

IT ALL BEGINS WITH PLAY
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON CHILD LED PEDAGOGY

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By

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This study aims to determine the primary purpose of Early Childhood Education utilizing qualitative data collected from an array of experienced individuals from the target school's kindergarten at Kids Day School. The qualitative approach of phenomenology was utilized to make sense of individual experience of the early childhood context. Systematic sampling of individuals with experience in an early education setting occurred. Participants varied in age, educational experience, and cultural background. Semi-structured interviews and participant observations were conducted to examine how and why young learners learn, focusing on child led learning pedagogy within early childhood education. After axial coding was completed, three themes were identified: foundational learning, metacognition, and empowerment. The findings further the understanding and appreciation of early childhood education.

Keywords: early childhood education, foundational learning, metacognition

Dedicated to my parents & husband Max.

Thank you for being my continued support, encouragement, and inspiration.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND NOTATIONS

ECE	Early Childhood Education
DAP	Developmentally Appropriate Practice
PBL	Project Based Learning

CHAPTER 1: PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

INTRODUCTION

Why educate? Education can be defined as the process or product of instruction (Adams, 1993). Process includes the action steps taken to achieve an end whereas product is the result of a process (Adams, 1993). How can one determine the ultimate purpose of education without answering the question of whether education is a process of individual learning or a product of structured schooling? When considering early childhood education (ECE), the idea of education becomes much more fundamental, as ECE fosters the development of our youngest learners from birth to twelve years old. Several scholars suggest that ECE is essential for the success of future development (Labaree, 2017). However, we remain wholly focused on direct instruction in ECE, which may create children who learn to rely on others to teach rather than learn by trusting in their natural curiosity to explore.

The Problem of Practice

The problem of practice in early learning is that children in the target school's kindergarten are not involved in project learning. Children are naturally curious beings (Stacey, 2018). They are young people who cherish the smallest moments of the world. Admiring and wondering about all of life's questions, a child's innate sense of wonder can be a driving force concerning their learning (Christakis, 2017). Yet why are we not relying on that force of wonder? Why is our education system limited to what a teacher decides is best for children? When are we going to realize that what is best for children may not necessarily be the countless teacher-directed lessons that everyone remembers from their own early

educational past? Developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) are teaching styles that promote holistic learning, and rely on teaching styles that recognizes the multiple assets of children and creates joy in the learning process (NAEYC, 2020).

In kindergarten, life becomes a bit more structured. There are more rules and guidelines to adapt to and follow that require a bit more effort for our young learners. They go from learning from play to teacher-directed learning.

Kindergarten classrooms may look different across the country; however, highly structured learning is a common feature across many of them. The children in a kindergarten classroom may learn from books, and teacher-directed instruction, or are sitting trapped at their desks all within a structured environment. This may not be the case for every kindergarten level classroom, but it can be said for the majority (Labaree, 2017). For example, kindergarten education in Ohio adheres to state mandated requirements to ensure children are prepared for future academic grades. According to the Department of Education (2019), schools are required to have a curriculum in place, a certified teacher, at least one teacher for every 25 students, and at least 900 hours of schooling a year. The standards mandate what children need to know but not how it should be taught. The number of hours and ratio in a classroom are set but how they are spent is not mandated. Although the state is describing the foundation of a traditional education, it is not helping to facilitate educational growth.

An antiquated educational process, traditional pedagogy may be considered responsible for student demotivation, low attendance rate, and general

poor persistence in the classroom (Fredricks, 2011). According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress there have been no gains in literacy since the assessment's implementation in 1990 and little to no progress in mathematics (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1999). Average test scores in the United States in reading and math have begun to flatline or decline from 2010 to 2017 (Gess-Newsome, 2019). Yet the conventional method of teaching, teacher centered and directed, remains at the forefront of education. Schools across the nation are retaining an obsolete system that has not only been proven to be inadequate but also redundant (2019). As seen by the flatline or decline in test scores, children do not learn best through traditional lecture-based education (Stacey, 2018). The United States has invested heavily in education with little to show for it. It is time to stand up for children's rights to a better education. Time to implement a new inquiry inspired approach that will not only cause students to take control of their learning but will lead them to become innovative thinkers, problem solvers, and lifelong learners (Kizkapan & Bektas, 2017).

Classrooms can become chaotic places if not managed and run properly. They can also become a place where joy and wonder cease to exist as teachers fight to meet the strict expectations of state standards and standardized assessment goals. The decline or lack of progress among kindergarten students nationally is seen on a much smaller scale within the target school, Kids Day School kindergarten located in a midwestern state. Although comparing national stagnant averages to one classroom may seem insignificant, the problem of students not leading their learning still exists. The student voice is being muffled and

implementation of new educational philosophies that are child led such as project-based learning will allow them to take the reins of their learning and shout their success.

Justification of the Problem

Among the challenges facing our education system today is being able to fully prepare and equip students with necessary skills of problem solving, critical thinking, and innovative thought to be prepared for the 21st century future. Educators across the world are struggling to engage students and inspire them to learn (Fredricks, 2011). As our world becomes more dynamic, our educational efforts remain stagnant. Technology and a global economy continue to shift as our students remain limited in the approach to learning. The current education system prepares today's students for a world in the past, rather than for the possibilities of their future (Hallermann et al., 2011).

Research has proven a correlation between student engagement and student achievement (Fredricks, 2011). Fredricks' research finds that 40-60% of students are disengaged from learning. This disengagement stems from lack of interest and freedom about learning. When students are disengaged, they are more likely to drop out as a result (Hallermann et al., 2011). With dropout rates rising, high absenteeism and low student achievement, there is a need more than ever for all stakeholders to fight for their students.

Project-based learning (PBL) is a dynamic classroom approach with student-centered pedagogy that enables students to acquire knowledge through active exploration of real-world challenges and problems (Stacey, 2018). PBL

enables learning to become alive for all students, even our youngest learners in the kindergarten classroom context. Making learning engaging, responsive and adaptable per each child's needs, PBL introduces a new innovative educational framework that is an approach to learning suitable for all types of learners. A unique hands-on pedagogy should be implemented in the classrooms. Yet, the same, direct instruction teaching styles remain.

Given the importance of education, and improving upon student engagement and motivation, this study's purpose is crucial in showcasing how and why our education system needs a shift in direction. Schools such as Kids Day School strive to provide the best possible education for children and are limited if their own students do not have a voice in their learning. This study will be utilized to expand upon current educational debates as well as advance intellectual conversations, informing student led teaching effectiveness. The case will provide empirical evidence that supports schools' consideration in making the shift from teacher to child led learning. By including both empirical support and oppositional opinion, this study will act as a lens into the world of early childhood education, looking directly at Kids Day School's kindergarten classroom. As long as students remain curious and full of wonder, this study on improving student achievement will remain significant. Overall, education is too valuable, and our society should not take the teaching of our next generation lightly.

Deficiencies in the Organizational Knowledge Record

Education is a powerful weapon to possess, and with-it people can begin to change the world (Dewey, 1939). School leaders nationally and internationally continue to debate how best to educate. Even the most influential countries in the world, especially ones with the highest student achievement scores, still question their teaching styles as they reach success in the academic world (Chappell & Szente, 2019).

Although there is great data present that emphasizes child led learning, opposition remains a part of the growing research on the subject of project-based learning. Although related to the constructivist theory, PBL is a relatively new pedagogy that is challenging the traditional teaching styles in schools, leaving teachers across the world questioning their own teaching style and classroom tactics. Many schools, including Kids Day School continue to question the effectiveness of said teaching and thus there remains a gap in data and opinion.

Audience

The intended audience of this research study is fellow educators and school leaders who may still question what is best for children and their learning. This research may also pertain to interested parents who question the effectiveness of their own children's education and would like more information on ECE, and efforts being made to transform the world of education with a child led focus.

Overview of Theoretical Framework, Methodology, and Research

Project-based learning as an instructional model is rooted in aspects of the constructivist theory, a theory and pedagogy that encompasses student-centered

learning with active engagement. The responsibility of the learning is placed on the learner providing opportunity to problem solve, think critically, and construct knowledge socially (Quigley, 2010).

The founding theorists of the constructivist paradigm emphasize language, discovery learning, zone of proximal development and social interaction (Dewey, 1938; Piaget, 1955, Vygotsky, 1978). One of the major contributions from the constructivist framework is grounded in “learning by doing.” Piaget (1955) believed that knowledge could be constructed from experiences and that humans have the capacity to build upon prior knowledge indefinitely. When it comes to PBL, the project component is at the forefront as students are asked to utilize the experience in stages to develop their learning. Learning becomes relevant to the learner when using a social constructivist model such as project-based learning methodology (Quigley, 2010).

Using a phenomenological research design centered in an early childhood center context, this study explored how early learning can be influenced when taking children’s rights into consideration, focusing on the intentional philosophies and primary intent of teaching children. A phenomenological design was selected due to this research’s intent to understand and illustrate the early childhood learning phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell 2017). By looking closely at how and why schools teach, this study attempted to determine what factors play a role in establishing a successful education.

Research Questions and Purpose

This study aims to answer the following questions:

- What are perceived to be the barriers, challenges, and/or advantages of implementing the project approach into the kindergarten program?
- Should early education be seen as a product or process?
- What are the best practices and methods for student learning?
- What possible outcomes result from the implementation of project-based learning?

The purpose of this study is to understand the target stakeholders' (teachers, children, and their parents) perceptions about project learning and its implementation into the target school's kindergarten program and potential outcomes.

