Does Student Choice Improve Students’ Attitudes Toward their Language Arts Class?

Mindie H. C. Vardinakis

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Dr. MC Harper, Advisor

Dr. Jo Ann Burkhardt, Coordinator
Master of Arts in Education Program
Head of Teacher Education
Abstract

The purpose of this project was to determine if the implementation of student choice in a secondary language arts classroom would change or improve students’ attitudes toward their language arts course. There were a total of 43 participants from a rural Midwestern public school involved in the study. The data was collected using a daily journal and post assessment questionnaire. Analysis of the data indicated that a change in students’ attitudes resulted from the implementation of student choice. The study included several recommendations for further study that included the use of a likert scale pre-assessment instrument.
Acknowledgements

This action research project is dedicated to my husband, who was a constant support during the completion of this project.
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Chapter I: Introduction

Introduction

“Aww man!”, “Do we have to?”, “I’ll do it later.”, and “I hate this class!” were comments made by students on a regular basis to the researcher during substitute teaching experiences. During substitute teaching experiences the researcher learned that high school students had negative attitudes toward their language arts courses. The researcher observed that students were not actively engaged during their language arts class. The lack of student engagement in classroom activities may have resulted in students having negative attitudes toward their language arts classes. In order to foster positive student attitudes it became important for the researcher to implement an educational activity involving student choice in order to develop positive attitudes towards their language arts course among secondary students. According to the professional literature reviewed, the majority of students who had positive attitudes toward educational materials or experiences had chosen the materials, topics, or activities within the classroom environment (Edmunds and Bauserman, 2006). Upon completion of the review of professional literature the researcher determined the implementation of a student choice assessment activity appeared to be the most beneficial in developing positive student attitudes toward language arts courses.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this project was to determine if the implementation of student choice in a secondary language arts classroom would improve students’ attitudes toward their language arts courses.
The research questions were:

1. According to the professional literature reviewed how was student choice defined?

2. How was student choice implemented in an educational setting according to the literature reviewed?

3. According to the professional literature reviewed what were the benefits of the implementation of student choice?

4. Did the implementation of student choice in a secondary language arts classroom yield positive student attitudes toward their language arts courses?

Justification

During the time spent in several educational institutions the researcher noticed that many students had negative attitudes toward their language arts courses. The researcher anticipated that if students were given choice in how they demonstrated their understanding of concepts in their language arts courses, students' attitudes towards their language arts courses would improve. In addition to improving students' attitudes it was expected that using student choice would encourage students to take ownership of their educational endeavors as well as engage in active rather than passive educational activities. Using student choice was one way the researcher might be able to improve students' attitudes toward their language arts courses as well as get students excited about learning and motivate students to actively challenge themselves to become informed members of a democratic society.
Definitions of terms

- **attitude**—“a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor” (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993, p.1)

- **attitude change**—“any alteration in the direction, degree, or intensity of an attitude” (Miller, 2005, Definition of terms section, ¶ 3)

- **language arts courses**—classes that involved the study of literary texts, writing applications, research methods, and oral and visual methods of communication

- **secondary language arts classroom**—regular education classroom that involved students in grades 7 through 12

- **student choice**—students chose how they demonstrated their understanding of concepts learned

Limitations

The data collected during this project was limited due to several factors. First, the researcher completed the project in a secondary language arts classroom in a small rural Midwestern public school, which resulted in a limited number of participants. Second, in addition to involving a limited group of students most of the students were English-speaking Caucasian students. Therefore, issues of diversity were not attended to during the completion of the project. Third, the data for this project was gathered on a one time basis during the researcher’s student teaching experience. Therefore, due to the small sample size, homogeneity of the group, and limited data set the results of this project should not be generalized to other grade levels or school districts.
Chapter II: Review of Literature

Introduction

The purpose of this project was to determine if the implementation of student choice in a secondary language arts classroom would improve students' attitudes toward their language arts courses.

The research questions were:

1. According to the professional literature reviewed how was student choice defined?

2. How was student choice implemented in an educational setting according to the literature reviewed?

3. According to the professional literature reviewed what were the benefits of the implementation of student choice?

4. Did the implementation of student choice in a secondary language arts classroom yield positive student attitudes toward their language arts courses?

Question 1: According to the professional literature reviewed how was student choice defined?

A professional literature review was conducted to determine the definition of student choice. The definition of student choice varied in complexity and focus. Therefore, the definition of student choice used in this study consisted of multiple components.

Hicks (2001) defined student choice as doorways into learning experiences. As the school year progressed and additional skills were taught the number of doorways
increased. Included in the doorway selections was choosing the topic for study and the materials that were used to express ideas, memories, or feelings. For example, students began by selecting their subject for study and then selected the materials that would be used to convey their thoughts or understanding from what Hicks termed the “choice board”. Hicks explained how one student used the memory doorway to create a visual representation of a sunset the student saw at the beach using materials the student had selected. Hicks believed in giving students unlimited choice. Therefore, no restrictions were placed on students’ topic or subject choice. In conclusion, Hicks utilized doorways to represent the choices students were given to embark on their learning experiences.

Like Hicks, Cavazos-Kottke (2005) utilized an instructional pedagogy that afforded students multiple points of entry into a learning experience. In the self-selected reading (S-SR) program students chose their own reading material and the presentation design used to demonstrate understanding of the information. The reading materials were selected by students from a list of titles that were compiled by Cavazos-Kottke and students during individual reading conferences. In conclusion, Cavazos-Kottke defined student choice as students making choices about reading materials and how understanding of the reading materials was demonstrated by selection of their own presentation designs.

Another definition of student choice was provided by Smith and Wilhelm (2002). Smith and Wilhelm believed that student choice involved students selecting curricula that were organized around topics, themes, and problems of interest. Their definition of student choice included offering more options in texts, assignments, and projects. One way Smith and Wilhelm noted that student choice could be utilized in a classroom was
allowing a portion of class time to be used for free reading. The text read during the free reading period would be chosen individually by students without imposing limitations. Therefore, Smith and Wilhelm's definition of student choice encompassed students selecting materials and methods for demonstrating their understanding of a concept in addition to negotiating curricula organized by topics, themes, and problems of interest in students' lives.

Students exercising choice in book selection, topic choice, and the activities they would focus on during a portion of the day was the definition of student choice provided by Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde (2005). This definition of student choice was very similar to the definition provided by Smith and Wilhelm (2002). Both definitions involved students making decisions about what was learned, the materials used during the learning process, and how the understanding of a concept would be demonstrated. Therefore, the definitions of student choice provided by these authors moved beyond the selection of materials to include a choice in how knowledge of a concept was demonstrated.

Gentry and Springer (2002) defined student choice as "give students the right or power to select educational options and direct their own learning" (Method section, ¶ 1). Unlike the previous definitions reviewed, this definition of student choice was more general in nature. Authors like Busching and Slesinger (2002) and Smith and Wilhelm (2002) defined student choice in terms of specific choices that students were permitted to make such as choice in materials or how to demonstrate understanding of a concept. However, like the previous definitions of student choice, the definition provided by Gentry and Springer (2002) resulted in students making choices that would directly affect
their learning process. Therefore, Gentry and Springer defined student choice as allowing students to select an educational activity that resulted in students directing their own learning.

Summary

Through the literature review, the complexity of including student choice in the classroom became evident. The definition of student choice incorporated doorways into learning experiences that included students selecting topics for study and the materials that would be used to express students' ideas, memories, or feelings (Hicks, 2001). A similar definition of student choice that also included selecting topics and materials was provided by Busching and Slesinger (2002) and Cavazos-Kottke (2005). The definition that involved students selecting materials and course of study was extended to include students selecting how they would demonstrate understanding of learned concepts (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 2002). The final definition of student choice made evident during the literature review was: providing students with the opportunity to select educational activities that resulted in student directed learning (Gentry & Springer, 2002). In conclusion, the definition of student choice included selecting topics for study, materials, and in some situations the method used to demonstrate understanding of a concept.

Question 2: How was student choice implemented in a secondary language arts classroom according to the literature reviewed?

As made evident during the literature review, the definition of student choice consisted of multiple components. Due to the complex definition of student choice, the implementation of student choice practices also varied in complexity and educational
focus. Therefore, the implementation of student choice in an institutional setting encompassed a multitude of pedagogical methods and educational activities.

