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# Using Choice to Promote Intrinsic Motivation within Students during their Literacy Activities

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# Using Choice to Promote Intrinsic Motivation within Students during their Literacy Activities

By: Nicole Berntsen

A thesis submitted to the Department of Education of The College at Brockport, State University of  
New York, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Literacy Birth through Twelfth

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### **Abstract**

The lingering question that I sought to answer was: in what ways can I build intrinsic motivation within my third grade students. Drawing on social constructivist theory, I examined how implementing student choice as part of a project-based learning inquiry about frogs influenced my students' intrinsic motivation. The students were given free choice within set parameters as part of a project-based inquiry unit around frogs. I included data examples from student work and interviews to showcase my findings through the study. The significance of my study stems from a personal desire to build engagement and self-efficacy in my own classroom.

## Introduction

As I get my students' attention with a call and respond chant, I ask them to come sit at the carpet so we can discuss what our day holds. They all seem to be excited about our day starting; they are sitting up straight with their hands folded, and there is not a whisper to be heard. That is until I bypass the clip chart (one of my classroom management tools). Their posture starts to slouch, some turn and start talking to people around them, but most of all they lose what I thought was excitement in their eyes. In all actuality it was the hope or chance that their clip was going to get moved up. Therefore when I didn't touch the clips, I felt like they were no longer interested in what I had to say.

This is one of the many times throughout the day, and even the months thus far that my students demonstrate they are only showing me what they think I want to see or say what they think I want to hear, if it will benefit them in some way. These are the actions that truly started to make me wonder. I began to question myself as an educator; why are my students not invested in their learning? Do they even care that I am here, or that they are here? Why do they not find learning exciting and intriguing as I did when I was their age, and still do? Is this just another chore they do not have a say in? These are the questions that led me to the notion of wanting to build my students' intrinsic motivation, their need and desire to learn for themselves, and not just for a prize or reward from me. Therefore I set out to find strategies to implement in my classroom that will help to build intrinsic motivation within my students. I was perplexed when I didn't find an extensive list of best practices and strategies that I might use. However, a common thread that continued to appear throughout my research was the idea of using choice in my daily routines. I am not sure if it is because this is my first year teaching and I want everything to go smoothly (that might be a joke in itself), or the fear of what may happen if I leave the students in charge. Like most people I do not like giving up control. But if it is in the students' best interest and in the long run would hopefully

help them to become empowered and engaged in their learning, I would put my feelings aside. And that is exactly what I did.

Therefore, this study aims to address the lack of intrinsic motivation within my third grade students. Since intrinsic motivation is a characteristic that cannot be seen on the outside (such as anger or excitement), I looked toward the level of student engagement to decide if they are intrinsically motivated and invested in their learning. In doing so, I looked in depth at the personal excitement and interest shown during their learning.

My rationale for this study is that I have noticed a disconnection between what my students want to do in school and what the curriculum expects them to do. This issue needs to be addressed because lack of intrinsic motivation is prohibiting students from engaging with the material. As a result, it is stopping them from making connections, and in fact is creating a disconnection between the students' lives and the information they are reading about.

I am invested in this study because I see these excitable and rambunctious children walking into my room with high energy levels and mouths moving a mile a minute. Then teaching begins and throughout the day the students become drained and zombieified! (I recognize that what I am teaching and how I am teaching it are not the only variables that affect my students' demeanor throughout the day; however I do feel that what they are learning and how they are expected to demonstrate what they have learned plays a role in their attitudes and levels of involvement in school learning.) With that being said, I want my students to want to be in school and to have a passion and desire for learning that is solely for themselves and not because they want to please me, or any other adult for that matter. I want them to feel that school is worth their time and effort.

This study is important to the field of education, and more specifically to teachers because it is our role as educators to help students become independent and capable learners who are eager and curious about the world around them. In order for that to happen, we as teachers should find

ways to make the content we are teaching worthwhile and interesting to our students. In doing so, teachers can build intrinsically motivated students who enjoy learning for the simple reason that they are learning new information and developing their sense of the world that surrounds them. As educators, by encouraging students to find enjoyment and pleasure in what they are learning, the students will become more willing to put forth the effort needed and as a result take more away from the given task; this as opposed to feeling that they are completing a numerous amount of pointless tasks because they were instructed to.

In my own third grade class, I have observed a lack of intrinsic motivation in my students. This research is significant because I studied the implementation of choice as a strategy to promote student engagement and intrinsic motivation. By researching articles around intrinsic motivation, student engagement, and student interests, I have discovered variables that could influence students' engagement and intrinsic motivation that can be applied to my classroom practices. Ultimately, the majority of our students could be engaged and intrinsically motivated in the topic, they theoretically would become more engaged, develop pride in their work, and as a result decrease off task behaviors. Students who are intrinsically motivated exhibit better behaviors as a result of their greater sense of wellbeing and engagement in the classroom due to their inherent respect for their education (Froiland, 2012, p.97)

In the world today, the 21<sup>st</sup> century generation of students expect instant gratification, and recognition for tasks completed or chores done when asked. But when our society rewards students for such things in the classroom, it's no wonder that they don't have the passion and excitement for learning that there once was. When these students are constantly praised for doing what is asked, we are robbing them of feeling the satisfaction of success and completion on their own. Therefore this problem needs to be addressed, because our society needs to become aware of ways to build intrinsic motivation within our students.

According to Gambrel and Gillis (2007), “**Intrinsic motivation** is the link between engagement in **literacy** activities and proficient reading and writing.” (p. 50). Gambrel and Gillis (2007) further suggest that highly motivated literacy learners read and write more than less motivated literacy learners do. Simply stated, as people we tend to find enjoyment and pleasure in the things that we do well, whereas activities that we struggle in we typically tend to avoid or only do when we have to. For example if you enjoy reading for pleasure you will be more likely to grab a book to read in your free time rather than spend that time on things you struggle with. The same would go for writing. If you enjoy writing, whether it is short stories, a novel, or simply journaling, you are more likely to do that in your free time rather than do something you do not find pleasure in doing so, in such as household chores. If you didn’t enjoy reading for pleasure or writing for fun, then it is logical to think that you are not going to do those things in your free time. However the idea is, students who enjoy reading do it for pleasure and enjoyment, and turn to writing to express their ideas freely. They are the students who typically become proficient in reading and writing. Due to the fact that they often participate in those pleasurable activities for enjoyment, they have greater exposure to language usage. Those students who find it boring or difficult, would rather spend their time doing other activities that they find pleasurable, and feel competent in. Schiefele (1991) suggests that “when students can choose tasks and texts they are interested in, they expend more effort learning and understanding the material” (p. 312). Schiefele is describing the concept that if students are personally interested in and invested in a given assignment or book, they are more likely to put forth more effort into their learning of the material and fully comprehending what it is all about. Plainly, it interests them and that is key. Therefore stating that intrinsic motivation is the link between proficient reading and writing, and engagement in student’s learning makes perfect sense.



The purpose of this research was to study the implementation of choice into my third grade curriculum and instruction as a strategy to promote student engagement and intrinsic motivation. According to the work by Deci and Ryan (1985; 2000) discussed in Wang and Guthrie, “intrinsic motivation involves engaging in an activity based on personal interest in the activity itself” (p. 162). The students will become active participants in the lessons by exhibiting engagement in the activity from the lesson because they are interested in the topic or task at hand and want to learn for themselves.

According to Turner and Paris (1995) “allowing students to make choices encourages them to develop an interest in literacy, and it provides students an opportunity to plan and regulate their literacy learning” (p. 666). When students are given choices in what they have to complete or in the ways they can complete their assignments, they feel that they have a say in their learning. This provides students a new found empowerment over what they are asked to complete. They feel that their interests and ideas matter, which in turn motivates them to expend the effort needed to succeed. Progressively, the students will become personally invested in their task or project and want to go above and beyond what was asked of them because they are truly enjoying their learning.