Limitations

This qualitative action research study uses people at the forefront of the research. Specifically highlighting the perceptions of both young students, their families, and educators as the voice of the data. With all research, there may be limitations present that can have a possibility of interfering with the data. Despite every effort from the researcher to keep the limitations limited, information from a select number of people, and potential bias could arise and would be unwarranted.

Review of Related Literature

Frameworks Informing the Study

Education standards across the nation are undergoing transformative reforms due to the need to promote conceptual understandings and 21st-century practices (Holmes & Hwang, 2016). The traditional paradigm of teachers sharing knowledge and students engaging in rote memorization practices is no longer

adequate for current society (Dole, Bloom & Doss, 2017). Researchers Mahasneh and Alwan (2018) similarly assert that this explicit push toward inquiry-based approaches is a driving force behind the shift in standards held by educators. With a dramatic and impending shift in educational practices, methods such as project-based learning are examined to determine the reliability and effectiveness of student-centered pedagogies. Although there are both teachers and data-driven research that supports the implementation of PBL within schools, many teachers still hesitate and fret over the dramatic shift in educational reform (Dole, Bloom & Doss, 2017).

Theoretical Connections of Listening as a Means of Teaching

Not necessarily a new term to education, project-based learning, also referred to as discovery learning, was first introduced in the research of seminal theorists Piaget, Vygotsky, and Dewey. The term, discovery learning, is not specifically stated in all of their works but is referenced as a novel idea of putting the child's experiences at the center of teaching philosophies. Piaget (1955) is widely recognized for the novel idea of students constructing knowledge and learning by connecting and building upon previous knowledge (schemas) with new information (Öztürk, 2016). An educational interpretation of this constructivist approach relates to incorporating active learning experiences into the classroom. Teachers can do so by listening to the children and facilitating their interest in learning projects. Consequently, children in these supportive environments become more capable, confident, and curious as a result of this

learning practice (Stacey, 2018). Thus, creating a learning environment that is conducive to project-based learning (Kwietniewski, 2017).

In further support of theoretical connections to PBL, Kameda (2017) suggests that the social aspects of learning, related to the idea of Vygotsky's social constructivism, are imperative for student success as students are able to connect and share ideas thus provoking further thought and learning. Students listen, discuss, and feed off each other's learning progress, becoming inspired along the way (Christakis, 2017). Social constructivism focuses on learning within a social cohort to be able to work with varying perspectives and abilities offering unique insights to everyone involved (Kameda, 2017). Students need to be offered a variety of learning approaches such as individual, small group, and large group to effectively teach and reach a classroom of learners (Dole, Bloom, & Doss, 2017). Students in early childhood can only learn so much working independently. By offering a variety of learning, such as project-based learning in the form of social and independent learning, teachers are able to provide a unique pedagogy that supports the needs of every type of learner.

The essential element of PBL is learning by doing and it is also the foundation and belief of Dewey, a philosopher referenced as the father of project-based learning (Griffith et al., 2018). Thus, by learning while actively engaged, students are able to make connections that have a lasting impact on their overall development. Researchers Griffith et al. (2018) suggest that PBL is a group-based project that requires the individual to make connections, share, and solve a problem within a group and then reflect on the learning opportunities the project

provides. This idea not only demonstrates Dewey's progressive philosophy of *The School and Society* but highlights the role Dewey played in reforming educational practices to make the student active and not passive within the learning process (Szulevicz & Jensen, 2013).

Barriers to Learning

Contrary to many researchers and philosophers' viewpoints regarding the positive change PBL instills within education, there are some researchers that object to the PBL nontraditional philosophy. The objections to PBL include but are not limited to students are not able to connect with a good teacher, teachers are not motivated to share knowledge with students, and the system of PBL is unorganized and ill-defined (Hemker, 1998). Similar to the viewpoints of Hemker, research Guido (2016) states that teachers are not given the freedom to share their own thoughts and understanding of the subjects they have a passion for. Teachers are not meant to be teachers in the context of PBL, but rather facilitators or mentors. Guido's (2016) and Hemker's (1998) opinions of PBL fall on common ground with the stated assumption that teachers will not be prepared to teach students whose own choices and interpretations lead to learning. Researcher Jones (2006) further asks the question of how PBL can be organized for teachers to properly prepare when the basis of PBL is dependent on the students involved.

The challenges and concerns associated with PBL relate mainly with the teacher's involvement (or lack thereof) within the classroom. Teachers take a passive position in the classroom giving way for students to be responsible for

their learning, which is the necessary force driving the PBL reformers (Szulewicz & Jensen, 2013). It begs the question between both sets of contradictory viewpoints of project-based learning: Who should be responsible for the journey of learning, the teacher or student in the early childhood context?

How Schools Teach

Exploring education in the early childhood context is expansive, especially when considering how culture and a country's values influence teaching philosophies, more specifically how schools teach. Structure, play, and curiosity are integral parts of the education system across the world (Chappell & Szente, 2019). Although vastly different, each type of teaching style in ECE is primarily influenced by a country's educational values and upbringing style (Davis & Dolan, 2016). In countries such as the United States and Australia, play is the primary form of learning in childhood settings. Research suggests that children learning through play are enabled to problem solve and become more creative by learning in unstructured settings (Faas, Wu, & Geiger, 2017). Moreover, children are able to choose how and what they learn, leading young learners to become imaginative in ways they use their time (2017). Similarly, Italy, Sweden, and Canada focus on child-inspired learning, focusing on the child's interest to lead the learning process, allowing curiosity to become the drive in the educational process (Chappell & Szente, 2019).

Gnjatović (2015) shared the view that a country's customs and values can contribute to the way students are taught and expected to learn. Countries, like China and Canada, that place high expectations on test scores and achievement related to placement create structured learners who rely on teachers for

information and guidance. Early childhood education in these settings is utilized to enhance how a child learns, teaching them the importance of goal setting and becoming a strong product of orderly schools.

Why Schools Teach

The purpose of education today is a heavily theorized question and one with answers that extend across the board. Each country and culture prioritize education differently than the next. One might argue that education is used purposely to find truth such as the research of Labaree (2017) while counterparts argue it is necessary to prepare a workforce (McLeod & Giardiello, 2019). Or in extreme cases, education is perceptualized as a means to prepare and achieve high exam scores suggested by Liu et al. (2019). These ideas are assumed speculations as there is no one congruent answer (Rouse & Joseph, 2019).

Researchers McLeod and Giardiello (2019) argued that history and socio-culture are the true proponents that influence the purpose and value of education with the distinction made between whether education is a product or process. Dominantly democratic jurisdictions such as the United States, Italy, and Australia portray education, especially early education, as a process to finding oneself and ultimate growth (McLeod & Giardiello, 2019). The process approach creates a paradigm of children being agents of their own lives, seen as competent and capable (Labaree, 2017). Ringsmose (2017) reiterated that learners in these settings are considered more participatory in their learning, rather than dominated. Consequently, authoritarian cultures, like the Chinese culture, emphasize structure, narrowing curriculum, and test-based accountability as the forefront of their teaching philosophy (McLeod & Giardiello, 2019). Teachers become leaders

of education in assertive settings rather than facilitators of learning in counterpart schools (Liu & Huang, 2019).

Identifying reasons behind the how and why schools teach can be ambiguous, depending on perspective and cultural background (Gnjatović, 2015). Although there is no one correct way, it is interesting to note how learning development in one country is interpreted differently than in others. Thus, learning is relative to various social and contextualized factors, resulting in the ability to make it undefinable in a standardized way (Chappell & Szente, 2019). This makes ECE difficult to illustrate as there are many factors that play a role in interpreting pedagogical approaches. Laughter, bubbles, and glitter may be present in ECE classrooms globally, yet the reasons and paradigms behind education are found to be reliant on cultural factors. Regardless of where a child learns in the world, one driving factor of their education stems from their motivation and drive to learn. The influential force behind said motivation and drive lies in how a child is taught along with the extent of their autonomy in the classroom.

Gaps in the Research

There is more to ECE than laughter, bubbles, and glitter. Although these certain qualities bring joy, education and the essential developmental milestones remain a foundational necessity in the journey of learning. Specific pedagogy can make or break one's success in the field of education, especially in this day and age where academic achievement remains a predecessor of future success (Tienken, 2019). When examining one type of teaching style from the next, a few thematic question words to consider how and why schools teach. There is a gap in

the research when considering the idea of teaching to the child versus teaching with the child. Children have the right to the best possible education (2019). Implementation of discovery learning approaches, such as PBL, face a lot of criticism with the inconsistencies and challenges faced through the implementation of this child led teaching style. By exploring the different perspectives, concepts, and practices adopted in early childhood settings, education is brought to life to demonstrate how pedagogical approaches are implemented in a classroom and the impact the approaches to learning have on teacher and student outcomes.

Action Research Design and Methodology

In order to explore discovery learning pedagogies, such as project-based learning, it is important to consider the impact it has on student and teacher outcomes. During this research process of diving into the early childhood context, the action research design of a phenomenological qualitative approach will be utilized to examine early childhood education on a deeper level. Phenomenology is an approach to research that aims to explore how a phenomenon, in this case, early childhood education, can be defined, understood, and interpreted from those who experience it (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). By focusing on qualitative research, this researcher hopes to gain perspective data that will contribute to explaining student and teacher outcomes shift when certain pedagogy is implemented into the classroom. This qualitative study will aim to ask the following research questions. How is child development impacted by the implementation of student-centered social constructivist frameworks in the classroom? How is child involvement influenced by student-led learning as

opposed to traditional schooling? Can early education be seen as a product or process?