Mark Springer’s approach to incorporating student choice into the institutional structure of a classroom was the development of a program titled Soundings (Brown 2002). Students involved in the Soundings program were responsible for developing their own curriculum, study methods, and assessments that were created based on questions that were identified as being important to the students. According to Brown, the students were expected to explore the topics of study more deeply than typically permitted in a traditional classroom. The Soundings program was developed to join students and teachers in a partnership to create meaningful learning activities. According to the professional literature review, Soundings provided students with the opportunity to have a voice in their educational development through choosing what they would study and how they would study the chosen topic, as well as the opportunity to share their learning experiences with the classroom community. Students who participated in the program began by creating lists of topics they were interested in studying. Once students identified possible areas of study, they were placed in small groups where common areas of interest were identified. The themes of common interest, created in the small groups, were posted and the class worked collectively to determine three to four topics for the class to study. After the three to four class topics of study were established, students were again placed in small groups based on their interests. According to Brown, the implementation of student choice involved actively collaborating with students to develop meaningful learning experiences that resulted in a deep understanding of the topics investigated.
In contrast to the Sounding Program, the study conducted by Campbell and Donahue (1997) utilized a more structured approach in implementing student choice practices. Student choice was limited to a pre-defined list of fictional texts and the implementation of the study took place within a controlled environment. Campbell and Donahue's study was designed to determine the affect student choice practices had on student achievement. Students who participated in the study were given a list of seven literary texts and were allowed to choose which text they would read during an assessment activity. Campbell and Donahue utilized questions that were worded in such a way that they could be applied to multiple texts while assessing common literary textual features such as setting, plot, characters, and theme. “Choose a conflict in this story and explain what the conflict is about” (Campbell & Donahue, 1997, p. 70) was one of the questions that appeared on the assessment. The study showed that overall there was no increase of test scores as the result of having choice. However, the study indicated that students who had choice believed that they earned higher scores and answered more questions correctly. The study also indicated that one third of the students made text selections based on feelings or anticipation the text would prove interesting or exciting. The Soundings program and the study conducted by the Campbell and Donahue were similar in that in both situations students were given the opportunity to make a choice about what they would study. The Soundings program engaged students in making choices in all aspects of their educational development (Brown 2002). The study completed by the Campbell and Donahue (1997) only afforded students the opportunity to choose the text they would read during an assessment activity from an annotated list of seven texts. In conclusion, both the Soundings program and the study conducted by the
Campbell and Donahue (1997) engaged students in exercising choice, but varied in structure and student involvement.

In contrast to the implementation addressed previously, Hicks (2001) viewed student choice as a process that needed to be addressed during classroom instruction. Before students could choose materials to use during the completion of educational activities, Hicks believed it was essential that students undergo instruction that encompassed the proper use of the materials. Hicks added materials or options as students' understanding of the materials or practices evolved. These choices were added to the “choice board” posted in the classroom. Hicks presented these options as doorways students selected to begin their learning experience. Hicks stressed that no matter which doorways students selected as an entry point into the learning experience that they use the doorway to make connections to themselves. The doorways or options spanned ten categories: touch, revising, sound, observing, copy, text, scientific, smell, memory, and revolving. She used the doorways as points of entry to a shared learning experience. The touch doorway was one of the choices that students could select as the entry point into their learning experience. Students began by closing their eyes and touching items in bins. Hicks asked that students connect the object they were touching to a memory. Once the connection between the item and the memory was established, the students were asked to create a picture of the memory using selected materials. Therefore, the implementation of student choice for Hicks resulted in students choosing doorways and materials that allowed them to demonstrate their understanding of a topic or concept while making personal connections to themselves.
Summary

The literature review illustrated that there were several implementation methods of student choice that were utilized by educators. The Soundings program not only provided students with the opportunity to choose how they would demonstrate their understanding of a concept and what materials they would use, but also included students in all aspects of curriculum development and implementation (Brown, 2002). Using student choice as a component of an assessment activity was another implementation method utilized by education professionals. During the assessment activity students were permitted to select which literary text they would read from a limited list of seven texts (Campbell & Donahue, 1997). Providing students with unlimited topic choice, limited choice in materials, and doorways into learning experiences was another implementation method that incorporated student choice activities within the classroom structure (Hicks, 2001). Therefore, the implementation of student choice varied in focus and student involvement.

Question 3: According to the professional literature reviewed what were the benefits of the implementation of student choice in a secondary language arts classroom?

A number of individuals in the education field chose to incorporate student choice into their teaching pedagogy and research the affects of the practice. The benefits attributed to using student choice that echoed throughout the literature reviewed were: positive student attitudes, increased student motivation, increased student interest, increased student individualization, and the ability to assimilate to the democratic model.
**Attitude**

Positive student attitude was one of the many benefits of using student choice made evident during the literature review. Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde (2005) cited fourth grade teachers Norlund and Woodbury as utilizing best practice teaching methods that included affording student a high level of student choice. Norlund and Woodbury integrated literature circles or book clubs into their literary lessons. These literature circles or book clubs were developed based on students’ interest in literary texts. One student was cited as stating “Our book clubs really changed the way I look at reading. I didn’t enjoy it before. But after I could share books with my friends, I really loved it. It gave me a reason to want to read it—you could be in the story with other people” (Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 2005, p. 39). For this student, the use of literature circles or books clubs that afforded opportunities for choice resulted in a more positive attitude about reading.

Similarly, a of the benefit that was identified from students’ participating in the Sounding program was positive student attitudes towards learning (Brown, 2002). This benefit was identified by parents of students participating in the Sounding program. A more positive attitude about learning was also noted by teachers who had students who were former participants of the Sounding program. These teachers cited former Soundings students as being able to engage in lessons in a more refined and scholarly manner.

A more positive attitude about school, as the result of having choice, was made evident in the study completed by Smith and Wilhelm (2002). Their research indicated that choice, even if provided in a limited manner, was appreciated by students. One of the
subjects who participated in the study indicated that he had more choice in his educational endeavors after switching from a public to private school. During a conversation with the researcher the participant further explained that he frequently exercised choice, which allowed him to engage in activities that were both enjoyable and interesting. The result of having more opportunities to exercise choice was a more positive attitude in relation to school learning.

The results from the study completed by Campbell and Donahue (1997) also concluded that having choice resulted in positive student attitudes in relation to the assessment activity. Not only did the study indicate that choice positively affect how participants felt about the assessment activity, but also improved their overall perception of how they performed on the assessment. Therefore, participants had a positive attitude about the assessment activity as result of having choice in addition to having a more positive outlook of their assessment performance.

Motivation

Increased student motivation was one of several benefits made evident by the literature review. Cavazos-Kottke (2005) identified student choice as a powerful motivator in adolescent literacy development. The result of implementing choice as part of the S-SR program was an increase in student motivation. The accession in student motivation was very dramatic and Cavazos-Kottke worked to incorporate student choice in other large units of study. Increased student motivation was also identified as a benefit of using student choice by Ivey and Fisher (2005). Ivey and Fisher stated that independent reading activities, which took place during students’ classes, not only increased students’ motivation, but also increased students’ background knowledge and
vocabulary. Furthermore, it was noted that students were more motivated to read when they were given the opportunity to read what was termed "real texts". The example of real texts provided by Ivey and Fisher involved reading materials that coincided with student’s interest and reading level.

The study completed by Campbell and Donahue (1997) indicated that student choice was a form of intrinsic motivation that promoted sustained higher levels of learning in students. The study identified a correlation between increased student interest and increased student motivation. The study illustrated that as the levels of student interest increased, students were more motivated to develop an understanding of concepts being taught during classroom instruction.

*Interest*

Increased student interest was another benefit identified during the literature review. Smith and Wilhelm (2002) believed that using student choice in the classroom enabled the educator to meet the needs of both male and female students. According to Smith and Wilhelm, typical classroom structures did not accommodate the reading habits of male students. According to their research, male students generally enjoyed reading short nonfiction texts, while female students generally enjoyed the longer fictional texts typically utilized in language arts courses. Smith and Wilhelm determined that the student choice allowed students to select reading materials that were interesting to them as well as coincided with the reading habits of their gender which resulted in increased student interest in lesson concepts.

Edmunds and Bauserman (2006) also identified increased student interest as a benefit of using student choice activities. They cited student choice as being effective in
allowing students’ interests to guide classroom learning. During interviews with students, Edmunds and Bauserman learned that there was a connection between students’ personal interests and their motivation to read. Moreover, the data indicated that students were more likely to share information about books they had chosen to read with the entire class. Allowing students to incorporate personal interests in classroom learning by selecting texts resulted in increased student interest in the classroom endeavors.