One of the major findings in a study by Turner and Paris (1995) was:

Tasks that provided opportunities for students to use in reading and writing for authentic purposes (like reading trade books and composing), that conveyed the value of literacy for communication and enjoyment, and that allowed students to be actively involved in constructing meanings and metacognition about literacy were most successful in motivating students. (p. 664)

In other words, when students are given an opportunity to construct meaning within a genuine context, they are able to come away with a deeper understanding. For example, if I have a student

who is intrigued by cooking and they are asked to design a recipe for their favorite dish, they are going to be more motivated to complete this task because it is interesting to them and worth their time. The same applies for a student who is interested in Pokémon characters or Dragonball-Z; that student would find more enjoyment in writing and reading about their interests rather than an assignment on the history of the Erie Canal. Whether you are a child or an adult, you are going to expend your effort and time around things you enjoy doing and learning about.

The question that I intended to answer throughout my study was: How might implementing choice into the curriculum and instruction promote student engagement and intrinsic motivation within students? This question is the basis for my research and will frame the entire study.

Therefore, I implemented choice within my English Language Arts (ELA) block as a way to promote intrinsic motivation and engagement in my students by allowing students to choose how they present their research about a particular frog. The third grade Common Core State Standards for ELA Module 2 deal with a variety of frogs and accessing informational texts to learn about them in depth. I gave the students the opportunity to present their informational research in a way where they felt comfortable and confident in their work.

I assessed the students' level of engagement through surveys, rubrics, and one-on-one interviews. These tools provided a means to an end for my data collection and analysis by providing valuable and reflective information from the students' perspectives. There was a pre survey passed out before the students started their inquiry based unit on frogs, and then the same survey at the end of the unit. I compared the pre surveys to the post surveys and coded the information gathered to represent any initial findings. In addition to the surveys, I included rubrics that the students completed that assessed their level of engagement. Based on those findings and the findings gathered from the surveys, I conducted one-on-one interviews with the students.

## Literature Review

As a result of the implementation of the New York State Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts, the texts and tasks themselves are demanding of the students and require a rigorous work ethic. Many students lack the motivation and engagement in the lessons and activities designed for their grade level curriculum. As a way to counteract these negative feelings of competence and ability, teachers can and should find ways to implement intrinsic motivation, engagement, personal interest, and curiosity for learning into their classroom environment. Students have lost their love for learning and have been bogged down by the workload, but perhaps if they could find interest in the tasks at hand they could become intrinsically motivated to succeed.

This section will summarize and review various works of research literature that are based around student interest, engagement and motivation. These works of research literature help to provide a context for my own study. Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) “[d]efined motivation and engagement as interest, persistence, and willingness to engage in literature activities” ( p. 549). They define motivation and engagement side by side simultaneously; I think that is because they are demonstrating how motivation and engagement go hand in hand. Relevant research suggests that “instruction that attends to issues of motivation and engagement is linked to improved strategy use and reading achievement” (Dougherty, Ford-Connors, Paratore & Robertson, 2014, p. 549). In summary, research indicates that students become more involved and active in their learning when they are interested in the topic and task, which leads to motivation and can be seen through their level of engagement.

With this being said, one way that issues of motivation and engagement can be addressed within classroom practices is by incorporating choice into the curriculum and daily practices. The sections that follow will discuss various studies and relevant research that illuminate motivation and choice as a way to empower students and their learning.

### **Impact of Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation on Student Learning**

When it comes to motivation there are two types that can exist; extrinsic and/or intrinsic. “Extrinsic motivation refers to the participation in an activity based on external values and demands” (Guthrie & Wang, 2004, p.165). Guthrie & Wang (2004) suggest that “intrinsic motivation involves engagement in an activity based on personal interest in the activity itself” (p. 162). Ryan and Deci (2000) defined intrinsic motivation as “a person’s own inherent desire or personal interest, drawing him or her to participate in an activity” (as cited in Law, 2009, p. 80).

As relevant research indicates, intrinsic motivation refers to the interest and personal engagement in a particular activity; the students’ desire to further their learning. On the other hand, extrinsic motivation occurs when the students’ desire for rewards and prizes are the driving force behind the completion of the assignment or task. For example, if a student is participating in an activity because they want to do as told, or to get recognition and praise from the teacher, then this would be an extrinsically motivated action. However, if a student is participating in an activity to further their understanding and exploration (because of personal interest and investment in the topic), this is an action that is motivated intrinsically.

“Extrinsic and intrinsic motivation are two types of motivation in the area of achievement motivation” (Law, 2009, p. 80). Although these two types of motivation are distinctly different, they can coincide with one another simultaneously. Students can want to please their teacher and receive recognition and praise, while at the same time want to further their understanding of the topic that interests them. Ultimately the goal is to help guide students from only extrinsic motivation to an intrinsic motivation approach toward their learning. After all, if students are only completing the work or assignments for a reward, their learning is no prize at all.

Recent research reveals “intrinsically motivated learners (1) choose to read and write, (2) find pleasure in engaging in literacy activities, and (3) consciously apply knowledge and strategies to more deeply comprehend and compose text” (Gambrel & Gillis, 2007, p. 50). Gambrel and Gillis (2007) research suggests students that are intrinsically motivated will metacognitively apply knowledge gained through their learning, along with specific strategies that aid in their comprehension of the material.

Wang and Guthrie (2004) highlight the impact of intrinsic motivation on reading comprehension with this statement: “Specifically, when children’s curiosities about a story are generated, their interest in understanding the story is heightened. Driven by their interest in the story, these children are involved in what they are reading and concentrate on the description of the events in the story. With the intention of understanding the story, they are likely to put more cognitive effort into making appropriate judgements and references to obtain accurate meaning. (Wang & Guthrie 2004, p. 178-179).

Wang and Guthrie (2004) state that when students are provided opportunities with texts that pique their interests they become more interested in what they are reading. This interest is what manifests into intrinsic motivation over time; the students become actively engaged in what they are reading and as a result truly make meaning from what has been provided. While students are focused on making meaning and comprehending, they are intentional employing the various reading comprehension strategies that they have previously learned.

One way to promote reading in the content areas with students is by connecting the literacy activities to the students’ motivation, interests, and their personal lives. If a student is interested in a specific topic that is being discussed in English Language Arts, that student is going to become engaged in exploring and learning as much as they can about it. Such students will become

intrinsically motivated to further their understanding because they are finding their own sense of pride and capabilities. This is key to learning!

### **Using Choice as a Strategy to Promote Engagement**

“Students are more motivated to engage in literacy activities when they have positive affective responses to the content or processes” (Gambrell & Gillis, 2007, p. 53). Simply stated, when students have positive experiences in literacy activities they can attribute positive and rewarding feelings to the work associated with the given activity. According to Schiefele, (as cited in Paris & Turner, 1995, p.664) “when students can choose tasks and texts they are interested in, they expend more effort learning and understanding the materials.” Therefore, as a way to promote engagement and personal interest within the activity, allowing students to choose what they are reading or how they are presenting their knowledge provides them with the opportunity to become invested in their learning. By incorporating choice into daily literacy activities, such as reading in the content areas, students are offered an empowering way of thinking by doing.

Oldfather (2011) discusses empowering ways of thinking as “self-regulatory and metacognitive in nature, such as choosing a positive attitude, searching for worthwhileness in a task, observing classmates’ interest, just beginning an activity, and self-regulating attention to their work” ( p.243). If students feel the work they are doing is worth their time and effort, they are more willing to find the time and put in the effort. “Allowing students to make choices encourages them to develop interest in literacy, and it provides students with an opportunity to plan and regulate their literacy learning” (Paris & Turner 1995, p.666).