By focusing on the phenomenon of early education, using multiple data collecting strategies and contextual analysis, certain insights will be gathered in order to determine possible impacts of discovery learning pedagogy within the journey of learning.

Site Selection

Early childhood education (ECE) is a branch of the education theory that focuses on teaching children by focusing on several stages of development. ECE can look pretty drastic from country to country yet still include some primary similarities. Early education globally includes young children learning in some capacity from birth to eight years old. Whether they are learning through play, exploration, or direct instruction, young children across the world are building their foundation of knowledge at an early age. This qualitative study will be conducted at Kids Day School.

Kids Day School has served the families in a midwestern state for the past 27 years by inspiring the hearts, minds, and imaginations of children. A school for children between the ages of six weeks to 12 years of age, Kids Day School is a family-owned and operated school with six locations. Kids Day School provides educational care to approximately 1200 children. With the help of our 225 educators, Kids Day School is open five days a week to accommodate and exceed the needs of the families who have become a part of our community of learners.

Although relatively small compared to the national competitors, Kids Country's

innovative practices, nature-inspired environments, and drive to provide quality educational care has given the organization a strong academic rich reputation within the community. To remain true to our mission and dignified reputation, Kids Day School continuously remains abreast of successful educational trends across the nation and around the world. One of these trends taking shape within our classrooms, specifically our kindergarten classroom is the idea of Project-Based Learning.

Population Selection

To truly capture the early childhood context in its entirety, the participants will include a range of stakeholders of Kids Day School, from young children to their parents to early childhood professionals so that multiple perspectives on building the theory of early learning can be gathered. It is important for this research study to bring multiple perspectives together to truly capture the impact child led learning has on a classroom's stakeholders. This research study aimed to select six participants, with the intended participants consisting of two children and one of their parents from a varying profession and two educators. With this research study focused on children's rights in the classroom and how they learn best, it is only vital to have children's voices heard. Thus, participant age level ranged anywhere between five years old and 60 years old. Selected participants took part in the research study through observation and interview methods. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were created to ensure the privacy of the participants in this qualitative study. By bringing together the voices of the

internal stakeholders of an early childhood classroom, this research study captured the impact of child led learning pedagogy.

Researcher Role and Positionality

Family, education, and curiosity are at the forefront of my values as an individual. Female, Caucasian, middle class, Christian are identity and character attributes that influence my actions. These values and characterizations, along with past experiences make up who I am as a person to result in the formation of my unique research lens. A lens I utilize to see and understand the world. It is critical in my research journey to know and fully grasp the beliefs I have to ensure the validity of research conducted. Research is always influenced by the philosophies that shape it (Walliman, 2017). A strong researcher is able to utilize these philosophical influences to acquire knowledge and develop an understanding of the data gathered. Before beginning the research process, a researcher must first determine their access, influence, participatory role, reciprocity, trust, and rapport to effectively establish themselves in the study and mitigate potential bias (Mertler, 2020). By accurately approaching qualitative research with a conceptualized view of my research positionality, I can employ my research lens to guide the objective exploration of the world around me.

Access

My lens is very attuned to the world of early childhood education. As an active participant in the organization where the research took place, it was imperative that I remain unbiased and supportive of the participants within the study. The access that I have as a leader in the Kids Day School school will enable me to have already established relationships with any potential participants

of the study, including the children, parents, and of course teachers. This research study consisted of internal stakeholders as participants, thus people I currently am around daily. To remain in the researcher's role, I established myself early on as a trustworthy data collector. Participants of the study were selected as volunteers from a participant proposal letter (see Appendix A) that will be sent to Kids Day School families with a child enrolled in a kindergarten classroom, detailing the research study on project-based learning and the need for external perspective and critical thought.

Influence, Trust, and Rapport

Being an established leader within the organization will have some pros and cons in regard to the research process (Coronella, 2019). As a leader, rapport and trust have already been established from my daily interactions with Kids Day School stakeholders, so potential participants will have a connection that could help or hinder any research results. As a leader and with the influence I may possess, I must remain cautious not to showcase any bias with the subject of the research. I will mitigate potential influences that could cause certain limitations by establishing myself from the beginning as a researcher rather than a leader during the duration of the study. Those that volunteered to participate were given every opportunity to stop their participation for any reason. My hope is that those that have a familiar background with me, volunteered with the understanding that my purpose and intention was to remain unbiased and maintain integrity.

Participatory Role

As an active participant in the Kids Day School organization, I will remain active during the research process acting as a participant-observer. Being a

participant that observes means that as the researcher, I annotated, and directed the research methods, and interacted with the participants, yet remained unbiased throughout my work as a researcher.

Reciprocity

To establish reciprocity within this research study, it must first be determined what I as the researcher gave to participants and what the participants of the research will give back. The give and take, reciprocity, between participants and researchers during the research process, is vital as human nature relies on this give and take to establish and maintain social interaction (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). In regard to this case study, the participants provided the research with their time, effort, experience, and wisdom to inform the study. To repay the volunteer participants for their contributions to the research process, the researcher thanked each participant and welcomed them to a research conclusion celebration after the research process was concluded.

Potential Bias

As a perfectionist and idealistic researcher, I must rely heavily on reflexivity to monitor myself and the role I play in the research, “in order to maintain a balance between the personal and universal” (Berger, 2015, p.220). This is especially important considering I am actively involved in the early childhood education context. During the research process, my reactions, thoughts, and assumptions need to be reflected on and appropriately managed to ensure trustworthiness in my work. Utilizing the qualitative research approach in any case study requires the researcher to remain vigilant in their relationship to the work. My being and nature are to form relationships and become connected, a

strength when conducting qualitative research but a weakness if overdone. As a researcher, I must understand myself and the role I play in the research process to accurately collect and analyze knowledge when peering through my research lens.

Ethical Considerations

In early childhood, trust can drive a lot of factors and create so many opportunities for learning and development. Trust is essential especially when working with someone's most prized possession, their child. We not only have to establish trustful relationships with parents and children, but we also must ensure a certain level of comfort for a child to fully feel capable of learning.

The same importance holds true for a research study, specifically this study on children's right to guide their education. As previously stated, this researcher will establish trust in the research process by asking for volunteer participants who will be aware of the purpose of the study. Participants will volunteer and consent to working on the project, but if one must stop for any reason, their contributions, even small, will be appreciated and they will be free to end their participation. I understand that as a researcher in the early childhood field, I must remain extra cautious and ensure complete confidentiality especially since minors will be a large component and ultimate focus of the study. All identities of every participant regardless of age will be protected and thus pseudonyms will be utilized to maintain confidentiality. As the researcher, I will do everything in my power to ensure that trust is established and maintained and that all participants feel protected, supported, and appreciated during the duration of the study.

With one of the biggest contributing factors of this study will be the idea of amplifying children's voices in their educational journey. Although I will be focused on studying how a child's voice impacts their learning through child led practices such as project-based learning, their voice will not be limited to just the classroom. Every intention of this research project is to showcase how children have the right to voice their thoughts, ideas, hopes, and dreams. That is why I am placing a strong emphasis on having children be a part of this research's participation team. As an active participant in the field and future researcher of early education, I pledge to uphold everyone's voice, from child to adult so that this research project can accurately and effectively portray any possible impacts of student-led learning on teacher and student outcomes.

Data Collection Methods

For this qualitative study on education, data was collected utilizing multiple strategies such as interviews and observation to gather extensive information on the subject of early childhood education, specific thoughts on project learning versus traditional teaching styles.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via the zoom online platform to minimize personal contact during the global pandemic. Zoom interviews provide more benefits than phone interviews as face-to-face can create a more naturalistic setting as proposed by researchers Thomas et al. (2011). Semi-structured interviews were chosen based on the ability to prepare pre-determined questions as well as allow for open-ended questions to be asked depending on the discussion. The interviews were intended to last approximately 30 minutes to one

hour depending on the length of the conversation. Prior to each interview, an informed consent form (see Appendix B) was sent to each participant. With informed consent being asked of every participant, those being underage gain consent from their legal guardian. Once the forms are completed and signed, the interview began by highlighting aspects of the consent form.

With the younger participants, I explained the purpose of the study and why I felt it was important to hear from them. I then asked for each child participant to give me their own verbal consent in addition to obtaining written consent (see Appendix C) from their guardians. Each participant were asked a relatively similar list of ten questions (see Appendix E). However, there will be slight differences to the interview protocols based on the participants' age and position related to the organization. For example, questions were worded differently to ensure understanding and comprehension by young children. Each interview began with background questions to gather some demographic information, which Hill et al. (1997) suggest can help by making the participant feel more comfortable.

Observations

In addition to the interviews, this research study also utilized participant observation from a single kindergarten classroom, approximately 23 people, to gather relevant information. The classroom selected was easily accessible, age-appropriate to the study, willing to participate through observation. The observation method was chosen in order to allow the researcher to fully examine classrooms in naturally occurring situations. Through observation, a better understanding can be generated (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Each observation

lasted approximately 30 minutes. The observations took place during the morning hours of 10 to 11 o'clock as this timeframe has been determined by the teachers as a vital learning time. Observations differed as one observation covered a teacher-directed lesson whereas a different observation covered student-directed work. Each observation noted behaviors and interactions between students and their peers as well as students with their teachers. Observations allowed for firsthand data to be collected to see early childhood experiences in action (Hill et al., 1997). The aim of the observation was to see student learning in action and to note how students play a role in developing and leading their learning process.