Zelmelman, Daniels, and Hyde (2005) and Hicks (2001) stated the implementation of student choice was beneficial in allowing students to make connections between their own lives and the work they engaged in during the school day. The result of creating a connection between personal interest and the school day was increased student interest in classroom activities. Hicks used doorways to create connections between students’ personal experiences and school experiences. The memory doorway is one example of how Hicks enabled students to make connections between these two aspects of students’ lives. Students worked to make connections between the past and present in order to create a visual representation of a personal memory. Hicks believed the connection between personal experiences and school experiences fostered what she termed “real-world thinking”. Hicks stated “As for me, I was watching how choice helps Courtney to find her reservoir of ideas, making her art matter to her” (p. 21) Zelmelman, Daniels, and Hyde (2005) believed that a student centered classroom involved students’ personal interest taking precedence over preselected curriculum. Furthermore, these authors noted that interest was an important part of the learning process and led students to believe they were working on something real. For example, during free choice reading time, a student selected reading materials that were relevant to
the student’s desire of becoming a veterinarian and resulted in a situation where the text was real and, from the student’s point of view, was being read for a real purpose. Hicks (2001) and Harvey, Daniels, and Hyde (2005) noted a correlation between student interest and student motivation. If student interest was stifled or nonexistent student motivation decreased.

Individualization

Individualization was identified during the literature review as being a benefit of using student choice in the classroom. Hicks (2001) and Busching and Slesinger (2002) stated that student choice enabled students to learn what was being taught through their own strengths. Using this teaching method allowed students to develop effective individualized learning strategies to use throughout their educational endeavors. Hicks (2001) acknowledged that students became problem finders rather than problem solvers. Becoming a problem finder required students to find a problem to solve rather than the teacher providing students with a problem to solve. Students found their problems through selecting and entering one of the doorways provided by Hicks. For example, Hicks quoted one student who stated that “The doors are ways we get our ideas. There are lots of doors on a castle, just like there are lots of ways to get in our heads for ideas” (Hick, 2001, p. 26) Busching and Slesinger (2002) utilized inquiry units as part of their instructional pedagogy. This method of instruction required students to ask questions and construct their own ideas in order to find answers to the questions they posed. The inquiry units required students to complete research individually and share what they learned with other members of the classroom community in an expert capacity. At times during inquiry units, text sets were utilized. Busching and Slesinger defined text sets as
collection of materials that were associated with a specific topic. Students were then permitted to make selections from the text set for further study of the topic. Busching and Slesinger noted that the opportunity to choose allowed students to select texts that met their needs and interest. Therefore, Busching and Slesinger (2002) and Hicks (2001) established student choice as a teaching method that allowed students to learn through individual experiences and needs.

The use of student choice was recognized as being personally powerful by Smith and Wilhelm (2002) and proved to be beneficial in providing students with a real context in which learning took place. The real context, according to Smith and Wilhelm, provided students with a sense of personal agency or competency about the subjects being addressed during classroom instruction. This meant that students had a sense of control over their learning by selecting texts and other aspects of their educational endeavors. Students chose instructional materials that guided their learning while giving them a sense of control. Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde (2005) agreed with Smith and Wilhelm (2002) and went on to point out, that when utilized in a student-centered holistic learning environment, student choice resulted in deeper understanding of the instructional material. Within the student-centered environment that resulted from the best practices identified by Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde, reading skills and strategies were presented as options rather than teaching a skill or strategy and requiring all students to utilize the skill or strategy in their reading endeavors. Students were given the opportunity to select reading skills and strategies that fit their learning style and reading needs.
Democratic Model

Another benefit of using student choice revealed during the literature review was the ability to model how to function in a democratic society. Busching and Slesinger (2002) believed that using student choice included the role democracy played in student development. Through using student choice, according to Busching and Slesinger, a classroom structure that modeled a democratic community was created. Students learned to make choices and communicate their ideas and needs with others. Making choices and communicating with others were two things members of a democratic society engaged in on a daily basis. The democratic classroom structure resulted in the benefit of students learning how to become productive members of a democratic society.

Smith and Wilhelm (2002), like Busching and Slesinger (2002), identified the ability to reflect the role of democracy in students’ lives as a benefit of this teaching strategy. Furthermore, Smith and Wilhelm pointed out that incorporating student choice in classroom activities provided students with an opportunity to practice free choice, which was identified as an important component of a democratic society. Within a democratic society, citizens exercise choice, which gave them a sense of personal agency. During discussion with several students participating in Smith and Wilhelm’s study, school was compared to prison. However, implementation of student choice within the classroom structure made students feel valued. Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde (2005) also cited the ability to simulate a democratic environment as a benefit of using student choice. As a result of having choice, students learned how to make good choices as well as how to become active members of a community. “So they expect students to take considerable responsibility—to establish learning goals, monitor their own learning,
apply the abilities they’ve acquired, keep their own records, and elect new projects when they’re finished with something rather than just fill in an extra ditto sheet” (Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 2005, p. 20). These expectations were consistent with the expectations of the democratic society in which students lived.

Summary

The literature review identified several benefits of the implementation of student choice. The first benefit identified by the literature was positive student attitudes (Brown, 2002; Campbell & Donahue, 1997; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Zemelmen, Daniels, & Hyde, 2005). As a result of utilizing student choice, students had a more positive attitude about learning. The second benefit indentified by the literature review was increased student motivation (Campbell & Donahue, 1997; Cavazos-Kottke, 2005; Ivey & Fisher, 2005). Student choice was viewed as a motivational tool that increased students’ willingness to learn. The third benefit recognized during the literature review was increased student interest. Student choice allowed students to build connections between their personal interests and school day activities. The connections between these two aspects of students’ lives resulted in increased student interest and were viewed as a benefit of using student choice (Edmunds & Bauserman, 2006; Hicks, 2001; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 2005). Individualized instruction was the fourth benefit of using student choice that was made evident during the completion of the professional literature review. Using student choice enabled educators to accommodate students’ preference and abilities making individualized instruction a benefit of this teaching strategy (Busching & Slesinger, 2005; Hicks, 2001; Smith and Wilhelm, 2002; Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 2005). The fifth benefit of using the student choice
teaching strategy was the ability to create a democratic model for students (Busching & Slesinger, 2002; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 2005). The use of student choice resulted in a classroom structure that assimilated a democratic society. The democratic class structure provided students with the opportunity to learn how to become a productive member of a democratic society. In conclusion, the benefits of the implementation of the teaching strategy student choice were: positive student attitudes, increased student motivation, and interest in addition to providing individualized instruction and a model of a democratic society.

Conclusion

According to the literature review, student choice was defined as an instructional strategy that encompassed students selecting topics for study as well as the materials that would be utilized during the course of study. The definition of student choice was extended to include the selection of how knowledge of a concept was demonstrated. Due to the complexity of the definition of student choice there were several different implementation methods that were used to incorporate student choice within the classroom environment. Some educators incorporated student choice by permitting students to select materials from a list of resources while others chose to develop a program that placed students in control of the classroom. Regardless of the manner of implementation of student choice the goal was to allow students multiple points of entry into a learning experience. The benefits of using the instructional strategy student choice were: positive student attitudes, increased student motivation, increased student interest, individualized instruction, and the ability to assimilate the democratic model. These benefits included establishing connections between students’ personal interests and
activities encountered during the school day and accommodating students’ preferences and abilities. Thus, student choice was an instructional strategy with a complex definition that resulted in a variety of implementation methods and yielded multiple educational benefits.
Chapter III: Methods and Procedures

The purpose of this project was to determine if the implementation of student choice in a secondary language arts classroom would improve students’ attitudes toward their language arts courses.

The research questions were:

1. According to the professional literature reviewed how was student choice defined?
2. How was student choice implemented in an educational setting according to the literature reviewed?
3. According to the professional literature reviewed what were the benefits of the implementation of student choice?
4. Did the implementation of student choice in a secondary language arts classroom yield positive student attitudes toward their language arts courses?