Offering choice can empower students to reach for a higher challenge level. This helps give them a new awareness of their own potential in expanding their horizons for development, along with a smaller margin for boredom or a sense of failure (Oldfather, 2011). By challenging students

to work at their zone of proximal development- on the edge of what they can do independently and still need a little support-they are implementing strategies and metacognitively becoming aware of the thinking processes that are occurring. A “crucial element of choice is that it can encouraging students to take personal responsibility for their tasks by setting goals and deciding how to reach those goals” (Paris & Turner 1995, p. 665). When students are in an environment that is safe enough for them to take risks and be accountable for their learning, they truly begin to learn.

Often choice is associated with open-ended choice tasks, which is defined as students being “in control of both the products they create and the processes they employ” (Paris & Turner, 1995, p.664). In other words, the students have the ability to decide what they are doing and how they represent their understanding. Paris and Turner (1995) further state that, “open-ended activities provide students with opportunities to mold tasks to interest and values, thus supporting their efforts to make meaning while engaging them affectively” (p.665). Along the same lines, open-ended tasks let the students determine in what ways they can adjust and alter the activity in order to meet both the students’ needs and interests. Paris and Turner (1995) suggest the “open tasks allow all students to work at their fullest capacity by adjusting the goals and relative difficulty of tasks” (p.666). Similarly to Vygotsky and his notion of the Zone of Proximal Development, when students are provided with open-ended tasks they are in control of their pace and the end goal of the activity. By transferring the ability to dictate what and how to complete an assignment, students are empowered to put forth the time and effort necessary to succeed.

### **Authentic Purposes and Motivation**

As cited in Turner’s work (1995, p. 416), “[a]n ultimate goal of authentic tasks is to create classrooms that are “cultures of practice” in which students learn skills within, as opposed to separate from, their social and functional contexts” (Brown et al.,1989). Turner is referencing the

psychological perspective that states these “cultures of practice” are tasks that provide students with authentic purposes to pursue actual real-life situations, rather than falsely construed and constructed learning circumstances (Brown et al., 1989). These situations encourage students to foster their knowledge both in school and outside of school; they are not seen as separate realms of learning. In other words, students strive in environments that provide students with as close to real-life experiences as possible. Students will develop and construct meaning about these learning situations through their personal, first-hand experiences, which can then be translated to their everyday lives. When students are given tasks that not only challenge them, but are also relatable to their personal lives, the gained knowledge and skills become more applicable to their life experiences. Therefore when students encounter difficult situations or challenging tasks, they can transform the knowledge previously constructed in a way that allows them to practice those skills through the interaction with their environments (Collins, Brown, & Newman, 1989).

Edelsky (1991) “discusses three dimensions of authentic literacy: (a) meaning making, (b) purpose, and (c) position” (Turner, 1995, p 415). Turner (1995) suggests that Edelsky’s perspective on authentic tasks are those in which opportunities are made that have a clear purpose for the students, as well as encourage the students to make meaning outside of school in conjunction with their own personal desire to learn. Generally speaking, when students can construct meaning in their learning that is not only applicable to lessons in school, but also build connections in regards to life lessons, they are more likely to foster the desire required to motivate them to learn.

“Tasks that provided opportunities for students to use reading and writing for authentic purposes (like reading trade books and composing), that conveyed the value of literacy for communication and enjoyment, and that allowed students to be actively involved in constructing meanings and metacognitions about literacy were most successful in motivating students” (Paris & Turner 1995, p.664). Paris and Turner (1995) suggest that students’ levels of engagement and



motivation in their literacy learning will increase and become more successful if they are given tasks that they find interest in, as well as have a personal value and investment within. By providing students with opportunities in their literacy learning that places value on the students' enjoyment and ways of communicating with one another, teachers are encouraging student's active participation in their construction of knowledge. This can provide students with a sense of self-determination and autonomy.

Relating authentic purposes to intrinsic motivation occurs naturally due to the fact that students are more likely to actively participate in an activity that they have a personal interest in or find value within in regards to their learning. When students are invested within a given task, they exhibit more effort and demonstrate persistence even if the task becomes difficult. Therefore "literacy tasks that encourage students to pursue their personal interests promote motivation" (Turner, 1995, p.417). Csikszentmihalyi's work (as cited in Turner, 1995), states that the "intrinsic motivation theory suggests that literacy texts should be chosen not because they "illustrate abstract principles" but because they "relate to students' interests, goals, or abilities" (p. 417). When the literacy tasks are chosen based on the students' interests, goals and/or abilities the students will take away much more than if they feel like they are being forced to read or write about something that has no relation to them and their lives.

## **Summary**

In conclusion, by molding literacy instruction to the needs, interests, and skills of the students, it's possible to instill an intrinsic desire for learning and reading in students. (Paris & Turner, 1995). When teachers adapt their objectives and lesson activities to meet and support the needs of their students, as well as their interests, students will begin to excel. The students' level of interest are piqued, and as a result the students' become more engaged and willing to put forth the

effort to complete the task. As the student becomes engaged and willing, their intrinsic motivation- or personal desire to achieve increases as well. That is a huge feat in itself. We can't be worried only about the work load, rigorous tasks, and standardized tests at hand, if we can't get the students engaged and motivated to put in the time and effort. If we can guide students in a path that finds motivation and engagement, that is half the battle already won.

As a way to help promote intrinsic motivation, using choice to encourage self-efficacy and self-competence in the students learning provides an empowering way of thinking by doing. When students can make choices about what they are reading and what they are doing, process and products- authentic purposes, they begin to feel like their education is worthy of their time and effort. This approach encourages students to become willing and motivated in their learning, which in turn promotes intrinsic motivation through engagement.

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this research is to study the implementation of choice into my third grade curriculum, and instruction as a way to promote student engagement and intrinsic motivation. Implementing choice within my English Language Arts block allows the students to have a say in how they demonstrate their understanding and knowledge of our inquiry-based unit on frogs. The research gathered from the study in my classroom supports the idea that engagement and intrinsic motivation increased when students had a choice in how they presented their understandings. In gathering data, I used student observations, anecdotal notes, pre and post-surveys on students' level of engagement, and interviews based around their level of intrinsic motivation; as well student reflective rubrics and staff reflective rubrics that highlight key areas of inquiry-based learning such as: collaboration, engagement and knowledge of the topic.

**Participants**

The participants involved in this study originally included twenty-one third graders from an urban city school district located in upstate New York. However, due to unforeseen circumstances with scheduling and available areas, my study was altered to have a small group of eight students in total. These eight students happen to be the highest in regard to academic benchmarks, as well as being at or above grade level. Therefore, my time with them was done as a form of enrichment. The group of students were made up of a combination of students from all three of the third grade classrooms. They ranged in ages from seven to eight. Their participation was based on parental consent and each student's assent. All students completed the survey, however data had been collected and used only from the students whose parents have consented to their participation. This number totaled six out of the eight students whose data were able to be published within my study due to the parental consent and the students' assent.

**Procedures:**

When administering the pre and post-assessments I provided all students the opportunity to share their honest feedback. These assessments included the pre and post surveys, one-to-one interviews with myself, the presentation of their project, as well as their self-reflective rubrics.

The students completed the pre-survey before even diving in or explaining what the project would encompass. This survey was passed out to each of the students and was completed independently. After all students had finished, the surveys were collected.

Then we began our research and constructed our projects. Throughout the learning inquiry, students' opinions and thoughts were discussed both independently and in a whole group setting. During this time there was not any formal assessment data collected, only before the inquiry based unit and afterwards.

Immediately after their presentations the students were asked to independently complete the post assessment survey and the self-reflective rubrics. The post surveys, which was the same as the pre survey as a way to compare and record any changes, was completed first. Once the survey was collected, I passed out the self-reflective rubric that had them individually assess themselves on creativity and innovations, as well as team work and collaboration through five questions.

Lastly, I conducted one-on-one interviews with each of the six students who had returned their permission slips and audio-taped our session. I then transcribed the discussion from the interview and recorded these transcription in my field notes and double entry journal.