Data Analysis Procedures

The purpose of this study was to understand the target stakeholder' (teachers, children and their parents) perceptions about project learning and its implementation into the kindergarten program. Through data analysis, coding would enable themes to be extrapolated from the interviews and behavior analysis from the pre-written checklist will provide relevant data from classroom observations. First content analysis will be conducted to categorize and organize all of the data collected so that it may then be classified and summarized. Then the data will be axial coded in order to link and categorize codes together to create common themes and thus make further inferences. Findings from both data sources will be integrated in order to offer first hand observed experiences as well as participant perspectives.

Trustworthiness

Every effort was made to establish and maintain trustworthiness during the duration of this qualitative research design. It is imperative for the researcher

to take such measures as it ensures their work is valid. By going through the additional steps of trustworthiness, the researcher was then able to conduct a true research study that can be utilized to provide credible information to the public. To fully establish trustworthiness, dependability, confirmability, credibility, and transferability was upheld using multiple strategies including inquiry audits, journaling, member checking, and triangulation.

Dependability

In order to focus on the consistency of the research, should someone wish to replicate my results, an audit trail was utilized. Inquiry audits allow for research to be extensively reviewed to ensure the research process could in fact be repeated if desired (Elo et al., 2014). The data collection process, analysis, and final interpretations will be extensively recorded to enable further research to take place.

Confirmability

To ensure the confirmability of this research project, an audit trail and reflexive journaling will be available. After reflecting on my research lens, I was able to be extra cautious that no biases or personal motivators disrupted the analysis. To confirm the research, an audit trail was implemented to further explain the process of collecting, analyzing and interpreting data (Wolf, 2003). To ensure credible results, weekly journaling were conducted to allow for thoughtful explanations of the research process.

Credibility

Credibility was established in this research study by utilizing member checking and triangulation. To validate not only accurate results but establish

internal validity (Connelly, 2016). Member checking was used so that participants can validate their experiences. It will include not only the participant's review of data but also give each participant an opportunity to clarify or add additional comments. Further, to ensure results are accurate and findings credible, triangulation was implemented by using multiple methods of data collection.

Transferability

A lot of effort was focused on establishing effective transferability of findings and conclusive results to ensure the research could be implemented in other similar contexts. By providing detailed experiences and perspectives of the early childhood education participants, results were applicable to other educational settings. Using the strategy of thick description, detailed evidence in the form of observation recap and direct quotations from interviews were used to showcase that the research is able to apply to other circumstances (Rodon, & Sesé, 2008). Thus, the results from this case study could give way to and lead to other findings from other educational organizations.

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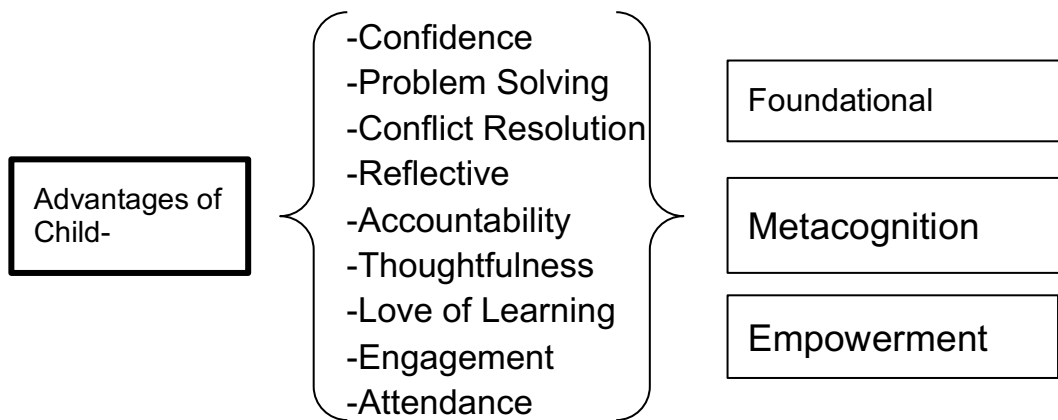
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CHAPTER 2: RESULTS OF RESEARCH

This study began in the hopes of determining how young learners learn best in an early childhood setting. Participants consisted of a group of seven individuals ranging in age from five to fifty each with some prior knowledge or experience in an early childhood education organization. Each of the participants offered a unique perspective within their interviews on early learning and informal observations which led to three major themes arising. The three major themes that emerged were foundational learning, metacognition, and empowerment (see figure 1). Furthermore, the ECE participants' reflections led to a consistent appreciation for early learning opportunities in an early childhood education setting.

Figure 1.

Advantages of Child Led Learning Themes



Early Childhood Education as Foundational Learning

Each of the participants, whether experienced in teaching or not, highlighted the importance of early learning as a process of education rather than a product of society. Education is not a means to an end but rather an ongoing process meant to be continuous and dynamic in nature, oftentimes unique depending on the individual. Foundational Learning is the building blocks of all learning which can be considered all basic skills that need to be taught first in order to lay a solid foundation for future learning to occur (Larabee, 2017). “Every child is born with an innate sense of learning that needs to be nurtured and cultivated in order to lay a foundation of learning” matter of factly stated by Susan, a kindergarten teacher. The importance of early education was at the forefront of every conversation, even five-year-old Skylar stated, “my teacher teaches me to teach myself.” Sam, a parent, detailed how both of her children’s development continues to amaze her and how she believes they will be fully prepared for future education as a result of the early learning they have had. Sam stated that, “I can see their confidence with learning shining through and growing daily.” Early Childhood Education sets the stage for the rest of a child’s life (Ringsmose, 2017). Suzie, another kindergarten educator similarly stated how ECE can be “a preparation for life, linking social-emotional concepts to cognitive thought.” All participants agreed that education can be seen as a process with one participant, Becky a teacher, stating that “I think of it as a process that leads to the ultimate product of who the child becomes and what their role in society is.”

All participants seemed aware of advantages in education as a continual process. “The teachers give the kids a chance to explore and play and with that freedom they learn so much” stated Sam. This freedom she speaks of is often the

case in unstructured early learning environments like the target school's learning environments. By challenging the traditional educational style that is structured, professionals in early educational settings can give way to thoughtfully building an educational foundation in each child. Teaching children to think, learn and make connections around them should be the primary goal of early education (McLeod & Giardiello, 2019). With these goals in mind, a child would be taught to metacognitively act within their own education, once again further implying the stance of education being progressive and more of a process rather than a product of teaching.

Metacognition

Thinking about thinking is a metacognitive practice in education that gives way to reflective thought and deeper synaptic connections (Labaree, 2017). Sam stated, "I believe the purpose of early childhood education should be teaching children how and why to think. Not what to think." Interestingly, educators, Suzie and Susan also highlighted how early childhood organizations have the ability to individualize learning, providing children with the opportunity to think, find and explore their own interests. Individualized learning allows for children to be advocates for their own learning, thus leading themselves to success (Gnjatović, 2015).

"Every time I ask a question, my teacher asks me a question," said Grant, a student in Suzie's classroom. When observing the target school's kindergarten program, I came across another instance where a teacher did not simply provide an answer to a question. During this instance of teaching, I observed the child ask about how butterflies fly. The teacher could have easily given a simple answer

and moved on. Yet, instead, this teacher took a second before answering, asking a question back to the child on if they have ever flown. The child quickly said yes with excitement, pondering a bit, and then went back to their original question asking again about the butterflies. The teacher said for the child to go around the room to see what could fly. For about 10 minutes, the child explored their surroundings by lifting items off of the ground and threw them in the air. Other children quickly joined with a mess building. Yet, after some time had elapsed, the child was able to think critically, problem solve, explore, play and come to find their own answer. Giving children the chance to explore and truly think about their thoughts and ideas makes the learning possibilities endless.

A key idea that continued to arise was the idea of the educational process. One parent, Kathy, and Susan, one of the educators defined the term process very similarly, stating that a process is continuous. “There really isn’t one goal in mind with the early educational process other than giving children a chance to be children and find themselves through exploration,” states Susan, “by allowing children to be naturally curious and follow their innate desire to discover, we are basically empowering them to succeed, providing accountability along the way.”

Empowerment

Students observed in their kindergarten classroom became clearly excited when given the opportunity to pick their activities during all five separate occasions of informal observation. The excitement ranged from running to a specific area, clapping their hands, or even exclaiming, “yay I wanted to look at the bird’s nest with the magnifying glass.” When asked about this specific observation, one of four kindergarten teachers, Becky, suggested that students feel

empowered when they can dictate their learning and make choices. Likewise, Becky's colleague Rachel has examined many instances where she has noticed students becoming more motivated to learn and engage when they are the ones making the decisions. She laughingly said that she uses this as an advantage in the classroom and gives the students choices between two subjects to make them feel empowered and thus focus more on what is being taught. "I think my daughter is just more motivated to learn when her teacher lets her pick activities," thought Sam. Continuing, Sam added that "Skylar really wants to come to school on what she calls 'choice' days, I honestly think she barely sleeps the night before because she is so excited." It is easy for a child to develop a love of learning when child led pedagogy is instilled in the classroom (Stacey, 2018). Students become motivated, accountable, and thus empowered when child led learning is emphasized within a classroom leading to so many impactful ways to improve upon their learning success (Christakis, 2017).