Participants

The participants in this project were students enrolled in two tenth grade language arts classes at a Midwestern public school. There were a total of 43 students who participated in the action research project. Out of the 43 participants, 20 were male students and 23 were female students. The classes were College Preparatory English courses that were 50 minutes in length. Of the 43 participants, 21 of the participants were from the first period class, while 23 of the participants were from the sixth period class. The action research project was conducted during the researcher’s student teaching experience.
Treatment/Intervention

This action research project used the idea of student choice as part of the assessment activity for the Midsummer Night’s Dream literary unit in order to improve students’ attitudes towards their language arts course. The assessment activity was implemented at the end of the Midsummer Night’s Dream Literary Unit. The purpose of the activity was to evaluate students’ understanding of the literary element plot in relation to the Shakespearean play *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. The learning goal for this lesson was for students to understand the literary element plot and explain how an author develops conflicts and plot to pace the events in a literary text. Using the Ohio Academic Content Standards for language arts, the researcher created multiple educational activities that resulted in a shared learning experience for the students. These shared learning experiences resulted in students understanding the complex plot construction utilized by William Shakespeare in the play *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

Students were presented with several choices for demonstrating their knowledge of the learning goal of the lesson that were outlined in detail on the A Midsummer Night’s Dream Assessment Options Handout (see Appendix A for options handout). The handout provided details pertaining to the requirements for each of the assessment options. Each student individually chose how he or she would demonstrate his or her knowledge. After the introduction and explanation of the assessment process and options, students were given the remainder of the 50 minute class period to make their selection and begin working. The students were given three additional 50 minute work sessions. Students were expected to work on their chosen assessment option outside of class if more time was needed in order to meet the assessment deadline. Students were given use
of the stage that was part of the classroom to rehearse if the performance option was chosen. Additional practice space included the hallway and lunchroom. Markers, pens, pencils, rulers, scissors, glue, tape, and construction paper were also made available for students use during the work sessions. Students’ attitudes towards their language arts course were assessed upon the completion of the assessment for the literary unit.

The first option for demonstrating students’ understanding of the literary element plot in relation to the text *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* was to create a comic book that was based on one of the scenes in the play. The comic book had to be at least 5 pages in length. Furthermore, students needed to demonstrate their understanding of at least one of the plots William Shakespeare utilized in the play. Students were instructed to use either modern day English or the language of the Elizabethan time period to construct the written portion of the comic book. The comic book pages had to be visually interesting and at least 5” x 7” in size. Students who chose this option were required to provide an illustrated cover that included an interesting title as well as his or her first and last names. Students were permitted to use the computer to construct the comic book or they were allowed to construct their comic book by hand incorporating their own drawings or images. This option was developed by the researcher to ensure the needs of kinesthetic learners were met by allowing students to create visually interesting projects to demonstrate their understanding of a concept.

The second option that was given to the students was to select a scene from the play, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and perform the scene for the class. Students, who chose to complete this activity to demonstrate their understanding of the literary element plot, worked in small groups that were no larger than four students. Students were
required to perform the scene as it would have been performed during William Shakespeare’s time: orally and in front of a live audience. Students were responsible for creating an interpretation of the scene they chose and performing the scene in a way that demonstrated their understanding of at least one of the four plots that arose in the play. The performing a scene option was constructed by the researcher to meet the needs of students who demonstrate their understanding of concepts more effectively using oral methods of communication.

The third option given to the students by the researcher was to write four ShrinkLits. ShrinkLits were short poetic summaries of a longer literary work. See below for an example of a ShrinkLit written by one of the participants in this study.

Is all our party here?

Then masters lend me your ears,
towards the lines that you shall play,
upon the grand duke’s nuptial day.

Then may every man disperse,
so that we may rehearse,
depth within the woods.

For if we knowest not the parts then
the duke may have our hearts.

Students were to write one ShrinkLit for each of the four plots in the text. Each ShrinkLit was to incorporate Shakespearean terms and language while summarizing each of the four plots that developed in the play *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. The researcher developed this option for students to demonstrate their understanding of the literary
element plot in relation to the play to meet the needs of students who prefer to use the written word to demonstrate their understanding of a concept.

*Instruments*

There were two instruments used by the researcher to collect the data for this project. The data was collected by the researcher using a daily journal and a post assessment questionnaire.

*Daily Journal*

A small composition notebook was utilized by the researcher to make reflective journal entries for each of the two class periods upon completion of the school day. The reflections included observations of student behavior as well as conversations that took place with students during each of the class periods. For the purpose of this study, the definition of attitude was “a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor” (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993, p.1). Eagly and Chaiken also specified that “an attitude develops on the basis of evaluative responding: An individual does not have an attitude until he or she responds evaluatively to an entity on an affective, cognitive, or behavioral basis” (p.2). For the purpose of this action research project the “entity” was the Midsummer Night’s Dream Assessment involving the idea of student choice.

As stated previously, attitude development involved responding to an entity, also know as an attitude object, in at least one of three ways: affective or feelings, cognitive or thoughts, or behavioral or acts (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Eagly and Chaiken defined attitude object as “anything that is discriminable” (p. 4-5). Therefore, the Midsummer Night’s Dream Assessment can be referred to as an entity or attitude object. For the
purpose of this study, the affective component of attitude formation was comprised of the feelings related to the Midsummer Night’s Dream Assessment involving student choice. The cognitive component of attitude formation was comprised of the students’ thoughts related to the Midsummer Night’s Dream Assessment involving student choice. The behavioral component of attitude formation was comprised of the acts related to the Midsummer Night’s Dream Assessment involving student choice.

According to Eagly and Chaiken (1993) attitudes were not observable, which requires them to be inferred based on behavior and verbal affirmations or oppositions. Therefore, the researcher was responsible for making attitude inferences based on the behavior and verbal responses witnessed during each class period after the implementation of the Midsummer Night’s Dream Assessment involving student choice. Behavior included “postures and movements” toward the attitude object (Martin & Bateson, 1986, p. 57). The types of behavior that were used by the researcher to make attitude inferences were: interaction with other students, emotions such as happy, frustrated, or confused made through facial features, and seating posture such as putting head on the desk. Verbal responses that indicated how students felt or what they thought about the Midsummer Night’s Dream Assessment involving student choice were also utilized by the researcher to make attitude inferences. For example, if a student told the researcher that he or she did not like the assessment options utilized in the assessment activity the research took note of that statement and included the information in the reflective journal entry for that class period.

The daily journal was utilized for a period of five days that coincided with the implementation of the Midsummer Night’s Dream Assessment activity involving student
choice and was an ad libitum sampling. According to Martin and Bateson (1986) an ad libitum sampling recorded all observable behavior that the observer deemed important and relevant at the time without imposing specific criteria or limitations. The researcher took notes regarding students' feelings, thoughts, and actions using a steno notebook that related to the Midsummer Night's Dream Assessment during each class period that appeared to be important and relevant at the time. The notes were consulted during the composition of both journal entries. A separate entry was made for each class period and the researcher spent approximately 20 to 30 minutes per day composing the reflective journal entries.

Post Assessment Questionnaire

The post assessment questionnaire was completed by the participants upon the conclusion of the assessment activity. The questionnaire consisted of three questions that were used to evaluate whether an improvement in students' attitudes toward their language arts course occurred (see Appendix B for questionnaire). The questions were:

1. Did you like or enjoy choosing the way to demonstrate that you understood the main ideas and concepts of the play?

2. If you did like this kind of “testing” tell me at least two things that you liked about this method of testing.

   If you did not like this kind of “testing” tell me at least two things that you did not like about this method of testing.

3. Did this method of testing change your attitude toward learning in any way? Please explain.

The questionnaire was completed individually by students and collected by the researcher.
**Procedure**

Prior to the implementation of the project the researcher worked closely with professors and the cooperating teacher to develop three educational activities that would assess students’ understanding of the literary element plot in the play *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Once the three educational activities were developed, the researcher provided an overview of the assessment process and assessment options to the students. The overview included a discussion about the three assessment options as well as provided students with the Midsummer Night’s Dream Handout (see Appendix A for options handout). The overview took place on March 27th, 2008, the first day of the implementation of the Midsummer Night’s Dream Assessment. After the overview students were given time to select one of the assessment options and begin working on the option they chose.

During the work time, the researcher was able to walk around the room and engage in individual or small group conversations with students about the assessment and their thoughts and feelings regarding the Midsummer Night’s Dream Assessment that included student choice. In addition to talking with students to learn more about their thoughts and feeling about the assessment, the researcher observed student behavior. At times the researcher was observing the class as a whole group, while at other moments the researcher was observing a student or small group working on their chosen assessment option that was used to evaluate their understanding of the learning goal of the lesson. Furthermore, the researcher checked in with each student or small group of students, depending on which assessment option was chosen, at least once per class period. The researcher completed a reflective journal entry using the notes taken during
each of the class periods. A separate ad libitum journal entry was made for each class period. These observations were an account of behavior and conversations that took place during each of the 50 minute class periods.