### **Positionality**

As the teacher-researcher I am positioned as a working class female who is Caucasian with Italian ethnicity. Currently I am completing my Master's Degree in Literacy Birth through Twelfth Grade at The College at Brockport, SUNY. In addition I am a first year teacher, and I am currently teaching third grade at a western New York urban school. I was born and raised within the same area and attended suburban schools growing up. My elementary school, middle school, and high school were all within a five mile radius of one another and were close to my home. I always enjoyed school and found learning to be intriguing and engaging in itself. I am an only child and was raised by a single mother, with active involvement from my grandparents and great grandparents. Growing up I was considered to be part of a working class family which permitted for some luxuries and advantages in comparison to the students I teach now. I believe these aspects are integral to my positionality as a teacher-researcher because they affect my outlook on life and perspectives of society.

### Procedures and Data Collection

As a third grade teacher, I follow the New York State Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts. When deciding which of the modules for the year provided the most opportunity for student choice, I decided that Module 2 aligned with my goals to use choice as a way to promote intrinsic motivation and student engagement. This module allowed for student interest to drive their investigations and research on a particular type of frog. As a culminating activity students were to demonstrate their expertise on their chosen frog through a research-based narrative paragraph. This paragraph will highlight the research conducted by the students and lend itself as a way to educate their peer about their diverse frogs (*EngageNY Resource Grade 3 ELA Module 2*, n.d.). The standards that support this culminating activity would be NYSP12 ELA Standards W.3.2, W.3.3 and L.3.3 (See Appendix for attached standard descriptions).

From the standards listed above that aligned with the culminating activity, I was able to design lessons that followed an inquiry-based format and provided students with the opportunity to have choice in their learning. I was able to adjust the lessons to meet the students' diverse needs by offering them the choice of which frog they would like to learn more about, as well as how they would like to demonstrate their gained knowledge of that particular frog. First we created a master list of all the frogs we had read about from the articles and resources provided through the module. After doing so, each student decided on which frog they would like to learn more in depth about. Once the research was concluded, students were able to choose the manner in which they represented their gained knowledge. We brainstormed a list of ideas as a whole class, such as a children's book, three dimensional model of their frog, constructing a diorama that focused on their habitat and adaptations, writing a poem or a rap, and many more. My hope was that this ability to choose what interests them personally would empower the students and motivate them to put forth

the work needed to complete their research. Once their research was completed, students were able to have freedom in how they represented what they had learned.

I used a pre and post assessment survey that asked students about their feelings toward school and the work associated with it in ELA, as well as if they are more obliged to do the assignment if they could choose how they would like to present the information.

I administered the survey to all eight of my students in the class and asked that they provide honest feedback and answers to the questions. Since the surveys were administered as a part of my curricular lessons, I only sought out consent from the parents and assent from my students to use the data collected in my study. All eight students participated in the inquiry-based unit lesson activities, but only the six students with both parental consent and their personal assent will have their data collected and published in my report.

After collecting the surveys, I observed the students and their level of engagement in the lessons. I observed the students 3 times per week for the duration of 5 weeks. During this time I looked at their level of personal interest, their level of excitement, and ability to stay on task as ways to demonstrate their intrinsic motivation in the lesson.

Once the students presented their project, I had them complete self-reflective rubrics that assessed themselves on creativity and innovation along with team work and collaboration. Once the rubrics were completed students then completed their post surveys. From there I conducted one-to-one interviews with each student and audio recorded our session, with permission from the parents.

The post survey had very similar questions as the pre-survey with minor adjustments to the tenses. The post survey was administered after the students' final project and was done in a whole-class setting. Once again, the students who had both the parental consent and individual assent were the only students whose data were gathered and used for my report. If students did not have both

consent and assent, the surveys and anecdotal notes recorded served as a reflective tool for my teaching practices and useful information for me professionally.

I interviewed the six students using a semi-structured format. The questions included: Did you like doing this project? What did you like about it? How did you choose your frog? Did you enjoy doing the research on your frog? What parts did you enjoy and what parts did you not like doing? What was most interesting to you? And why? Why did you decide to (modality of presentation) in order to present your research on your frog? Was it easy? What did you find difficult? Why do you think you chose that style? Was it something you find fun and interesting? Something new you learned how to do? Were you thinking about what the audience would enjoy the most? In the future, would you like your classroom to have choices built in for projects like this one? Why or Why not? What would you recommend that I change if we were to do this again?

Overall these assessment tools were created and administered in the hope that the students' level of engagement had increased during our time together and working on their projects. I used students' engagement level as an indicator of intrinsic motivation.

### **Trustworthiness**

My research design met the criteria for trustworthiness because it exhibited coherence among all components of my research design; such as relevant data, data sources, and data collection strategies. These include choosing to elicit specific data in order to answer my research question. I triangulated my sources in a way that incorporated various methods and perspectives from different articles, as well as elaborating on notions or concepts that pertained to my study. I stressed key aspects of research articles that help to develop and illuminate the basis of my own study. I believe that my research study is trustworthy because I have accumulated data sources that

have been proven to be academically sound and valid. The plausibility and integrity of my study was done with the utmost respect for research and the results gathered.

### **Data Analysis and Findings**

The two emerging themes that I found when I coded and analyzed my data centered around student voice and teacher support. Before I describe my findings in depth I would like to define what I mean by student voice and teacher support. When describing students' voice, I am referring to the thoughts, ideas, and opinions being shared by all of the students. Through this inquiry-based learning approach towards my teaching, students willingly offered ideas and explanations for both themselves and for the other students in the small group of eight.

The students were actively engaged when the power of their learning was handed over to them.

In regard to the teacher support, I am considering how the support of the classroom teacher (myself) and at least one other support staff member (math, literacy, and/or STEM coaches) was at all times during the project. This allowed for my students to work at their fullest potential. Students were supported when and where they needed it and given the freedom to explore when they were capable.

Using choice as a strategy to promote engagement and intrinsic motivation within my students presented itself in various ways throughout my study. In regard to the students' voice in their choices, I found that they used their voice for different purposes. Students actively participated, actively collaborated, and actively listened and provided critical feedback to one another in order for their voices to be heard. In reference to the teacher support, I found that the amount of support by teachers and coaches allowed for students' zone of proximal development to be reached. It forced the students to become accountable for their own work, as well as providing



support where the students decided they needed it, rather than where we as the adults perhaps thought they did.

My findings are presented chronologically so that I can show how the project unfolded. As my findings are interrelated, I will illustrate them together throughout the narrative.

### **In the Beginning**

The first finding was that implementing choice provided students with opportunities to have their voices heard. My first finding illuminated how providing students with opportunities to have their voices heard can encourage them to actively participate in an activity. The first event that supports this finding is what I am going to refer to as my decision making activity. I created an activity that promoted team work and collaboration among my eight students. They were presented with a problem that needed solving. The problem was that Mr. Scoops needs to buy four cartons of ice cream for a birthday party he was hired for. So Mr. Scoops had to decide on which four cartons of ice cream to buy. I presented my students with this problem and was truly intrigued by their ways of problem solving. When I asked the students to brainstorm ideas aloud and collectively, they were able to create a list of various strategies they could use to solve the problem. For example, one student recommended creating a tally chart for each other's votes in regard to the four cartons. As they started to get moving on this strategy, they quickly realized they needed to have the students vote on different flavors of ice cream first. So they did! Each student was allotted four votes and could use them however they pleased. With some probing questions, I asked the students if the four cartons had to be all the same or if they had to be all different? They soon realized that they could have a combination of how they cast their four votes. A student volunteered to write down the different flavors of ice cream that each person chose and constructed a list that showcased these various flavors. From there, another student went person by person and placed a tally next to the

flavor that was chosen. Once everyone had cast their votes on their chosen flavors, I asked the students to look at the data collected and tell me what they noticed. They described the flavors that had the most amount of votes, the ones that had an equal number of votes, as well as any outliers that were not chosen or very few votes in comparison. With support from myself, I asked them what they could do with the information they gathered, “How can this help you make a decision?” From there they took off with their own ideas of how they could come to a collaborative decision. Finally they agreed upon taking the flavors that had the highest tallies associated with that particular flavor.