Trustworthiness of Qualitative Data

Every effort was made to establish and maintain trustworthiness during the duration of the qualitative research design. By going through the additional steps of trustworthiness, the researcher was able to conduct a true research study that can be utilized to provide credible information to the public. To fully establish trustworthiness, dependability, confirmability, credibility, and transferability will be upheld using multiple strategies including inquiry audits, journaling, member checking, and triangulation.

Dependability

In order to focus on the consistency of the research, should someone wish to replicate my results, an audit trail was utilized. The data collection process, analysis, and final interpretations were extensively recorded to enable further research to take place.

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To ensure the confirmability of this research project, an audit trail and reflexive journaling is available. After reflecting on my research lens, I was able to be extra cautious of potential biases or personal motivators to not disrupt the analysis. To confirm the research, an audit trail was implemented to further explain the process of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data (Wolf, 2003). To ensure credible results, weekly journaling was conducted to allow for thoughtful explanations of the research process.

Credibility

Credibility shall be established in this research study by utilizing member checking and triangulation. To validate not only accurate results but establish internal validity (Connelly, 2016). Member checking was used so that participants could validate their experiences. It will include not only the participants' review of data but also give each participant an opportunity to clarify or add additional comments. Further, to ensure results are accurate and findings credible, triangulation will be implemented by using multiple methods of data collection.

Transferability

A lot of effort will be focused on establishing effective transferability of findings and conclusive results to ensure the research could be implemented in other similar contexts. By providing detailed experiences and perspectives of the

early childhood education participants, results will be applicable to other educational settings. Using the strategy of thick description, detailed evidence in the form of observation recap and direct quotations from interviews are used to showcase that the research is able to apply to other circumstances (Rodon, & Sesé, 2008). Thus, the results from this case study could give way to and lead to other findings from other educational organizations in addition to the study's target school, Kids Day School.

Logic Model

The logic model found within Appendix H shows how hands-on training in project-based learning and listening to the students will produce outcomes that support their learning and provide them with an educational foundation that will instill a lifetime of learning. As the model shows, there is participation required by the teachers and the students as both are essential for project-based learning to occur. The logic model does present some assumptions including that teachers are properly trained to document the students asking the questions (Appendix A-2). If a teacher does not hear a student ask a question, a learning opportunity may be missed.

Conclusion

The initial qualitative study found that participants believe that child led, inquiry-based pedagogy such as project-based learning can have a positive impact on student and teacher outcomes. With this in mind, the next step of the evaluation process would be to implement project-based learning into the classroom to note the quantifiable outcomes of child led learning practices.

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CHAPTER 3: DESCRIPTION OF ACTION PROCESS

Description of Action Process

Based on qualitative research collected over the past few months, this phenomenological study on child led learning found that internal stakeholders of early childhood education (ECE) schools believe that child led learning through project-based learning (PBL) pedagogy could benefit students more than traditional teacher-directed practices.

With data from structured interviews and informal observations coded and analyzed, it was found that the participants favor child led learning over teacher-directed pedagogy. With this in mind, this researcher developed an action plan, to answer some questions that surfaced from the data (found in table 1). How can teachers best prepare to facilitate learning that is child led? Furthermore, would quantifiable data verify the opinions of the participants by comparing student achievement scores from child led learning classrooms versus traditional teacher-directed classrooms?

Action Plan Design

Table 1

Action Plan

Objectives and Outcomes (What)	Tasks (How)	Person(s) (Who)	Time (When)	Location (Where)	Resources	Funds
<p>Develop and implement Three teacher-oriented professional development (PD) trainings to showcase the what, how and why of child led learning so that teachers have a better understanding and knowledge base and can be better prepared for implementation of child centered teaching in their</p>	<p>-Create a research-based training on child led learning with a theoretical framework base. -Create a training outlining instructions for implementation training for ECE teachers. -Create a training on the importance of with child led learning pedagogy.</p>	<p>-Four kindergarten Teachers of Kids Day School -Two Administrators that approve trainings -One Education Coach that develops trainings</p>	<p>-PD Trainings will be completed by January 2022 -Trainings will be approved within one week after training completion date in early January 2022. -Trainings will take place in three separate sessions for two hours per session, one per week the month of January 2022 -Classes completed by February 2022</p>	<p>Kids Day School-Fairlawn Campus (ECE)</p>	<p>-Printed materials -Three trainings -References for trainings -Food -Time</p>	<p>- Grant to pay the cost of training</p>

own classrooms.						
Use quantifiable data from assessments scores to act as a validator and determine the true success of child led learning compared to standard teacher-directed learning on student motivation and student achievement.	-Have students (Four kindergarten classrooms each school) from one school using PBL pedagogy and one school using traditional teacher-directed complete standardized testing for kindergarten grade level. Compare kindergarten student achievement scores from state standardized tests to show the difference in student achievement from child led learning versus teacher-directed learning.	-Eight classrooms of students, about 200 kindergartners total -Eight kindergarten Teachers total, Four from each school -Four Administrators, Two from each school - Each Child's Parents for consent in the study	- Assessments completed at the beginning of May 2022 -Scores compiled end of May 2022 -Scores analyzed June 2022 -Outcome conclusion reached by July 2022.	-Kids Day School private ODE program (PBL) -Local school district (Traditional teaching pedagogy)	-Student standardized achievement tests (Ohio kindergarten Assessment) -Time	- Grant money for standardized kindergarten assessments

Considering these two questions, the following objectives and outcomes are listed within the future action plan to propel the study forward:

-Develop and implement three teacher-oriented professional development (PD) trainings to showcase the importance and strategies behind teaching, focusing on child led learning so that teachers have a better understanding and knowledge base.

-Use quantifiable data from assessment scores to act as a validator and determine the true success of child led learning compared to standard teacher-directed learning on student motivation and achievement.

Analysis of Action Plan

Objective One

Objective one focuses on developing and implementing teacher professional development training aimed to assist teachers in improving upon understanding and knowledge of child-centered pedagogy. With some careful consideration and thoughts obtained from the research, the three trainings that will be implemented will focus on child led learning theoretical framework connections, instructions for implementation of PBL like pedagogies, and a training on strategies and methods associated with child led learning.

Participants

To make these trainings a reality, an educational coach from Kids Day school would be necessary to develop and implement the three teacher training modules. In addition to the educational coach who creates the training modules, the two administrators, the school director, and the assistant director must approve the professional development training prior to the implementation. Lastly and

most importantly, the kindergarten teachers who have been the main participants of the study will be the ones to receive the three training modules.

TimeFrame

In order to best prepare the teachers for future facilitating success, the research-based training that will be developed will take time to fully create and thus will have a goal of January 2022 as the completion date. Thus the educational coach has a few months to research, create and obtain approval prior to training being conducted. After the administration team has approved the professional development training, then can the fun begin. Starting the second week of January 2023, the education coach will conduct each training session, lasting two hours, one evening per week after school, for a total of three weeks. This timeframe not only is achievable by all participants but also provides the teachers with efficient time between training sessions to put theory to action.

Location

Located at Kids Day School (KDS), a private state-chartered kindergarten program is the primary focus of the study and action plan. The kindergarten program at KDS consists of four kindergarten classrooms and teachers with about 80 kindergarten students total. Typically KDS followed the local school district lead and developed curriculum and teacher pedagogy based on what the local public school did. This researcher aimed to determine if this was the best practice. Being a private school, KDS has the ability to forgo current teaching practices and implement child-centered learning at the forefront of the KDS curriculum.

Resources

In order to make this objective of teacher training a reality, the resources necessary include printed materials, three trainings, references for training, food, time to plan, and time to conduct training.

Funds

The necessary funds for the training development and implementation, resources, and overtime pay may end up being well over \$100 per training. As this is a professional development-based objective, the government has grants for schools in order to cover any additional costs associated with teacher development. Thankfully, the grant allows for another objective in the action plan to be implemented simultaneously in order to continue and further strengthen the study.

Objective Two

With a focus on determining and comparing student achievement outcomes, objective two focuses on quantitative data collection and analysis to ultimately determine if child led learning is successful.

Participants

The participants of objective two of the action plan include the students first and foremost as it is their standardized test scores that will ultimately determine if child led learning pedagogy impacts student achievement more or not. In order to gain a true comparative picture, two separate schools, KDS, and local public school will be utilized, thus there would be a total of eight kindergarten classrooms and just about 200 kindergarteners. With eight classrooms, there would be eight teachers and thus two administrators per school

for a total of four of them. To make this plan happen, parent consent and approval are necessary with using underage student test scores within the study, so parents will also be involved in the process.

Timeframe

Students typically take their standardized assessments in the spring semester, usually in the months of April or May so the time frame set for students to take the test would be early May 2022. The researcher predicts that the scores will be back by the end of May 2022 and thus analyzed in June 2022. This timeframe provides ample time to conduct a quantitative review and come to a conclusion to determine the objective outcome by the end of June 2022.

Location

This objective focuses on two schools' kindergarten programs, KDS, and the local public school near KDS.

Resources

In order to make this objective of student achievement comparison a reality, the resources necessary include standardized kindergarten assessments and time to analyze and come to a conclusion.

Funds

Another grant will be utilized to purchase the standardized assessments which can range from \$25 to \$45 a child depending on assessment so this money will be funded by the state of Ohio.

Analysis of Implementation and Assessment Plan

At Kids Day School the mission is to create a love of learning by inspiring the hearts, minds, and imaginations of children. KDS's vision and mission statement is a direct reflection of the learning organization. From the collaboration of the entire learning community, from students to parents to teachers and administration, the vision grew to become the commitment pledge above.