On the following three days, March 28 through March 30 of 2007, the students were given class time to work on the assessment option chosen. During this time period the researcher again observed student behavior as the students used the class time to continue working on the assessment option they chose. The researcher again walked around the classroom alternating between observing the entire class and individual or small groups. The researcher also used this time to discuss with students how they were feeling about having choice and the different assessment options they were given to select from as well as their likes and dislikes about the assessment process and options on an individual or small group basis. The researcher spoke with each student or group of students at least once during the class period. Typical questions asked by the researcher were: Do you like having this type of assessment and explain why or why not?; What changes would you recommend?; What assessment option did you select and why?; and How are you feeling about the assessment process? The observations and conversations were included in the reflective daily journal entry. A separate ad libitum journal entry was composed for each of the three days as well as each class period.

On the final day of data gathering the students turned in their assessments projects either by submitting the hard copy of their assessment option or by performing their assessment option. The researcher again observed student behavior and made notes using the steno notebook that was consulted during the composition of the daily journal entry for each class period. The observations made by the researcher included students’
responses to the work products of their fellow classmates. These observations were made from a fixed point near the back of the classroom. Upon completion of the assessment the researcher passed out the post assessment questionnaire for students to complete. The questionnaires were completed by students individually. The students were asked to turn the questionnaire face down upon completion. The questionnaires were collected by the researcher once they were placed face down by the students.

**Timeline**

This project was completed by the researcher over a five consecutive day period of time. On March 27, 2007 the researcher presented the assessment options to the students using the A Midsummer Night’s Dream Assessment Options handout (see Appendix A for options handout). The three days that followed the presentation of the assessment options were used as work days for the students, during which time the research gathered data about students’ attitudes using the daily journal. On the fifth and final day of the project, each student turned in the assessment option he or she chose to complete. In addition to submitting their assessments, the researcher requested that the students complete the post assessment questionnaire (see Appendix B for questionnaire). All questionnaires were collected by the researcher on March 31, 2007. Upon the completion of the questionnaire by the students, the implementation and data gathering components of the project were completed.

**Data Analysis**

Data collection methods were utilized in order to answer question 4: Did the implementation of student choice in a secondary language arts classroom yield positive student attitudes towards their language arts courses? Daily journal and post assessment
questionnaire were the two instruments used to collect the necessary data. The procedures, outlined in detail in the Procedure session of this chapter, provided the researcher with the information needed in order to determine if positive student attitudes toward language arts courses resulted from using the student choice as an integral component of the Midsummer Night's Dream Assessment. The results of this study were discussed in detail in Chapter IV: Results.

**Daily Journal**

The daily journal entries contained reflective entries that included the researcher's observations and student statements made during the class period. As stated previously, students' attitudes were comprised of feelings, thoughts, and actions that were used by the researcher to make attitude inferences. According to Eagly and Chaiken (1993) a positive attitude "approached, supported, or enhanced" the attitude object, while a negative attitude "avoided, opposed, or hindered" the attitude object (p. 155). The researcher identified the following behaviors as evidence of positive attitudes: creation of learning community, engagement, and increased motivation. Positive behaviors associated with the development of a learning community were: students supporting each other emotionally during the assessment process, active discussion of assessment options that included sharing ideas and offering helpful suggestions, desire to share knowledge gained and going beyond the minimum assessment requirements, exhibiting excitement, and exhibiting enjoyment. Positive behavior associated with engagement were active participation, arriving at class with materials needed, and beginning to arrange the classroom in a manner that supported their assessment option choice. The positive behaviors associated with increased motivation were: seeking additional information
from the researcher and other classmates when needed to ensure success and students actively setting goals and expectations on their own in relation to what the finished form of the chosen assessment option would entail. The journal entries recorded the researcher’s observations and interactions with students for each of the two class periods. The journal entries were first analyzed per class period and then as a whole group. The researcher began by carefully examining the journal entries for themes and evidence of students’ attitudes toward their language arts class. The themes that arose from the review of the journal entries were: appreciation of choice, supportive learning environment, and increased student engagement.

Post Assessment Questionnaire

All student responses were read by the researcher. A system of classifying data was developed for each question. The questionnaire contained three questions addressing students’ attitudes that the participants were asked to answer (see Appendix B for questionnaire). A system for classifying data was developed for each question. Each question and coding system was discussed in detail below.

Questions.

1. Did you like or enjoy choosing the way to demonstrate that you understood the main ideas and concepts of the play.

The question required participants to give a yes or no response and therefore utilized yes and no as the coding system for this response.

2. If you liked this kind of “testing” tell me at least two things that you like about this method of testing, or If you did not like this kind of “testing” tell me at least two things you did not like about this method of testing.
Student responses were reviewed by the researcher and grouped into categories. The coding categories for students’ likes about the assessment method were: creativity, enjoyment, less stress, appreciation of choice, more think time, more work time, individuality, interactive, group options, no studying, easier to understand, and better grade. The coding categories for student responses that indicated dislike of the testing method were: hard to generate ideas, unclear parts, lack of options, and does not work for everyone. For example, the student response “1. Groups and 2. No studying/memorizing” was coded as group options and No Studying.

3. Did this method of testing change your attitude toward learning in any way? Please explain.

This question was analyzed using two different coding systems. However, several participants either did not respond to the yes or no portion of the question or did not give a clear answer. The first portion of the question was answered by a simple yes or no response. The researcher sorted the explanation into three categories based on students’ responses. These coding categories were: yes, no, and unclear. The unclear responses were eliminated from further analysis due to the lack of indicators necessary to determine whether improvement in attitude had occurred. The yes and no responses were analyzed and like responses from each code were group together for further analysis of question 3. Once similar responses were grouped accordingly, a coding system was established. The coding categories for the yes responses were: try harder, not boring, easy, individuality, better than traditional test, new ways of learning, improved attitude,
appreciation of regular tests, and grade. The coding categories for the no responses were; no change, use to teaching method, test is a test, prefer traditional testing methods, and hard to change opinion. For example, the student response “Yes, because I became more opened to learning new things” was coded first as a yes response and then as relating to the code category of new ways of learning.

Conclusion

In order to answer question 4, Did the implementation of student choice in a secondary language arts classroom yield positive student attitudes toward their language arts courses?, data collection methods were developed. Two data collection instruments were utilized to gather information: daily journal and post assessment questionnaire. A method for analyzing the data was developed and included a coding system for organizing the information into categories for further discussion. A detailed review of the data collected for this project was provided in chapter 4.
Chapter IV: Results

The purpose of this project was to determine if the implementation of student choice in a secondary language arts classroom would improve students’ attitudes toward their language arts courses. The researcher implemented student choice through allowing students to chose how they would demonstrate their understanding of the literary element plot in relation to William Shakespeare’s play *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in the student choice assessment activity.

The review of literature completed in order to answer the research questions about definition, implementation procedure, and benefits of the pedagogy student choice revealed the complexity of this instructional strategy. Student choice was defined as doorways into learning experiences (Hicks, 2001), selection of materials and course of study (Busching & Slesinger, 2002; Cavazos-Kottke, 2005), selecting methods for demonstrating understanding of concepts (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 2005), and selecting education activities to direct student learning (Gentry & Springer, 2002).

The implementation strategies associated with the student choice teaching method were: program development and implementation (Brown, 2002), choice of literary text read during assessment activities (Campbell & Donahue, 1997), and unlimited choice in topics of study and limited choice in materials (Hicks, 2001). The benefits that resulted from the use of this instructional strategy were: increased student motivation (Campbell & Donahue, 1997; Cavazos-Kottke; 2005; Ivey & Fisher, 2005), increased student interest (Edmunds & Bauserman, 2006; Hicks, 2001; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 2005), individualized instruction( Busching & Slesinger, 2005; Hicks,
2001; Smith and Wilhelm, 2002; Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 2005), and democratic model (Busching & Slesinger, 2002; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 2005). The literature review provided the researcher with the information necessary to develop, implement, and measure students’ attitudes toward their language arts course.

Daily Journal

The observations recorded in the daily journal included observations of all 43 participants. The journal entries reflected the researcher’s observations and interactions with students per each of the two class periods. The journal entries were first analyzed per class period and then as a whole group.

The first journal entry, March 27th, 2007, for the first period class revealed a mixture of both positive and negative attitudes toward the implementation of the student choice assessment activity. Observations made after the overview of the assessment process and options were recorded by the researcher in the period 1 journal entry for March 27, 2007. See journal excerpt below for an example of observed student behavior.

3/27/07: Some students verbally and nonverbally showed interest in completing the assessment over the text in this manner, while other students felt limited and unmotivated in relation to the assessment assignment.

The researcher noted in the entry that students stated they were creatively drained and unmotivated. Two students commented about feeling limited due to the small number of assessment options. Being creatively drained, limited, and unmotivated were identified as characteristics of negative attitudes because the behavior avoided, opposed, and hindered their progress in relation to the assessment activity.
The journal entry for the sixth period class on March 27th, 2007 revealed that students were exhibiting negative attitudes before the researcher began discussing the assessment options. A portion of this journal entry was included below as evidence of the negative student attitudes.

