level of writing. Work on writing was Carl’s passion and he was encouraged to grow in areas that were appropriate for him. As this project went on he developed a new way to challenge himself and pick wider variety of topics to write about. He said, “I use the chart of writing ideas to help choose what I write about.” He did express an interest in buddy reading over reading alone. Carl said, “I get lonesome when I read by myself. I like buddy reading better.” When it comes to choice. Carl said “You get to choose things we get to do and things that aren’t too easy, and if they are too hard we wouldn’t want to do it.” This statement shows the importance

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of student's working at their level and on things that interest them. When given choice students are allowed to engage in activities that are at their level and are motivated to work on their goals which, in turn, increases their stamina.

All of these students showed ownership of their learning, and they all stated that choice was an important part of our classroom. They enjoyed having more options than just reading or writing. Buddy reading was mentioned as been helpful in becoming better readers, but it was also very important that they were allowed to pick their buddy. The more choices offered did not mean chaos in the classroom, it motivated students stay on-task, gave them independence, reinforced that their voice matters when it comes to their reading and writing goals.

### **Conclusion and Discussion**

Reflecting on this action research study I did see the reading engagement in my classroom improve. Students needed fewer reminders to be on-task during the Daily Five rotation. The project has made me more aware of student engagement and putting my students in charge of their learning. When the students verbalized what activity they were going to do, it helped motivate them. They were focused on their work and what they wanted to achieve. Reporting to the class their current stamina perhaps was the greatest motivator of all. The students wanted to increase their stamina and reach our 20-minute goal. It made me aware of my lesson length and not beating a lesson objective to death. I noticed before the project I was not aware of how long I was talking. I was interrupting my students' independent reading time due to what I felt I needed to accomplish, but now I am letting their engagement be the timer. My class has made it evident that they value choice through their survey responses and the overall feeling of enjoyment in our

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classroom. The Daily Five structure allows them choice and motivates them to learn and take ownership of their learning. Documenting their choices has also made me aware of what motivates and drives them. I will definitely continue to operate my classroom with the Daily Five structure.

### **Limitations**

On any given day in a school year there are interruptions and things that pull students off-task, but that is a normal day in any classroom. Stamina could be affected by the interest in a new activity, books, or a friend combination. Holiday breaks, school wide activities, and visitors to a classroom can always change students behaviors too. These limitations should not be overlooked in this study, but can provide insight into what increases or decreases reading stamina. Once teachers allow themselves time to stop and watch what is going on in their classrooms and give students' a voice in their interests, they should be able to see what motivates learning and capitalize on these opportunities.

### **Implications of Further Research**

In this study I wanted to see if offering choices of read-to-self, work on writing, word work, listen-to-reading, and read-to-someone increased young children's reading engagement and stamina. I charted my class' independent reading stamina and got their view, on reading and writing. This study confirmed that offering a choice between reading or writing did increase stamina, but there was not much difference in stamina between two or five choices of literacy activities. I did learn from students' interest surveys and reading conferences that having all five choices was very important and motivated them to learn because they felt they were in charge of their learning. In the future, I will continue to chart our daily stamina and offer all five choices during our

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Daily Five rotations. Though I have learned a lot from this research study, there are still a few areas that I would like to research: cooperative learning and changing up the materials weekly for the literacy activities.

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Appendix A



## Daily Five Survey

Rank each activity you like 1 being the best and 4 being the least.

\_\_\_\_\_ Reading

\_\_\_\_\_ Writing

\_\_\_\_\_ Listening to Someone Read (Computer/CD)

\_\_\_\_\_ Word Work

\_\_\_\_\_ Buddy Read

Does it make a difference when you get to choose what activity you do?

Yes      No

# CHOICE AND YOUNG CHILDREN'S READING ENGAGEMENT

Appendix B

## Reading and Writing Interest Survey

1. I think reading  is   

2. I think writing  is   

3. I have enough time to read?                      **yes**      **no**

4. I have enough time to complete my

writing?    **yes**      **no**