I then added another step to the problem and told them that Mr. Scoops had forgotten his wallet at home and could only afford two cartons of ice cream with the money he had in his pocket. I began to see my students’ wheels turning in their brains as they processed what that all meant for them. Through another round of brainstorming, the students collectively decided upon choosing 2 cartons of the same flavor. This was amazing to me! These eight students all worked together to solve a problem and no tears were shed! As I brought the activity to a close, I asked the students to reflect upon what they were able to accomplish and briefly described the process that we took in solving the problem. This event highlights how these eight students were all actively participating and engaged in the task at hand. I think that this active participation is due to the fact that these students were provided with an avenue to share their own ideas and opinions with one another and in turn felt affirmation from their peers in regard to their voices being heard.

As described above, this decision making activity encouraged student engagement and active participation in an activity that required their voices to be heard. One reason that I think this task was accomplishable is because of the level of support and guidance provided by the teacher, myself, as well as the other staff members that were present. This led me to my second finding; by scaffolding students’ learning, they become actively engaged within their own learning. When developing the activity I wanted to make sure that the tasks were broken down into smaller sections

or chunks as a way to help the students feel like they could accomplish what was being asked of them. Therefore, I would lead them through a process where they had one goal or one step to complete before moving onto the next. This was the first time these eight students were part of an environment that was based solely on inquiry. This is why I wanted to create an experience that was safe and inviting, not one associated with frustration and incompetence. The design of the activity provided students opportunities to go step by step and work collaboratively until they came to an agreement on their solution peacefully. Due to the manner that the decision making activity was broken down into smaller and more manageable tasks, these students felt like they could accomplish the task at hand.

Another way that I as the facilitator of the lesson made it accomplishable for the students was through the type of language I modeled through my questioning. When it came to asking students the questions, I purposefully would ask questions that were open ended. Such as, “What led you to that decision?”, “Tell me more about why you think that”, and “What is your reasoning for agreeing/disagreeing with that?” (These are just a few specific examples from my decision making activity.) As the facilitator of the lesson, I focused on asking questions that demanded the students’ to delve deeper into their thinking and, in turn have to be able to justify their responses; rather than questions that prompted a yes or no answer. If I were to instruct the students to choose two cartons of ice cream without any limitations on their choices, the number of solutions and possibilities would be endless. This would not be a bad thing entirely, however when first introducing an activity where students had to actively listen and participate in an effective manner, along with decide for themselves the best way to problem solve, this would become too overwhelming for them to process.

Therefore by breaking each of the steps down into a smaller sections (chunking), and pausing frequently to check for student understanding and engagement, these students were able to

work collectively with the problem at hand. In addition to chunking the tasks for the students, I was able to facilitate their learning in a manner that supported their needs without providing them with the answers-scaffolding. This was achieved by asking higher level questions

### **During**

As time went on during our inquiry based unit on frogs, the students' purposes when using their voices adapted to their needs. Students began and continued to use their voice to actively collaborate with one another during the research and design components of the project. One event that illustrated this finding was what I will refer to as the frog fact pass activity. During this activity students were asked to identify a fact that stood out to them that they discovered in their research. They were to write it down on a notecard shaped like a frog using a colored marker that was specific to them. After everyone had written down their fact, everyone passed their frog notecards to the right. Then students were asked to write down another fact that intrigued them. This process continued with three complete passes; therefore each student wrote down three important facts to them on three different frog note cards of the seven total. The chart below summarizes the students' findings from their research on their specific stage of the life cycle on the frog. The chart is separated by the frog note cards (card 1-7), with each student identified by a specific color.

<b>Card 1:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Long bodies</li> <li>• They have jelly to cover the eggs. It helps keep predators away</li> <li>• Predators eat the eggs</li> </ul>
<b>Card 2:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• After eleven weeks, they will have fully grown lungs, legs and they have lost their tail</li> <li>• When the tadpole has a tail, it looks like a fish</li> <li>• The tadpoles turn into froglets. The body shrinks and the legs form</li> </ul>
<b>Card 3:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Those eggs that die, their shell turns white</li> <li>• When they are fully grown they will have their poison from the food they eat</li> <li>• The frog will mate and make a baby and it is like an over and over thing for years going</li> </ul>
<b>Card 4:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tadpoles use their tails to swim in the water</li> <li>• After a few days a tadpole can swim and eat algae</li> <li>• Looks like a small adult frog, they leave the water then comes back</li> </ul>
<b>Card 5:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It starts to shed its lips and skin. At 12 weeks it has a small stub of a tail</li> <li>• Fin-like tails</li> <li>• The lucky eggs manage to hatch if it didn't get eaten</li> </ul>
<b>Card 6:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Froglets start to hunt</li> <li>• Tadpoles become frogs by losing their legs and tail</li> <li>• Earthy colors</li> </ul>
<b>Card 7:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• After the adult frog has laid her egg. The male frog will fertilize them to keep warm</li> <li>• Back legs first than front</li> <li>• They will now live on land and also in ponds</li> </ul>

Table 1- Frog Fact Pass Student Responses

Key: Student 1, Student 2, Student 3, Student 4, Student 5, Student 6, Student 7

Each student is assigned a specific color that indicates their response on each of the note card passes.

As a group the students' collectively decided upon important categories which would be useful for the students' to be knowledgeable about in regard to their project. First they brainstormed a comprehensive list of categories that included: time, place, food, size and characteristics, looks, predators, and interesting facts. From there I prompted the students to think what would be included in each of those categories and to share with someone right next to them (I refer to this as think, pair, share). After the discussions came to a close, I asked for some volunteers to talk about the discourse they had in their group and what they found to be important. After consolidating what each category encompassed, I asked the students to look at the categories and see if there were any categories that we could combine based on their definitions of what each category included. The students from there collaboratively decided to include the look category in with the size and characteristics. When asking them how they decided upon that, one student responded with "Well if you think about it, a characteristic is a way someone or something looks. So really we don't need a separate category for looks and characteristics, they could just be combined!" When asking the other six students (due to one being absent that day), I saw a consensus of agreement with the group by the head nods. It was a unanimous decision that they facilitated with a little prompting and scaffolded support from me. This example showcases how students are motivated when they have a choice in what they are doing and how they are doing it, along with how well they can collaborate with one another when they are interested and engaged within the activity.

Secondly, the students sorted the facts we currently had into the categories they had just developed. This illuminated where we had a plethora of facts, as well as where we had gaps of knowledge in regard to our research. For example the fact listed above in the chart: "at eleven weeks the frog has fully grown lungs, legs, and have lost their tail" was placed in the time category. After the students read a fact I paused and gave the students some wait time in order for them to internalize the fact that was just discussed and decide independently where they thought it should be

placed. Then I would have the student that read it share their personal decision and ask the group to “show me your thumbs” (this is an activity where the students place their finger with their thumb pointing up if they agree and thumb facing down if they disagree). If and when a student disagreed, I asked them to “Tell me more about why you think that.” This scaffolded support forced the students to become accountable for their thinking, but at the same time provided them with an opportunity to voice their opinion. We did this for each fact listed on each of the seven note cards. Although this process is time consuming, it was very much worth it because it demanded students to not only make their own independent choice but also to defend or describe why they had thought that to the group. Then in some instances students saw how their train of thought impacted their group members understanding and ways of thinking through a deeper level of discussion and higher level of understanding. The amount of group discussion and collaboration that transpired through this activity alone was incredible! And even more so the amount of respect that these seven students had manifested for one another was motivating for myself as the teacher to see within my very own students.