3/27/07: Before starting the discussion of the assessment choices, students were groaning about the assessment and demonstrating a strong dislike for the assessment.

The groaning was an indication of opposition to the assessment activity involving student choice. This entry made it evident that students were not having positive attitudes about the task they were being asked to complete. The behavior exhibited by the students conveyed strong dislike of the instructional activity, but it was not clear if the implementation of student choice had affected students' attitudes toward their language arts class or students' dislike was directed toward the assessment activity.

The second journal entry, March 28th, 2007, for the first period class indicated a difference in behavior between satisfied and dissatisfied students. A passage from the journal was included below in order to provide an example of behavior exhibited by students.

3/28/07: Overall, the students were either really excited about the assignment and working hard to complete the option they chose or were dissatisfied and did little or no work.

The researcher viewed working on the assessment option as evidence of a positive attitude because their behavior approached the assessment activity. Several students again expressed concern about the limited number of assessment options and this behavior was viewed by the researcher as oppositional behavior. The journal entry also revealed that despite having limited choice, students appreciated having choice and was evidence of
behavior that approached the assessment activity. Further analysis of the journal entry indicated that once the researcher communicated with students individually or in small groups about the assessment options, students seemed to enjoy the assessment more. See below for an excerpt from the journal entry.

3/38/07: Once their ideas received validation or approval and they realized the freedom the assessment afforded them, the students seemed to actively engage in the demonstration of plot.

Analysis of the journal indicated that students' attitudes were fluctuating. After a short conversation with the researcher students went from being unmotivated and uncertain to actively engaged productive members of the classroom environment.

The journal entry for the sixth period language arts class on March 28th, 2007 again emphasized students' strong dislike of the assessment method. The researcher associated dislike with oppositional behavior that hindered students' progress with the assessment project. An example of how this dislike was exhibited through student behavior was excerpted below.

3/28/07: The students are expressing that they feel their learning in relation to the text should be at an end.

Prior to participating in this action research project, students completed a project related to the play. This method of authentic assessment involving student choice was being met with animosity due to students' prior project experience. Despite the strong negative feeling about the assessment activity, the journal entry indicated that students continued to appreciate having choice.

The researcher also made an observation about students' attitudes toward learning as part of the March 28th, 2007 journal entry for the sixth period language arts class. The observation was excerpted below.
3/28/07: My overall impression of students' attitudes toward learning is that students who were able and comfortable making the choice or found a choice they connected with, had a positive attitude toward learning. Students who struggles with making a choice or did not like the option had a more negative attitude toward learning.

The connection between interest and attitude was made apparent in this excerpt. In addition to the connection between interest and attitude, students’ ability or inability to cope with the implementation of the assessment activity involving student choice and the impact that the activity had upon student attitudes was made evident. The journal entry indicated that students who were able to adapt to the assessment activity incorporating student choice had a more positive attitude than students who were unable to make the adaptation. Students’ ability to adapt to the assessment activity required students to engage in behavior that approached and supported the activity. Students’ inability to adapt to the assessment activity indicated behavior that hindered the assessment activity.

The researcher’s journal entry for the first period class on March 29th, 2007 contained several references to conversations that took place between the researcher and students during the class period. The conversations were focused on the likes and dislikes of the assessment process and whether or not students appreciated having choice. The entry indicated that the researcher focused on conversations with students who stated they preferred traditional testing methods. Preference of traditional testing methods was viewed as an indicated of possible avoidance of the assessment activity involving student choice. Below was an excerpt from this journal entry.

3/29/07: Several other students who said they would prefer taking a standard test said they were burnt out at this point. Overwhelmed by the number of projects and assignments they had been given from all of their classes combined.
Feelings of being overwhelmed and burnt out were not viewed as characteristics behavior that hindered the assessment activity as well as indicated a negative attitude. An individual with a positive attitude would attack the activity exhibiting behavior that supported the option chosen as well actively working on completing the requirements rather than exhibiting hindering behavior such as complaining and procrastinating.

The role students’ perceptions had on learning and attitude was made evident in sixth period journal entry for March 29th, 2007. See journal excerpt below discussing students’ perceptions.

3/29/2007: The message I got from students was that they view projects and tests differently. Students perceived the assessment options as projects. This view of the assessment as a project continued to be a source of concern for students and affected their attitude toward having choice.

Students’ preconceived notions of what was considered a test and what was considered a project fostered feelings of dislike or avoidance. The feelings of dislike resulted in negative attitudes.

Another observation made by the researcher in the journal entry was that students were using higher order thinking skills. The use of these higher order thinking skills was viewed supportive behavior and an indication of positive student attitudes. See the excerpt below for an example of observations of higher order thinking skills.

3/29/07: For example, they used the rubric they were provided with to analyze the product of their assessment option. Students started gathering props and rewriting play scripts because they were motivated to do well. The motivation was intrinsic because they were not promised or given anything as a reward for completing the assignment.

The reflection made by the researcher that the motivation was intrinsic proved to be incorrect. Upon further analysis the motivation was determined to be external due the fact that students were completing the assessment in order to receive a grade. In the review of
literature, increased student motivation was established as a benefit of using the student choice as well as behavior that approached and supported the assessment activity. Therefore, increased student motivation was viewed as a reflection of a positive attitude.

The March 30th, 2007 first period journal entry included the researcher’s observation of the classroom environment as a whole. The journal entry was excerpted below.

3/30/07: The more students worked on their assessment option, the more they seemed to enjoy the assignment. Students were working together sharing ideas and discussing the text. The environment began to feel like a learning community and students expressed they were excited to come to class.

In order for a learning community to develop students had to exhibit behavior that approached, supported, and enhanced the activity indicating the presence of positive attitudes. Therefore, the development of a learning community was viewed by the researcher as evidence of positive student attitudes. Furthermore, in order for students to become excited about something they had to exhibit behavior that was supportive in nature and further the evidence of positive attitudes. Thus, students’ expression of excitement to attend class was identified as evidence of positive student attitudes.

Furthermore, the March 30th, 2007 journal entry for the first period class lends support to the idea engagement was connected to students’ attitudes. If students were engaged and actively working on their assessment option the researcher interpreted this behavior as an indicator of a positive attitude. Engagement was viewed as supportive behavior. See journal excerpt below for an example of student behavior indicating engagement.

3/30/07: However, one concern students began to have was they were becoming so involved with their assessment option, they felt there was not enough time
outside of class to complete their assessment choice in the manner they would have liked.

Involvement was considered to be synonymous with engagement and the researcher viewed the level of involvement exhibited by students as evidence of positive student attitudes due to the supportive behavior exhibited. Students’ willingness to work on their assessment option and establishing their own goals and expectations furthered recognition of a high level of engagement as evidence of positive student attitudes.

The March 30th, 2007 journal entry for sixth period class contained several references to exhibitions of positive student attitudes. Below were listed several selections from this journal entry that were viewed as indicators of positive student attitudes.

3/30/07: Students in this class were excited and each day came to class energetic, ready to work on their assessment options.

3/30/07: They felt the assessment options allowed them to broaden their horizons.

3/30/07: One student found himself wondering what was going to happen in English class rather than dreading what was going to happen in English class.

3/30/07: The words used by students the most to describe the assessment was: fun and creative.

3/30/07: Students were excited about sharing their work with others and seemed to be proud of their accomplishments.

These actions were viewed as behavior that approached, supported, or enhanced the assessment activity involving student choice and interpreted as evidence of positive attitudes. Excitement and energy are both characteristics of behavior that was supportive in nature. Furthermore, students’ willingness to broaden horizons was evidence of a positive attitude due to the fact that in order to be open to learning new things an individual must engage in behavior that supports or approached the task. Negative
attitudes engage in behavior that avoids or hinders and does not result in individuals being open to the possibility of learning new things. Therefore, broadening horizons was interpreted as evidence of positive student attitudes due to the exhibition of supportive behavior. Having feelings of wonderment was also considered evidence of positive student attitudes. In order for a student to move from feeling dread to feeling wonder, a change in attitude must occur. Wondering what was going to happen in class also indicated that the student was looking forward to the class and required the student to engage in behavior that supported the assessment activity involving student choice. Therefore, the student was viewed as having a positive attitude toward language arts class. Word usage also indicated positive student attitudes. The words creative and fun were used by most students when describing the assessment. Fun and creative had positive connotations and were viewed as characteristics of positive student attitudes.