The organization has been successful in living the vision and mission while KDS educates young students in the community. Families and the students who experience the schools daily are excited to come to school where they can explore, play, and learn alongside their peers. The environments are natural and home-like and thus create a sense of calm for the student. The teachers are committed to providing the best possible education for students and thus treat each student with respect and acceptance. Overall, enrollment is on the rise while student achievement remains stagnant. Enrollment may be up 5% from previous years, but with the rise in new children, the issue of their academic success rates which have not improved or declined but instead remain consistent year after year is becoming more dramatic. This lack of growth in student academic achievement calls into question the KDS organizations' teaching style and curriculum programs utilized.

There is always room for growth and development in and out of the classroom. KDS teachers strive to create classroom environments where joy and wonder are at the forefront of learning. However, in some cases in the organization's schools and others, students do not always have the opportunity to

voice their opinion concerning their learning. Teachers will attempt to always give the students the chance to share their ideas, however, teacher training, timing and strict standards can become an obstacle in giving students the chance to use their voice fully.

A proposed goal that the organization plans to utilize regarding student involvement in the curriculum process is through a child centered learning approach: Teachers will spend at least 15 minutes a day listening to students speak about their interests or experiences for a three-month time in order to begin incorporating their interests into the classroom environment and curriculum. Within five months, students will take the lead with curriculum and environmental structure, implementing inquiry led practices such as project-based learning, with the teachers becoming facilitators as the students become more confident and engaged with their learning abilities.

Description of Evaluation

Classrooms can become chaotic places if not managed and run properly. However, they can also become a place where joy and wonder cease to exist as teachers fight to meet the strict expectations of state standards and standardized assessment goals. With a preschool setting in mind, the typical imagery is bright lights and colors, students playing freely, and the occasional structured art activity led by the teacher. This image and the one with lined desks is full of limitations concerning students and the power of their learning. Issues arise in a classroom when a teacher is a leader and the students are merely followers on their path of learning. Even the childcare teacher faces limitations as they strive to be and offer

more than the dreaded description of “qualified babysitter.” Many studies, including one by researcher Erika Christakis (2017) suggest that early childhood teachers can offer so much more when they understand that students have the right to use their voice within their journey of learning.

With the goal of improving the currently stagnant student achievement scores, this Kids Day School organization will implement the project-based learning program. To determine the overall effectiveness of the project-based learning program on student achievement an outcome evaluation framework will be utilized. An outcome evaluation will assess the short- and long-term results of the program (Giancola, 2021). The outcome design will work best for this type of organizational program because it tracks and determines if the program was a failure or a success.

With student achievement levels remaining stagnant year after year with a baseline at 80% of the class at the developmental level, there is a need to establish a program, such as Project-Based Learning, into the KDS schools to improve upon the Pre-K classroom’s student achievement levels. By focusing on outcome evaluation, this program evaluation will determine how the project-based learning program impacts student achievement in the early childhood context. The program goal this organization wishes to address is as follows:

Teachers will spend at least 15 minutes a day listening to students speak about their interests or experiences for a three-month time to begin incorporating their interests into the classroom environment and curriculum. Within five months, students will take the lead with the

curriculum and environmental structure, implementing practices such as Project-Based Learning, with the teachers becoming facilitators as the students become more confident and engaged with their learning abilities.

To properly evaluate the effectiveness of the project-based learning program, a single group design will be utilized when conducting this study. Single group design is when all subjects, KDS students, experience a single program implementation, and then results are collected with outcomes assessed over time (Giancola, 2021). A classroom group will be selected from the Kids Day School where the project-based learning program will be implemented. A prior and post-assessment will be conducted to determine the outcome evaluation of the project-based learning program on student achievement in the selected classroom at Kids Country.

Evidence and Data

How do students learn best, teacher-directed or student-centered? To answer the controversial question regarding student learning, an assessment instrument can be utilized to further inspect what type of learning and or teaching avenue works best for students in ECE. To meet the objectives of this research, which aim to increase student involvement through a listening approach by the teachers, and implementation of a student-centered learning philosophy such as project-based learning to ultimately increase student confidence, engagement, and motivation in learning, both an informal and formal assessment will be utilized.

Data collection on student achievement will be conducted utilizing a quantitative design. The data collected will allow the teachers to close the

learning gap for students. The data will inform teachers of the success of this model, and increase student outcomes, as the logic model in Appendix A-2 represents. The program outcome, to enhance students' learning, will be shown through the data collection.

Martin's Motivation and Engagement Scale

The first assessment, the Martin Motivation, and Engagement scale will be utilized to measure how students and their parents perceive their engagement and motivation in the classroom. Using a Likert scale, Martin (2007) informally assesses a student's feelings towards school and class engagement which will inform how students feel regarding their current instruction. The Likert-type survey assessment instrument along with the accompanying Wheel diagram (2007), seen in Appendix A-2 will address the goals within this research, specifically, if students are feeling more confident and motivated after student-centered pedagogy has been fully implemented in their learning journey. The assessment will be conducted prior to objectives being initiated and again after the research has begun to wrap up so that any changes in perspective and feeling can be documented. Being that students in this specific ECE field are young, around the ages four and five, parents will also be asked to conduct the assessment with their students. Questions asked by the Martin Motivation and Engagement scale are directed for younger students in mind, asking questions related to their feelings about school, their teacher, and themselves as students. A few sample questions from the Martin (2007) assessment are listed within Appendix B-2.

Martin's Motivation and Engagement scale is a well-established assessment that has been utilized for over 12 years by schools across the globe (Marin et al., 2015). The test is considered both reliable and valid due to many contributing factors that ensure validity remains present. A factor that ensures reliability is the internal consistency of the coefficients (Martin, 2009). Martin (2009) addresses the reliability of his assessment specifically by noting that the alpha coefficient remains constant from .77 to .82. The consistency of the coefficients further implies that the assessment measuring student motivation and engagement can be considered to provide reliable data. Furthermore, the assessment is valid due to evidence-based internal structure, content, and response processes (Martin et al., 2015). Items in the assessment were pilot tested to establish response processes and prove comprehension among the intended test takers and the varying degrees of age. In addition, Martin (2009) explains the development of the assessment by adapting questions from other testing instruments, ensuring that the question content and internal structure remained valid.

Teaching Strategies Gold Assessment

Just as the Martin Motivation and Engagement Survey assessment will assess students' motivation and engagement in the classroom, the Teaching Strategies Gold Assessment will also be utilized to measure student achievement as pedagogical changes begin to occur. Teaching Strategies Gold utilizes teacher observation techniques to formally assess student learning over a period (Lambert et al., 2015). It is an embedded assessment instrument that enables teachers to

note student learning achievements quickly and effectively during their day-to-day interactions. By using a color-coded system, Teaching Strategies Gold makes it easy for teachers to list their observation notes and determine where a student falls within their development (2015). The color-coded progressions represent different developmental and learning levels across multiple age levels. For instance, red represents birth through a one-year developmental range whereas yellow represents a two to three-year old's typical development. An example of a page from the assessment (Lambert et al., 2015) is shown in Appendix C-3. Measuring student learning outcomes in multiple ways, including social-emotional, physical, cognitive, and other learning domains. Similarly, to the Martin's Survey, Teaching Strategies has been proven by researchers, including Decker (2011) to have evidence of interrater, person, and item and consistent reliability. Additionally, the test is said to have evidence of concurrent validity with high correlations to the Bracken School Readiness Assessment (Panter & Bracken, 2009).

Being an ongoing assessment, this assessment will be implemented and conducted during the duration of the research process, from beginning to end to track students' learning progress as the pedagogical framework shifts from being teacher-oriented to student-led. Teachers will conduct the assessment with the students in their classroom using informal observations and annotations. The following is an example of the type of questions (Lambert et al., 2015) that can be found on the Teaching Strategies Gold assessment to guide teacher observations:

The student demonstrates phonological awareness by recognizing and producing rhyming words.

The student regulates their own emotions and behaviors by managing feelings.

Limitations and Ethical Consideration

Both assessments have proven reliability and validity factors established to ensure the effectiveness and success of each assessment. Even with evidence from other researchers, Kids Day School will also strive to ensure the integrity of each assessment remains when conducting the assessment with students. This will be done by asking teachers to remain consistent in conducting both assessments and by analyzing the data thoroughly, comparing the information with other learning assessments conducted by the early childhood school to ensure accuracy of results. Kids Day School will follow the guidelines of both assessments and ensure proper steps are taken to validate each assessment. However, the validity and reliability of the assessments is not the only concern. Kids Day School will also want to establish that limiting variables are kept at a minimum to not interfere with results to validate that both assessments are properly conducted with each student's best interest in mind.

Both assessments may include some limiting factors that could become present when implemented in this specific Kids Day School School within the early childhood context. With concern to the limitations of both assessments, some limiting considerations include student behavior, evaluator discrepancies, and possible distortion. Depending on who is conducting and analyzing either

assessment, distortion can easily occur to limit this type of limiting variable one single teacher should conduct and analyze both assessments. When considering teacher-specific limitations, a possible limiting factor could be the teachers' administration of assessment confidence and prior administrative experience. The teacher chosen should be the lead teacher of the classroom, as a lead teacher in early childhood is one that has experience teaching, consistency in the classroom being assessed, and should have a strong relationship with students. This lead teacher leading the assessments would also be able to prevent student behavior from interfering with results as the lead should have a general idea of students and their needs prior to assessment implementation.