The frog fact pass activity encouraged the students to collaborate with one another by having to be conscious of their peers. This collaboration existed in every step of the activity, within the writing of their facts, the construction of various categories that were important for them to know and understand about their specific stage of the frog life cycle, the discussions that transpired from them, and the group efforts to sort and categorize the facts collectively. Students had to acknowledge the fact that was written down on the frog notecard and work collaboratively in order to not repeat the facts listed, as well as be aware of how much space they were taking up since it was a shared notecard. When coming up with the various categories, the students had to think about what their needs included along with their peers, and therefore had to conduct themselves respectfully in discussions. From there the students had to collaborate and collectively reach an

agreement on the different categories and what each included. Lastly they had to be able to describe their opinions in a manner that was courteous of others opinions while still meeting their own needs.

On the other hand, the amount of teacher support during the research and design of the project forced the students to be accountable for their work. By having the students conduct their own research, they had to acknowledge what they knew and did not know and take the next necessary steps. Simply stated, students could not just rely on notes given by the teachers or previous handouts that had important relevant information; the students had to do their own research which in turn made them become accountable for what they had completed and had not completed. Students could not use the excuse they “didn’t get one”, or that they “did not have the notes”, or “did not know what to do.” They were forced to self-regulate their learning and as a result be aware of what they knew and did not know. The Support Staff or I had no control or say in regards to what was written on the frog notecards, the students truly had the power in their hands. With it being a small group, when students were asked to describe their thought processes or justify their answer, every voice was accounted for. There was no “hiding” behind other more outspoken peers to answer the questions, they had to be accountable for their own actions and work completed. If they didn’t have a fact to write down, or their fact was already used they had to find or use a new one. If they did not have anymore “new” facts to use, well then they realized that their research was superficial and not as comprehensive as it needed to be. Now, luckily this did not happen and I strongly believe that it is because the students were engaged in their research and in turn motivated to perform the work necessary to succeed.

### **The Presentation**

The last way voice manifested itself in the study was by students providing critical feedback of their peers. Students had to actively listen to one another and comprehend what was being stated



in order to provide reasonable and just feedback for one another. This was perhaps the greatest success of my study. It was mind boggling to witness my students truly listening to one another and taking what each other's comments were, and respond and react respectfully. For my third grade students to positively receive constructive feedback and internalize it in a manner that did not make them feel incompetent or personally attacked showed great integrity.

Before describing the students' preparation for their presentations which was their last stage in the student inquiry-based learning, I would like to take you back to the very beginning so that I can draw parallels between the two. The first day that we started our inquiry based unit study the students had no idea what we were going to be learning about but instead participated in what was called the entry event. This event was the icing on the cake for my students. My room was decorated to look like a pond with blue chart paper everywhere and not part of our tiled floor or any student desks visible, blue and green streamers hanging from the ceiling from one end of my room to the other, lily pads scattered around and frog templates placed all over. Once students had stepped into the transformed frog pond that was once my classroom, their journey of inquiry-based learning began.

Students were given minimal directions, which included that they had to work with a partner and go to a station that didn't have anyone else working at it. Students were given five minutes to look at the clue and discuss where they thought they were moving to next by solving the clue. Once the timer went off the students migrated to the station that they thought was described on their card. Each station had a different activity. They were: a craft-ivity, a frog card match game, a station to read and explore the *Frog and Toad are Friends books by Arnold Lobel*, and smartboard activity where they had clues and had to solve them to figure out which animal or thing was being described. The craft-ivity (a craft and activity combined) is where the students used paper plates to design a frog face; they colored the paper plate with crayons, folded it in half, glued on googly-

eyes, and cut a hole for a tongue which was filled with a noise maker. The frog card match game had the students flip over one card at a time to see what frog it was, and what fact was being represented. From there they would record the facts on their recording sheet. The Frog and Toads are Friends books were laid out on a table with comfortable spots for students to spread out and read to one another or read independently the famous stories. The fourth station was the smartboard, this is where students were presented with three clues and they had to guess what animal or thing was being described. These clues all related to a life cycle of sorts, such as the life cycle of a plant, the life cycle of a chicken, or the life cycle of the butterfly. After figuring out what the clues were describing the students would have to drag pictures or phrases in the correct order of the given life cycle. As a facilitator it was challenging to sit back and truly just observe the students conduct themselves in how they saw fit but at the same time proved to be very rewarding. I was often asked “Miss Berntsen, what do we do?”; “Miss Berntsen, I don’t know where to go”; “Miss Berntsen I don’t get it!” But through my dismay they solved every obstacle they encountered without an adult telling them exactly what to do.

Now, I described this entry event in great detail so that I can illuminate the parallels that existed between the entry event and the preparation for their presentations. When it came time to brainstorm ideas for the students’ station activities, the entry event served as a great example that they had experienced first-hand. The students generated a list of possible ideas to use which included: a craft, a physical game, an activity where they had to put something together, a file folder game, and an activity where the audience member would have to pick out the true facts from the false facts. And this was just the beginning! Once students decided on which station activity they wanted to do, I gave each group a chance to try it out with their own personal twist and gained knowledge. Through many rounds of trial and error and critical feedback from peers, the students’ finally decided on their station activities and they were far better than I could have taught them.

That right there is the amazing part of inquiry-based learning, students' do not need the answers, but rather just the tools in order to succeed. The student's station activities ended up being: a fact game where the audience had to crack open a plastic egg and read the fact out loud and decide if it were true or false; an station for paper origami where students instructed the audience how to construct a tadpole; the Playdoh froglet where the audience created a froglet out of Playdoh, and lastly, the adult frog where the audience members had to identify true facts from a card and if they got it correct they got to play leap frog (physically leaping over another human being.)

In regard to the students' choice, I found that it allowed for students to actively listen and provide critical feedback of their peers. When students were to construct ideas for their station activities and their clues, I had us start off discussing ideas as a whole group. I then provided them time to go to their individual work spots with their partners to test out their ideas and then come back to our whole group discussion to share what worked and what didn't work along with possible new ideas. Students received this feedback from their peers with ease, and even more so students were eager to help one another make their station activity the best it could be. My students were truly supporting one another's learning rather than competing for the attention. During the design and work time, I could physically see the excitement on my students' faces when they had just thought of something either for their own station or for another member of the group. We often spent time brainstorming and generating ideas for everyone and not just one group at a time.

In regard to the teacher support, I found that students were able to receive support where they truly needed it and not where we as teachers thought they needed it. When it came time for students to decide upon their own station activities, based on the list that they had generated, I began to become a little apprehensive in allowing them to decide upon their own activities. They continued saying the same activity over and over again with minor changes to fit their stage. I began to fear that they were all going to do the same station activity and that it was going to be drawing a

frog or assembling a frog that was pre-cut into pieces. But with some scaffolded support, and not just telling them what to do, they came up with a solid list of various activities to do that would be great, let alone the activities that they constructed in the end on their own. Their station activities truly blew me away! I was thoroughly impressed with what they had created all on their own. To summarize what I describe in depth up above, the eggs stage did the plastic egg true or false fact activity, the tadpole stage used the paper origami to make a tadpole, the froglet stage decided to use Playdoh to create a three dimensional representation of the froglet, and the adult frog group found a way to incorporate facts and the game of leap frog.

As the teacher I could have easily stepped in and told each group exactly what to do; perhaps a crossword puzzle where the audience had to solve the questions and use the answer, or construct a children's books with information and drawings, or create a diagram of the physical habitat, but because I did not step in and take over the students learned way more than I could have forced upon them. Therefore the students were provided support where they truly needed it instead of where I as the teacher assumed they did. It very much turned into, "Miss Berntsen can we have your opinion on this" or "Miss Berntsen which way do you think is better?" rather than "Miss Berntsen I don't know what to do" or "Miss Berntsen this is too hard, I can't do it!" As teachers it is not our jobs to think for the students but rather guide them on the path of finding their own learning and knowledge along the way.