Upon review of the March 31st, 2007 journal entry for the first period class several behavior observations were recorded that reflected positive student attitudes. Several excerpts containing evidence of positive student attitudes were included below.

3/31/07: During the presentation of the performance options students were smiling and laughing at the intentionally fun aspects of the presentation.

3/31/07: Students were excited to be sharing and were asking to go first and wanted to know when their group could perform.

3/31/07: Students were smiling and stated they were excited to be in class. The students cooperated with each other to create an environment that was conducive for learning while having fun.

Smiles and laughing were supportive behaviors often associated with having a positive attitude. Additionally, students approached the researcher and asked to share their assessment option with others. The desire to share work with others was another
characteristic supportive behavior and evidence of positive attitudes. The nonverbal communication of a smile and the willingness to cooperate with others were also viewed as reflections of positive student attitudes.

The following were experts from the sixth period class journal entry for March 31st, 2007 were identified as evidence of positive student attitudes.

3/31/07: One student chose to present her comic book using a puppet show. She extended her thinking by combining her understanding of plot with her understanding of the performance elements of Shakespearean Literature.

3/31/07: A supportive learning environment resulted from using this assessment format.

In order for an extension of learning to take place a student had to engage in behavior that enhanced and supported the assessment activity. Behavior that supported the assessment activity involving student choice indicated a positive attitude and enabled learning to evolve. If an individual does not have a positive attitude the learning extension would not occur due to the fact that motivation, interest, and desire to do well would not be present. Extending thought processes requires motivation and desire to go beyond what was required to achieve more as well as engaging in supportive behavior. Therefore, extension of thought processes was identified as being evidence of a positive attitude. Also the creation of a supportive learning environment was interpreted as indication of the presence of positive attitudes. As stated previously, in order for a supportive learning environment to develop, positive attitudes must be present.

A holistic review of the journal entries resulted in the identification of three reoccurring themes. The themes were: appreciation of choice, supportive learning environment, and increased student engagement. Each of these themes was discussed in detail below.
The first theme identified was appreciation of choice. This theme was evident in the following journal entries: first period, March 28th; sixth period, March 28th; first period, March 30th; and sixth period, March 30th. An excerpt from the first period, March 30th entry was provided below.

3/30/07: Students appreciated having choice. Although they would have liked to have more options to choose from, they are still happy they had a choice. Appreciation was identified as a characteristic of a positive attitude due to the presence of supportive behavior. The ability to appreciate the teaching strategy despite disliking aspects of the assessment activity involving student choice required having a positive outlook despite adversity. Therefore, the reoccurring theme of appreciation of the instructional strategy of student choice was cited as evidence of a positive attitude.

The second reoccurring theme was the development of a supportive learning environment. The development of a supportive learning environment was recorded in the following journal entries: sixth period, March 29th; first period, March 30th; sixth period, March 30th; first period, March 31st; and sixth period, March 31st. An example of a journal entry discussing the recurrent theme was provided below.

3/30/07: Students continue to work together and support each other in the development and completion of the assessment options they chose.

As stated previously, in order for a supportive learning environment to develop, positive student attitudes must be present. Having a positive attitude enabled individuals to be supportive and work with each other. In conclusion, a supportive learning environment was an indication of positive student attitudes.

The third theme that was repeated in the journal entries was engagement. Engagement was addressed in the following journal entries: first period, March 28th; first
period, March 30th; sixth period, March 30th; and first period, March 31st. See the excerpt from the sixth period, March 28th journal entry for an example of reflection on engagement.

3/28/07: Many students began drafting or rehearsing the assessment. A characteristic of having a positive attitude was the ability to engage. Students actively working on the assessment option they chose were viewed as engaged. It was unlikely that an individual with a negative attitude would engage in an activity that he or she strongly disliked. Therefore, engagement was recognizes as a characteristic of a positive attitude.

Post Assessment Questionnaire

Of the initial 43 participants, 40 were present and completed the post assessment questionnaire. There were three students who were absent on the day the questionnaire was completed. Student responses to each of the three questionnaire questions were analyzed and a coding system was developed. Student responses to each of the questions and coding systems utilized were discussed in detail below.

Question 1 was designed to determine whether students’ liked or disliked having the ability to choose how they demonstrated their understanding of the literary element plot in relation to the play *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* by William Shakespeare. The question read, Did you like or enjoy choosing the way to demonstrate that you understood the main ideas and concepts of the play? Students were required to give a yes or no response. Therefore, a yes and no coding system was utilized for this question.
Thirty-six of the 43 participants responded yes to this question, while only four responded that they did not enjoy having choice. Figure 1 summarized the student responses to this question across both categories.

![Bar chart showing level of enjoyment](chart.png)

**Figure 1.** Question one responses.

The overwhelming majority of students answered question 1 with a yes response. While 90% of the students responded yes to the question, 10% of the students answered the question with a no response. Analysis of student responses to question 1 concluded that overall students responded favorably to having choice in how they demonstrated their understanding of the learning goal of the lesson.

Question 2 was asked to determine what students liked and disliked about the assessment method. Question 2 read as follows, If you liked this kind of “testing” tell me at least two things you liked about this testing method, or If you did not like this type of “testing” tell me at least two things you did not like about this method of testing. Student responses were reviewed by the researcher and grouped into categories. The categories became the coding system for this question. The coding categories for students’ likes
about the assessment method were: creativity, enjoyment, less stress, appreciation of choice, more think time, more work time, individuality, interactive, group options, no studying, easier to understand, and better grade. The coding categories for student responses that indicated dislike of the testing method were: hard to generate ideas, unclear parts, lack of options, and does not work for everyone.

The category with the most responses was appreciation of choice. Twenty-three of the student responses fell into the appreciation of choice category. The category with the fewest number of responses was better grade with only one student response. With four participants indicating a dislike of the testing method only two of the coding categories relating to the no responses contained more than one student response. Three responses related to the category of unclear parts and two responses were identified as relating to the category of lack of options. Figures 2 and 3 summarized the findings of question 2.

![Figure 2. Participants' likes of student choice "testing" method.](image-url)
Students who identified favorable aspects of the testing methods, as seen in figure 2, listed appreciation of choice as an appealing aspect of this teaching method. With 57% of student responses to question 2 falling into the appreciation of choice category the impact of including student choice as part of the assessment activity was made evident. The No Studying category received the second highest number of responses with a total of eight student responses relating to this category. The summary provided by figure 3 revealed that only two categories contained more than one student response. When compared with the summary provided by figure 2 it was evident that students found more they like about the assessment activity involving student choice than they disliked.

Question 3 was asked to determine whether a change in attitude had occurred as the result of implementation the student choice teaching strategy. Question 3 read as follows, Did this method of testing change your attitude toward learning in any way? Please explain your answer. This question was analyzed using two different coding systems. The first portion of the question was answered by a simple yes or no response.
However, several participants either did not respond to the yes or no portion of the question or did not give a clear answer. The researcher sorted the explanations into three categories based on students’ responses. The coding categories were: yes, no, and unclear. The unclear responses were eliminated from further analysis due to the lack of indicators necessary to determine whether an attitude change had occurred. The yes and no responses were analyzed and like responses from each code were grouped together for further analysis. Once similar responses were grouped accordingly, a coding system was established. The coding categories for the yes responses were: try harder, not boring, easy, individuality, better than tradition test, new ways of learning, improved attitude, appreciation of regular tests, and grade. The coding categories for the no responses were; no change, use to teaching method, test is a test, prefer traditional testing methods, and hard to change opinion.

Of the 40 participants who completed the Post Assessment Questionnaire, 24 said a change in their attitude occurred, 10 indicated no change, and 6 participant responses were unclear as to whether a change had taken place. Nine of the 24 students who respond with a yes answer to question 3 had responses that were similar and related to the new ways of learning category. The categories receiving the fewest number of student explanations were: grade and appreciate regular tests. The explanation provided the most by students who responded to the yes/no portion of the questions with a no response was that their attitude remained the same. Figures 4, 5, and 6 provided a summary of student responses to question 3.
Figure 4. Change in student attitude toward learning question.

The data indicated that 24 students believed that a change in their attitude had occurred. There were 10 students who responded that a change in their attitude did not occur. As indicated by the bar graph, more students responded to this question with a yes response to the portion of the question addressing whether a change in attitude took place as a result of participating in the student choice assessment activity.

Figure 5. Affirmative responses to change in attitude.
The data indicated that nine out of the 24 students who participated in the action research project felt that the student choice assessment activity allowed them to learn in new ways. There were also four students who indicated that the student choice assessment activity was not boring. Allowing learning to take place in new ways and not boring were the explanations given most often by students who participated in the project.