Data collected on student motivation and student learning achievement from the assessments will be measured by the lead teacher of the classroom who will be able to analyze both student perceptions and student achievement as they relate to the shift in pedagogy. By conducting the assessments prior to the change in teaching and again after some time has elapsed with students leading the curriculum, Kids Day School and stakeholders of administration, teachers, parents, and students will begin to see how students learn best. In doing so, it will be determined if students become more confident and motivated as well as achieve higher levels of learning as a result of student-centered learning and thus establish students' rights.

Anticipated Outcomes and Measurement

The Martin Motivation and Engagement Survey Assessment and the Teaching Strategies Gold assessment will be greatly beneficial in providing Kids

Day School with the necessary information needed as Kids Day School begins to alter the pedagogy to correlate more with the school's philosophy. In the shift to become more student-led and focused in the early childhood classrooms, the teachers will plan to implement both assessments mentioned above to measure how effective the shift in teaching style is. Each assessment will provide a quantifiable reflection of how successful the schools were in meeting the objective which is:

Teachers will spend at least 15 minutes a day listening to students speak about their interests or experiences for a three-month time to begin incorporating their interests into the classroom environment and curriculum. Within five months, students will take the lead with the curriculum and environmental structure, implementing practices such as Project-Based Learning, with the teachers becoming facilitators as the students become more confident and engaged with their learning abilities.

The researchers anticipate that after the PBL program is implemented, student motivation, confidence, and overall achievement will rise.

Analysis of Organizational Change & Leadership Practice

Organizational Change

This researcher found that child led learning such as project-based learning practices can positively impact child learning outcomes, however there is still hesitation from teachers who have been trained and taught traditional

methods that are teacher directed. With a focus on kindergarten, teacher training to implement child centered learning is necessary, but how can one begin the process of changing such a structured traditional practice and become confident in being a facilitator of child led learning? What this study and research is asking is that teachers and the overall organization must change their position in the classroom from top down to bottom up.

This researcher determined that three professional development trainings can be created in order for teachers to become knowledgeable, learn steps to take and appreciate the child led, non-standard teaching style. These trainings will require professional development that will be mandated and provide teachers with enough time between training to put theory and knowledge into practice. Looking back to the theorists these teachers know and appreciate, child led learning can be inferred from major theorists as one training. Another can focus on instructions for implementation and the third can be focused on the importance of child led learning. Thus these trainings focus on the what, how and why behind child led learning teaching practices. These trainings need to train the whole teacher so that they learn more and buy into this new child centered pedagogy.

Leadership Practice

The current leadership style of the Kids Day School organization is very transactional. Very organized and structured and relates to a typical work force practice where leaders set expectations and followers complete their roles. In the early childhood industry, this would typically look like the director of the school overseeing the teachers lesson planning and then teaching the children in the

classroom. However, with such a large transformative learning style taking shape, there also gives way for leaders to change and transform from transactional, to transformational. When directors in early childhood education become transformational leaders, they are becoming facilitators for success, similar to the role of the teacher in a child led classroom. Directors' roles shift to empower and support teachers, to inspire and motivate them towards the organization's vision and mission. In this case, it would be to lead them on the journey towards child led learning, giving way to allow for children to play and thus be curious in order to explore, discover and learn on their own path of learning.

Implications for Practice & Future Research

The need for actionable change has become evident in the study's target school, Kids Day School. After evaluating the kindergarten classrooms with interviews and observations, this research came to the conclusion that child led learning is needed, however there are some steps to take first before fully implementing the new pedagogy. First off, from the interviews, the teachers feel they are not equipped to fully implement project-based learning practices in their classrooms. They also saw how it could work well within a classroom, yet they continue to question the full effectiveness of child led learning versus traditional teaching methods they are much more comfortable with.

Education standards across the nation, including ones at the study's target school Kids Day School program, are undergoing transformative reforms due to the need to promote conceptual understandings and 21st-century practices (Holmes & Hwang, 2016). What fueled this research process is that the traditional

paradigm of teachers sharing knowledge and students engaging in rote memorization practices is no longer adequate for current society (Dole, Bloom & Doss, 2017). Scholarly researchers found in the early stages of the DiP work, Mahasneh and Alwan (2018) similarly assert that this explicit push toward inquiry-based approaches is a driving force behind the shift in standards held by educators. With a dramatic and impending shift in educational practices, methods such as project-based learning are examined to determine the reliability and effectiveness of student-centered pedagogies. This qualitative research study conducted verified that child led learning can be more effective for students' overall growth. Although there are both teachers from Kids Day School and data-driven research that support the implementation of PBL within schools, many teachers still hesitate and fret over the dramatic shift in educational reform and question the quantifiable evidence of child led learning.

With teacher's thoughts and hesitation in mind, an action plan was developed to further the study with two objective themes as the focus: teacher professional development in child led learning pedagogy and quantifying this research through student achievement scores to verify the effectiveness of child led learning over traditional teacher-led practices. Future research is necessary to fulfill the objectives of the action plan and to further implicate this studies qualitative findings that the purpose of early childhood education is to be a process of learning leading many to believe child led learning pedagogy would be the best course of action for children.

Conclusion

This phenomenological study's main objective is centered on the idea of children's rights. The right to the best early childhood education. The right to lead their own journey of learning. The right to remain innocently curious and full of wonder. The right to play with what they are passionate about and learn as they are doing so. This research study aimed to determine the purpose of education while also determining the potential impacts of child led pedagogy through play, in the form of implementing project-based learning into the early childhood education classroom context on teacher and student outcomes.

The findings of this research study imply that the purpose of early childhood education is more of a process of learning rather than creating a product. All the participants and observations confirmed this by highlighting the importance of child led learning to learn rather than being taught from a teacher directed set of criteria. A leading educational philosopher, John Dewey has stated that, "education is not preparation for life, education is life itself" (Dewey, Schilpp, & Hahn, 1939).

Why educate? The answer is simple. Children have the right to the best education, one that empowers them to lead and find enjoyment in the learning process through hands-on, playful engaging education. However, future research is still necessary to quantifiably validate the results from this study. No matter what you believe, in early childhood education, specifically a child's learning journey, it all begins with play.

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Appendix A-1

Participant Recruitment Letter

Dear XXXX,

I hope this letter finds you well. My name is Emma Burkholder and I am seeking participants in a dissertation study in a doctoral program of Educational Leadership at the University of Dayton.

I am conducting a research study designed to analyze and understand how student led learning impacts student and teacher outcomes in the early childhood context

In this study, I will utilize a qualitative methodology, which involves collecting data 30 minute classroom observations and approximately 30 minute interviews with a variety of stakeholders involved in early childhood education.

As a participant, you will be asked to sign an informed consent form in order to participate. Your participation is completely voluntary. You can choose to only answer the questions with which you feel comfortable and can discontinue your participation at any time. The data collected throughout this research study will be secured and only accessible to me. All privacy of participants will be kept confidential, all interview recordings and transcripts will not include identifiable information.

Again, if you wish to participate in this study,

- You will be asked to sign a consent form.
- Your privacy will be upheld, and no identifiable information will be used.
- You may withdraw your participation at any time
- You will be given copies of this paper and our transcribed interviews

Please let me know if you wish to participate in this research study. Thank you so much for your consideration and I look forward to hearing from you!

Warmly,
Emma Burkholder Duffy

Appendix B-1

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

University of Dayton
300 College Park, Dayton, OH 45469

Dissertation in Practice
Emma Burkholder Duffy
(330)-608-6265

A. Purpose and Background

Emma Burkholder is an Ed.D student at the University of Dayton conducting research on to analyze and understand how student-led learning impacts student and teacher outcomes in the early childhood context. Your participation in this research study would be to help the researcher collect valid information on your experience with early childhood education. Your information will be valuable as it will not only better aid the researcher's understanding but also provide evidence as to the importance of early teaching styles and student learning.

B. Procedures

If you agree to participate in this research study on early childhood education you will be asked to complete an interview. The interview will be conducted via Zoom and will last approximately 30 minutes. After completion of the interview, the researcher will transcribe the conversation and provide a copy for your convenience. You will then have the opportunity to make any corrections or additions to the information you provided.

C. Risks

Being uncomfortable during the interview.

D. Confidentiality

Confidentiality will be of the utmost importance during this research project. No identifying information will be shared in any reports or publications related to this study. All of the data collected in recordings, transcripts, and or summaries will be safely secured. Only those that are required to see any identifiable information will be given access.

E. Benefits of Participation

There is no compensation for your participation in this study. No direct benefits will occur for you as the participant. However, the information provided could aid in providing valuable information to the overall purpose of early childhood education.

F. Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and will not impact your relationship with the interviewer or the University of Dayton. You may choose to withdraw your consent at any time during the duration of the study.

G. Questions

If you have any questions, or concerns arise during the study, please do not hesitate to contact Emma Burkholder Duffy by cell phone at (330)-608-6265.

H. Consent

You are making a decision whether or not to participate in a research study on the subject of early childhood education. Your signature below indicates that you have decided to participate in this study after reading and acknowledging all of the information above. By signing this document, you attest to your understanding of the information in this form, have had questions answered and have received a copy of this form in your records.