Once the presentation started and adult began filtering in, the students soared. They looked so comfortable and confident I truly began to glow. These students had become experts on frogs in the short amount of time that we had together and were engaged in such a way that it demanded the audience members to get involved and participate at the same level. My students were making jokes and laughing with the adults walking through, they were speaking effortlessly, and they truly seemed to love what they were discussing with the adults about all that they had learned.

## **Conclusions, Discussions and Implications**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the level of engagement and intrinsic motivation present within my third grade students, when opportunities for choice were provided.

The research question that framed my study was:

- How might implementing choice into my curriculum and instruction promote student engagement and intrinsic motivation within my students?

### **Summary of Findings**

The major findings that I discovered throughout my study were implementing choice provides students with opportunities to have their voices heard, and by scaffolding students' learning, they become actively engaged within their own learning. "Providing choices can enable students to work at more optimal challenge levels so that they feel a sense of their own abilities and experience minimal boredom or failure" (Oldfather, 2011, p.250). In other words, Oldfather (2011) is advising educators to provide students with opportunities to choose what they learn about and how they learn about it. By doing so, it can make all the difference in their level of participation and engagement as well as their feeling of incompetence or boredom. This type of learning experience can allow for intrinsic motivation to prosper within the students rather than encouraging extrinsic motivation by bribing the students to complete their assignments for prizes and rewards. As cited in Crow (2015), Deci & Ryan (1985) suggest "that giving students some choice- however small- in a task or assignment will increase their intrinsic motivation for that task" (p.21) Deci & Ryan (1985) are speaking to the fact that when students' feel like they have control over what happens in their learning environment, they exude the necessary characteristics to succeed, such as active listening and participating within the lesson. Other relevant research that supports providing students' opportunities for choice as a way to increase active participation and engagement is supported by

Turner and Paris (1995). Students whose daily reading tasks are confined to rigorous and seemingly pointless texts cause students to lose any and all interest, and as a result their level of intrinsic motivation decreases dramatically. When students do not have a personal interest or inherent desire in what they are reading, they will not employ the strategies needed to comprehend or internalize the text itself. Whereas, students who are provided with opportunities to choose their texts, construct rich literacy experiences through selecting, evaluating and enjoying literature (Turner & Paris, 1995).

Turner & Paris (1995) further discuss a “crucial element of choice is that it can encourage students to take personal responsibility for their tasks by setting goals and deciding how to reach those goals” (p. 665). This responsibility that the students feel for their work and take on over their learning aids in the journey of becoming lifelong learners.

Alongside of increasing intrinsic motivation in the classroom through choice, intrinsic motivation can also be cultivated among students by scaffolding their learning. According to Robertson et al. (2014), “[s]uch instructional planning takes into account students’ present needs for skills and strategies, while also emphasizing three key elements: motivation and engagement, instructional intensity, and cognitive challenge” (p. 546). These researchers shed light on how teachers instructional planning should focus on the students’ needs by looking at the ways in which students’ will be engaged and motivated to complete their work, the level or intensity of what is being expected of the students, along with the cognitive processes being used to successfully complete the assignment or task. When teachers have provided the necessary support for students, they become empowered and active participants in their own learning. Therefore teachers who effectively mold tasks to the students’ interests and values, are successfully supporting their efforts to make meaning, meanwhile engaging them affectively (Turner & Paris, 1995)

Turner & Paris discuss how “open tasks allow all students to work at their fullest capacity by adjusting the goals and relative difficulty of the tasks” (p. 665). As discussed previously, open tasks are those in which provide students’ choice, challenge and some control of their learning. By breaking up or chunking the tasks into smaller tasks, they become more manageable for the students and they feel like they can succeed rather than becoming overwhelmed and frustrated. If students get to their frustrational level, they often shut down and give up because to them, they do not feel competent enough to finish the task on their own. Through scaffolded support by the teachers, students shouldn’t find themselves at their breaking point. Teacher support also encourages students’ to become accountable for their work. Students are willingly and eager to demonstrate what they can do and what they already know. However, when students are the drivers of their own learning, they are forced to take accountability for what was not completed. Therefore students were forced to self-regulate their work and time because the teacher wasn’t sitting there telling them exactly what to do.

The last finding I discovered around teacher support was that implementing choice allowed for the teachers to provide support where the students actually needed it rather than where we as the adults felt that they did. When students were given the freedom to explore their learning and volitions in how they saw fit, the teachers were freed up to guide the students where they needed some support. Rather than feeling like all students had to be on the same page at the same step, which as a teacher I often feel like I have to do in order for their assignment or project to be “correct”. But who am I, or more importantly, as teachers who are we to say if their non-linear or scattered thinking habits are correct or incorrect as long as they arrive at the end objective.

“In summary, motivational research has shown that tasks which provide appropriate challenges, genuine choices, some student control over learning, and opportunities to collaborate with others enhance students determination, effort, and thoughtful engagement” (Turner, 1995,

p.418). Turner (1995) proclaims that all of these aspects attribute to engagement and throughout my study I have found that when these same elements are present, students can truly become intrinsically motivated by their learning.

## **Conclusions**

From my study, I have concluded that implementing choice encouraged group discussion and collaboration among students, as well as motivated students to become empowered by their learning. My conclusions directly relate to my purpose for this study, and are extensions of my findings that are discussed above.

### **Conclusion 1: Implementing choice encouraged group discussion and collaboration among students.**

By implementing choice into my curriculum and instruction, the level of students' engagement increased. This was demonstrated through their eagerness to discuss their ideas and opinions with others. Students who were typically introverted and reserved in my whole class setting, emerged and truly took off running when it came time to share their thoughts and suggestions based around our inquiry based unit on frogs. The students were able to share their ideas respectfully and be heard by their peers in a manner that fostered effective and critical group discussions. "[P]revious research suggests that contexts that increase intrinsic motivation will be socially interactive, with freedom for the learner" (Blumefield, 1992, p.311). I think that the students were willing to share and discuss with the group due to the opportunities for choice that were provided. The students acknowledged that they were the ones in charge of their learning and their project, and as a result they constructed an environment that was conducive to allowing all voices to be heard. Students exhibited characteristics of intrinsic motivation through their increased levels of



engagement; I often heard from other co-workers or the students themselves their excitement and volition to continue their learning and share with the other third graders what they had created for their cumulative projects.

**Conclusion 2: Implementing choice motivated students to feel empowered by their learning.**

For many students, school is disconnected from the students' personal and social lives outside of school. Therefore, countless students feel that their education has no relevance to them. However when students are provided with opportunities for choice, that is choosing what they are learning about or how they are learning about it, they can make and construct connections between their lives at home and at school. When students are building these connections between what they have learned in school and how it is relevant to their daily lives, they are truly learning! One way to achieve this goal is by giving students permission to make choices about their learning. Once they are permitted to do so, their learning no longer feels like tedious and strenuous work that doesn't apply to their lives; it becomes invigorating and powerful learning that is useful. When students can find this sense of empowerment over their learning, they are no longer just doing the work to please the teacher or to earn the reward; the students are expanding their knowledge because they want to learn more and are inherently interested in doing so for themselves. This occurrence is directly related to intrinsic motivation because the students are no longer performing the desired act in order to receive recognition or a prize but are innately doing it for the betterment of their own learning; for students their learning becomes liberating!