**Figure 6.** Negative responses to change in attitude.

The data indicated that the explanation given most often by students who participated in the study was that a change has not taken place. Seven out of the 10 students who responded with a no answer to question 3 stated that a change in attitude had not taken place.

There were significantly more student responses indicating that a change in attitude had taken place. The results indicated that 60% of the students participating in the study believed a change in their attitude had taken place as the result of participating in the assessment activity involving student choice. Only 25% of the participants
indicated that a change in attitude did not occur. Of the 40 participants, 15% did not provide a sufficient answer to the yes or no portion of the question, which resulted in their explanations being excluded from the analysis.

Conclusion

The purpose of this project was to determine if the implementation of student choice practices would improve students’ attitudes toward their language arts class. The data was gathered for this project using a daily journal and Post Assessment Questionnaire. The journal entries were analyzed individually and then as a whole group. Analysis of the questionnaire responses involved reviewing each question according the established coding system. In conclusion, the data gathered using the data collection instruments was analyzed in order to determine if the assessment activity involving student choice improved students’ attitudes toward their language arts class.
Chapter V: Discussion

The purpose of this project was to determine if the implementation of student choice in a secondary language arts classroom would change or improve students’ attitudes toward their language arts courses.

The research questions were:

1. According to the professional literature reviewed how was student choice defined?

2. How was student choice implemented in an educational setting according to the literature reviewed?

3. According to the professional literature reviewed what were the benefits of the implementation of student?

4. Did the implementation of student choice in a secondary language arts classroom yield positive student attitudes toward their language arts courses?

Meanings and Findings

Analysis of the data revealed that a change in students’ attitudes toward the assessment had taken place. When the assessment assignment options were implemented students exhibited characteristics of negative attitudes such as not working, groaning, and complaining about the bombardment of work. These displays of negative attitudes were recorded in the early journal entries. An example of the exhibition of negative behavior was recorded in the sixth period, March 27th journal entry previously excerpted in chapter IV. The excerpt involved students groaning before the researcher was able to being a discussion of the assessment options. Groaning was a characteristic of negative behavior
patterns and a reflection of a negative attitude. However, over the time period the journal entries began to include more references to exhibitions of positive student attitudes and less reference that were characteristic of negative attitudes. The final two journal entries made on March 31st, one for the first period class and one for the sixth period class, did not mention any characteristics of negative attitudes. It was unclear from the journal entries whether the attitude change applied only to the assessment activity or the language arts class as a whole. Thus, the journal entries revealed a change from negative to positive in students’ attitudes over the five day period toward the assessment activity. Students will have a more positive attitude towards their language arts course if they like or enjoy the activities that coincide with the class. The more students feel attending the class is fun, interesting, or anonymous the likelihood of positive student attitudes increases.

As part of this action research project, students were asked to respond to questions on the Post Assessment Questionnaire. The data indicated the majority of the participants enjoyed the student choice testing method and cited appreciation of choice as the number one thing they like about the testing method. Both the journal entries and post assessment questionnaire established a change in attitude had taken place. Thus, the data indicated that a change in attitudes occurred in 60% of the participants. For 60% of the students the implementation of the student choice assessment activity was successful in improving students’ attitudes.

During the implementation of the student choice testing method, it became evident that students’ perceptions and definitions of educational activities and the definitions of the educational community do not always coincide. The authentic testing
method that was utilized when implementing the student choice practices was viewed as a project rather than a test. Many students struggled throughout the assessment process and continued to view the assessment as a project. The definitions students used to classify learning experiences resulted in two distinct categories of test and project. Projects seemed to be viewed as something other than an assessment. Therefore, the implementation of student choice testing methods challenged and blurred students’ distinct categories of classification relating to educational endeavors.

Another interesting finding that resulted from this action research project was the lack of problematic behavior observed during the data gathering process. The daily journal entries contained reference to characteristics of negative attitudes, but did not identify problematic behavior. The lack of problematic behavior exhibited by students may or may not be attributed to the implementation of student choice. However, the lack of problematic behavior might prove be an added benefit of this teaching strategy.

In conclusion, the analysis of the research enabled the researcher to establish a change from negative to positive attitudes took place over the five day period following the implementation of the student choice assessment activity. Over the five day period the journal entries indicated a decrease in the number of observations made citing negative behaviors. Analysis of the data also revealed the difficulty of distinguishing between attitude toward a specific activity and a class as a whole. Students responded favorably to the student choice assessment activity and stated that they appreciated having choice. The Post Assessment Questionnaire supported the researcher’s observations. One unexpected finding made during the completion of this action research project was that using the
student choice assessment activity could result in the reduction of problematic behavior within the classroom environment.

**Summary**

The purpose of this project was to determine if the implementation of student choice in a secondary language arts classroom would change or improve students’ attitudes toward their language arts course. The researcher anticipated that this teaching method would improve students’ attitudes towards their language arts class. The action research project was completed in a small Midwestern public school. A total of 43 students participated in the study from two language arts courses. The 43 participants consisted of 20 males and 23 females. The data was collected over a five day period using the daily journal and post assessment questionnaire. The researcher recorded observations of student behavior and conversations with students during the five day period using the journal. Students were required to answer three questions that were related to the assessment process as part of the post assessment questionnaire.

The data gathered during the five day period indicated that a change in students’ attitudes had taken place. The daily journal was analyzed and the results revealed that upon holistic review of the journal entries a change in students’ attitudes was made evident. Information gathered using the post assessment questionnaire also indicated that a change in attitude had taken place in 60% of the participants. Based on the data collected, the researcher concluded that the implementation of the teaching methodology student choice resulted in a change or improvement in students’ attitudes.
Recommendations

The data for this project was gathered on a one time basis over a five day period. Further research into the effect student choice has on changing or improving students’ attitudes should be collected over a longer period of time. A longer data collection period might allow for a more substantial change in attitude to be observed and documented.

In addition to increased time allotted to collect data, the use of more assessment assignment options should be considered. In several of the journal entries, students indicated the desire of having more options. The relationship between number of options and attitude is a topic that may require further exploration.

One final recommendation for further implementation of student choice in the classroom is the use of a likert scale pre-assessment to determine students’ attitudes before the implementation of the teaching strategy. The use of a pre-assessment would yield more conclusive evidence of the occurrence of an attitude change. By utilizing a pre-assessment the validity of the study might be enhanced.

Conclusion

As a result of the data gathered, the researcher concluded that the implementation of student choice suggested that a change in student attitude did occur. However, it was concluded that an increased data collection period, further study of the relationship between number of choices and attitude development, and the use of a pre-assessment survey utilizing a likert scale were needed in order to increase the validity of the study.
References


Appendix A

Post Assessment Questionnaire

During the Midsummer Night’s Dream assessment you had choice in activities you could complete to meet the requirements of the assessment. I am interested in your opinion of allowing students to choose the manner in which they demonstrate understanding of a concept. Please take the time to thoroughly answer the next few questions.

Thanks.

1. Did you like or enjoy choosing the way to demonstrate that you understood the main ideas and concepts of the play?

2. If you did like this kind of “testing” tell me at least two things that you liked about this method of testing.

If you did not like this kind of “testing” tell me at least two things that you did not like about this method of testing.

3. Did this method of testing change your attitude toward learning in any way? Please explain.
Appendix B

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT’S DREAM HANDOUT

Assessment Options

**Comic Book**

- Based on one of the scenes from the text.
- 5-7 pages in length.
- Demonstrate an understanding of at least one of the plots utilized by Shakespeare in the text.
- Use the language of the Elizabethan time period to construct the comic book.
- Must be visually interesting and at least 5” x 7” in size.
- Includes an illustrated cover that contains an interesting title and first and last name.
- May use the computer to construct the comic book or you may incorporate your own drawings or images.
- Final copy must be on nice paper.

**Perform a Scene**

- Chose one of the scenes from the play to develop into a short performance.
- Must be completed in a group with at least 4 members, but may not exceed 5 group members.
- Must perform the scene as it would have been performed in Shakespeare’s day: orally in front of a live audience.
- Create an interpretation of the scene that demonstrates an understanding of at least one of the four plots that unfold in the play.
- This option must be performed in class.

**ShrinkLits**

- Write four shrinklits. One shrinklit for each of the four plots that develop in the play.
- ShrinkLits must be poetic summaries of four plots from the longer literary work *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.
- Must incorporate Shakespearean terms and language while summarizing each of the four plots.
- Final drafts of the shrinklits must be typed on nice paper.