Signature _____ Date _____
Research Participant

Signature _____ Date _____

Researcher

Appendix C-1

Informed Consent for Minor

UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON

Parental Consent for Minor/Child to Participate in a Research Project

Project Title:	Dissertation in Practice
Investigator	Emma Burkholder Duffy
Description of Study:	I am conducting a research study designed to analyze and understand how student led learning impacts student and teacher outcomes in the early childhood context.
Adverse Effects and Risks:	There are no adverse effects and risks.
Duration of Study:	The study will be conducted from August 2021 to May 2022
Confidentiality of Data:	All information collected during the study will be kept confidential, with all personal identifying information secured and only accessible by me, the researcher.
Contact Person:	Parents or guardians of participants may contact: If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact the researcher (Emma Burkholder) directly at burkholdere1@udayton.edu. Additionally, you may contact the researcher's dissertation chair (Dr. Meredith Wronoski) with any additional questions at mwronoski1@udayton.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant you may also contact the University of Dayton's Institutional

Review Board at (937) 229-3515 or IRB@udayton.edu.

Student's Full Name (please print)

Parent's Full Name (please print)

Parent or Guardian Signature

Date

Appendix D-1

University of Dayton - Participant Assent Form

TITLE OF STUDY:

Who is doing this research?

Emma Burkholder Duffy, a graduate student enrolled in a doctoral program of Educational Leadership at the University of Dayton.

Why should I do this?

The purpose of this project is to see if students learn more when given the chance to lead their education.

How long will it last?

You will be asked a couple questions while you play in one session which will last about 15 minutes.

What will happen?

I am going to watch you play and as you are playing, I will ask you a few questions about school

How will you feel?

You may feel tired after participating in a short conversation. You may feel happy because it will be fun!

Will anyone know I'm doing this?

I am going to use silly names instead of your real name so that no one knows you answered my questions. All the information we talk about and I see will be kept confidential, meaning I will make sure it stays safe and no one sees it but me!

What if I have questions or am worried about something?

If you have questions, you may talk to Emma Burkholder Duffy, her email is burkholdere1@udayton.edu if you have any comments, questions, or concerns, please do not hesitate to reach out.

Consent to Participate

I agree to work with Emma Burkholder and her team on this project. I understand all that is expected of me and promise to do my best. Emma Burkholder Duffy has answered all my questions. I understand I may stop this activity at any time.

Participant's Signature Date

Researcher's Name & Signature Date

Appendix E-1

Interview Protocol

Interview Questions -Adult

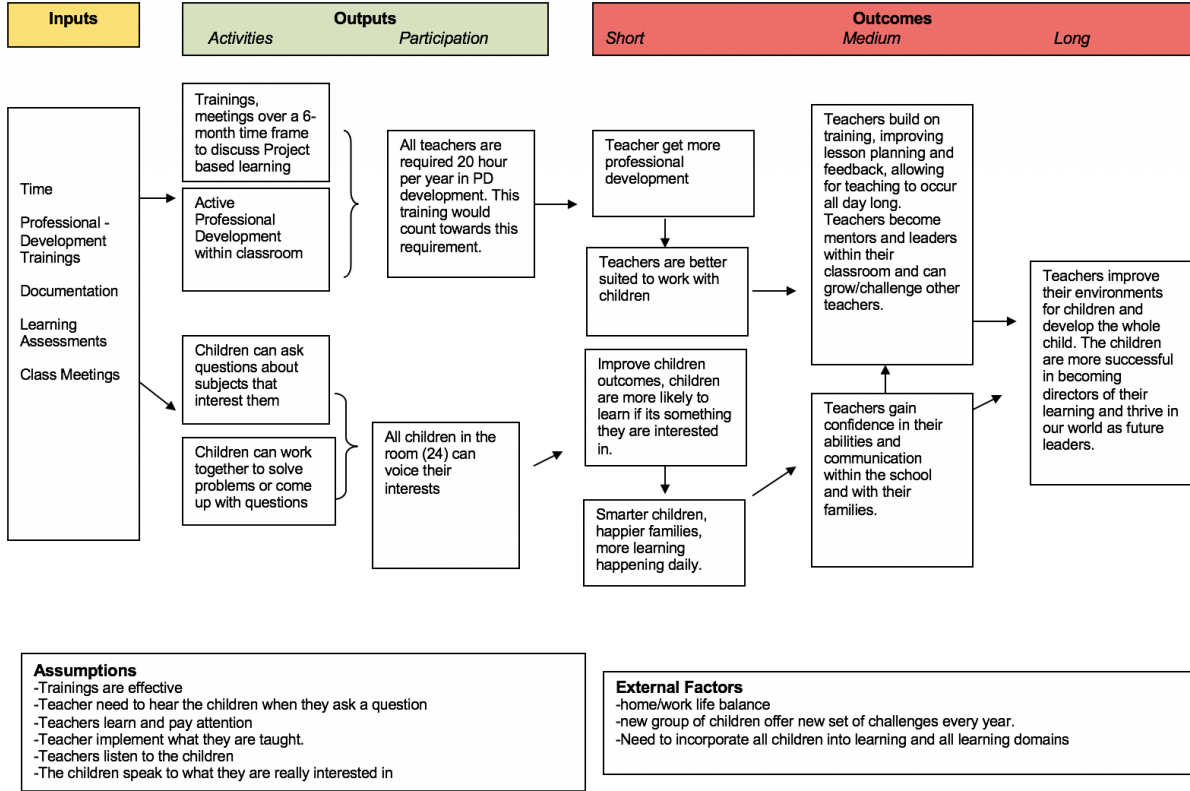
1. What is your highest level of education?
2. How many years have you been teaching in the early childhood field?
3. Are you familiar with project learning?
 - a. If yes: Tell me a little bit about what you know about project learning?
4. Can you tell me a little bit about how you learn best? For example, if you were going to learn how to swing a golf club, how would you best learn how to do this?
5. Would you be willing to implement the project learning approach in the kindergarten program? Why or why not?
6. What challenges do you see could occur with the implementation of project based learning.
7. Defining product as a means to an end, and process as continuous, how would you best describe education?
8. What three words best describe early childhood education?

Interview Questions-Child

1. Do you like school? Why or why not?
2. What is your favorite thing to do at school? Why?
3. Who is your favorite teacher? Why?
4. Do you get to pick what you learn at school

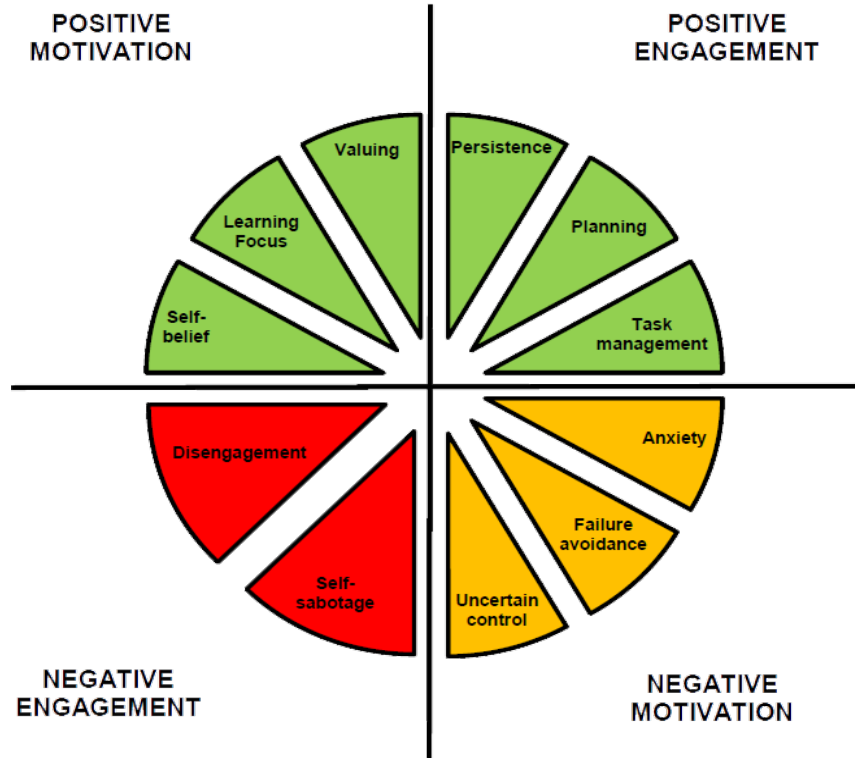
Appendix A-2

Logic Model



Appendix A-3

Martin Motivational Wheel



Appendix B-3

Martin Motivation and Engagement Scale

Sample Questions

Learning at School is important.	1	2	3	4	5
I'm excited when I go to school.	1	2	3	4	5
My teacher listens to me at school.	1	2	3	4	5

Appendix C-3

Teaching Strategies Gold Sample

Level	Not Yet	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6	Level 7	Level 8	Level 9
Indicators	Not Yet		Uses adult support to calm self		Comforts self by seeking out special object or person		Is able to look at a situation differently or delay gratification		Controls strong emotions in an appropriate manner most of the time	
Examples <i>Hide</i>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Calms self when touched gently, patted, massaged, rocked or hears a soothing sound Turns away from source of overstimulation and cries, but is soothed by being picked up 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gets teddy bear from cubby when upset Sits next to favorite adult when sad 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When the block area is full, looks to see what other areas are available Scowls, "I didn't get to paint this morning." Pauses and adds, "I have an idea. I can paint after snack." 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Asserts, "I'm mad. You're not sharing the blocks! I'm going to play with the ramps." Says, "I'm so excited! We're going to the zoo today!" while jumping up and down 	
Colored Bands <i>Hide</i>										