**Implication 1: Students need opportunities for choice to be built into their daily routines.**

Students need opportunities for choice built into their daily schedules and instruction in order to feel like their voices matter and that their education is worth their time and effort. By

providing opportunities for students' to make choices about their learning, they acknowledge that their voice matters and is being heard. When students' interests are being utilized within the classroom they are more likely to become active participants and show that they are actively engaged in what is being taught. This is directly related to intrinsic motivation because that is exactly what intrinsic motivation encompasses; active participants and engagement, along with the desire to learn more for themselves. Providing students with the ability to choose what they are going to learn about or how they are going to demonstrate their learning, means they are more likely to expend the effort needed to complete the task. This is because it is of interest to them and they don't mind putting forth the time in order to achieve and succeed. Whereas, in classrooms where there are not opportunities of choice for students, they are forced to complete the given tasks because they were asked too. As cited in Chapman, Greenfield, & Rinaldi (2010), Dahl & Freppon (1995) suggest that "we must consider the students' perspectives during reading instruction in order to understand what activities and which contexts shape their thinking and learning" (p. 125). I recognize not everything in regard to student learning can be left up for choice, however by having some areas or specific tasks where students can pick and choose how they complete them, the students will invest themselves more deeply and truly delve into the learning.

**Implication 2: Teachers need to implement choice into their curriculum in order to engage their students.**

If you ask almost any teacher what their goal for their students is, most of them are going to respond with something along the lines of finding pleasure and enjoyment in their learning, wanting to be at school in order to learn more, or guiding them in becoming lifelong learners. According to

Guthrie, Bennett, & Faibisch (2001), “[s]tudents who are intrinsically motivated have an inherent interest in what they are reading and enjoy figuring out the meanings for themselves” (p. 309) Well, in order for these hopes and wishes to come true, teachers need to find ways to engage their students and intrinsically motivate them. One way to do this is by providing choice within their classroom instruction. By doing so, students are able to choose what interests them, what they want to learn more about, and what they enjoy learning about. These conditions make students want to participate and become actively engaged in their learning. When students are engaged in their learning they are more willing to take risks with their learning and ultimately making it possible for them to reach their fullest potential, as well as self-regulating and self-monitoring their learning which as a result will promote independent thinkers and problem solvers.

### **Limitations**

My study overall reinforced the significance of providing students with choices over their learning. Even more importantly the students’ attitudes, excitement and engagement proved how choice can increase and promote intrinsic motivation within students. The limitations I encountered throughout my study would be the size of the group and the amount of time allotted for the study. Due to unforeseen restrictions, my original study was adapted to fit the needs of my students and the supports available. With the small group size of eight students, I was able to collect data but not as much as if I collected it from entire class of twenty students. I am interested in how the results possibly would change if I had all twenty students, or perhaps if they would be very similar to how they are currently (more students does not always mean better results). More specifically, of my small group of students, only six of them returned their parental consent forms. Therefore my small group or participants became even smaller. In regard to the amount of time provided for the study, I collected data over a span of five weeks’ time. I am intrigued by the possibility of continuing this

study for a longer time span, rather than five weeks perhaps six months or a full year. Alongside of the limited amount of time, if the span of time was extended the number of projects completed would increase and I wonder if that would change how invested the students were within their projects and learning.

### **Recommendations**

My recommendations for the future would be to involve a larger number of student participants. I specifically would love to continue this inquiry based learning framework and develop a unit for my entire class of twenty to be a part of. The reason I would recommend a larger group of participants is because due to my findings and conclusions, students became empowered by their voice and used it more regularly for class discussions and group collaborations. By developing and designing an inquiry based unit for a larger number of participant or perhaps the entire class, the respect and rapport establish as part of the classroom environment could foster a community among the students where they feel safe and trusted to share their ideas and opinions.

Another recommendation for a study that is looking at the role choice plays in regard to encouraging intrinsic motivation would be to utilize various projects for students to demonstrate their learning. Due to time constraints, I was only able to complete one project with my students. But I would recommend incorporating multiple projects for few reasons. One reason is that it will continue to foster students' intrinsic motivation. Another would be that their sense of empowerment would increase due to the fact that it would encompass various topics rather than just one. Lastly it would provide more opportunities for students to find their voice and have it be heard by their peers and teachers. Although my study is looking specifically at intrinsic motivation and engagement, all students would benefit from a project like this because it is acknowledging that their interests and

desires are being heard and are important, that they truly matter. And sadly, in the world today students do not always feel like they are important or cherished by others.

### **Overall Significance**

This study is significant for any teacher or adult in a role where they are molding future minds with knowledge. This study is significant to me specifically, because I have observed a lack of intrinsic motivation and engagement within students across many grade levels. Students have lost their love for learning and it is a devastating phenomenon. I think that one way to start repairing this issue is by incorporating choice within the classroom curriculum and instruction as a way to justify to students that their learning can be fun and exciting, and even more so that their voices are important and that they do matter! If students can begin to find enjoyment and pleasure in their learning then they will truly begin to possess the tools necessary to succeed in life. As cited in Froiland (2012) research, Ryan & Deci (2000) state that:

“[w]hen students are intrinsically motivated to learn they learn more, exhibit better behavior, are happier and aspire to contribute to the betterment of society. Intrinsically motivated learners have a greater sense of wellbeing and are more engaged in the classroom because they understand the inherent benefit of education” (p. 97).

Another reason this study is significant is because the students' interests and desires are becoming less and less important as the standards and curriculum create a larger disconnection between what the students are learning and what they are experiencing in their personal lives outside of school. As this gap between what they have to learn in school and how it relates to them personally becomes wider, the students' enthusiasm for learning dwindles. Students can express their interests and desires in regard to what they are learning when they are given choices about

what to learn and how they can learn about it. These choices are key to their amount of engagement and participation within their education. If the students' interests and desires can be utilized within the classrooms, the students are already engaged in the topic because it is relevant and exciting to them. As a result, students are willing and eager to put forth the effort because they are being rewarded with the knowledge itself, which is longer lasting and far more worthwhile than a treat or prize.

## NYSP12 ELA Standards Appendix 1

### 3rd Grade Writing Standards:

#### Text Types and Purposes

**W.3.2**- *Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly.*

- a. Introduce a topic and group related information together; include illustrations when useful to aiding comprehension.
- b. Develop the topic with facts, definitions, and details.
- c. Use linking words and phrases (e.g., also, another, and, more, but) to connect ideas within categories of information.
- d. Provide a concluding statement or section.

**W.3.3**- *Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.*

- a. Establish a situation and introduce a narrator and/or characters; organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally.
- b. Use dialogue and descriptions of actions, thoughts, and feelings to develop experiences and events or show the response of characters to situations.
- c. Use temporal words and phrases to signal event order.
- d. Provide a sense of closure.

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Language Standard:

#### Knowledge of Language:

**L.3.3**- *Use knowledge of language and its conventions when writing, speaking, reading, or listening.*

- a. Choose words and phrases for effect.\*
- b. Recognize and observe differences between the conventions of spoken and written standard English.

## Appendix 2

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**Pre-Assessment Survey:** circle the smiley face that best describes how you feel/felt

1. I am interested in this project



2. I am excited to start my work



3. I think I will feel proud of my work



4. I like being told how to present my project



5. I like to be able to choose how to present my project





## Appendix 3

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**Post-Assessment Survey:** circle the smiley face that best describes how you feel/felt

1. I am interested in this project



2. I feel proud of my work



3. I feel like I did my best work



4. I liked being told how to present my project



5. I liked being able to choose how to present my project



## Appendix 4

### Interview Questions

1. Did you like doing this project?
  - a. What did you like about it? What didn't you like?
  
2. How did you choose your frog?
  - a. Did you enjoy doing the research on your frog?
  - b. What parts did you enjoy and what parts did you not like doing? What was most interesting to you?
  
3. Why did you decide to \_( modality of presentation)\_ in order to present your research on your frog? Was it easy?
  - a. What did you find difficult?
  - b. Why do you think you chose that style?
  - c. Was it something you find fun and interesting?

d. Something new you learned how to do?

e. Were you thinking about what the audience would enjoy the most?

4. In the future, would you like your classroom to choices built in for projects like this one? Why or Why not?

5. What would you recommend that I change if we were to do this again?

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