INCORPORATING STUDENT CHOICE IN SECOND GRADE WRITING

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

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by

Shannon O'Grady

William Paterson University of New Jersey

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the integration of instructional choice into elementary writing instruction, focusing on its impact on second-grade special education students. The study addresses two primary research questions: 1) How does integrating student choice in elementary writing instruction impact second-grade special education students' writing quality? and 2) How are the motivation and engagement of students impacted while utilizing student choice in writing instruction? Findings indicate that instructional choice positively influences student engagement and motivation, aligning with previous research. Moreover, students demonstrated a mean writing quality improvement of 13.4%, emphasizing the potential of autonomy to enhance writing skills. This study highlights the importance of recognizing and respecting individual student differences in their responses to instructional choice. Aligned with Constructivist Learning Theory and Self-Determination Theory, this research highlights the active role of students in decision-making processes and the positive impact of autonomy on motivation. Recommendations include exploring long-term effects on larger study sizes, extending the study to other subjects, and providing a gradual introduction with ongoing support. This study contributes insights into student-centered education, offering practical implications for educators to create inclusive and empowering learning environments in elementary writing instruction for special education students.

DEDICATION

To my partner, Steve, thank you for your endless workshopping, encouragement, and love throughout this process. To my family and friends, I greatly appreciate your endless support and motivation through this challenging task.

To Dr. Michelle Gonzalez thank you for your continual support and guidance along the way, no matter how big or small the hiccup.

Finally, to my students. Past, present, and future, this is for you.

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CHAPTER 1

Statement of the Problem

Introduction

Children's lack of writing abilities is an issue of national significance. The Nation's Report Card details that 67% of eighth-grade and 76% of twelfth-grade students performed at or below the basic level in writing, and approximately two-thirds of fourth-graders scored at or below the basic level (NAEP, 2011). This data represents the intense challenges students are facing across grade levels.

This problem becomes even more concerning amongst special education students already facing challenges due to their disabilities. The general public may understand that special education students have individualized needs and unique learning styles. Teachers are expected to differentiate instruction for learners' individual needs, which can be challenging and time-consuming. Often these unique needs are not fully met in the general education classroom, which is when students are referred to work in the special education classroom. In writing curricula, there is often little freedom or room for modification. Students can be told what to write about, how to write, and how much to write, often regardless of interests, relevancy, or ability levels. Students are not as successful when there is a lack of interest or engagement in learning. According to Jean Piaget, a lack of interest and engagement in learning stems from unauthentic learning experiences (Brau, 2020). The needs of individual students are not fully being met through writing instruction, and students are not involved in the decision-making processes in their classroom. The most recent NAEP data represents how a change needs to be made in writing instruction in order for students to be most successful in their academic lives and after (Gilbert & Graham, 2011).

These low writing proficiency scores and the specific needs of special education students highlight the importance of researching and locating strategies that aim to address this national concern. Writing instruction receives little professional development time across district in-service meetings and in teacher preparation programs (Gilbert & Graham, 2010), which limits the potential of many young learners and hinders teachers' abilities to learn new and engaging strategies. "Almost two-thirds of the teachers reported that the teacher education courses they took in college provided them with little preparation to teach writing" (Gilbert & Graham, 2010, p. 494). A large number of teachers reported how they make little to no adaptations for their students during writing (Gilbert & Graham, 2010). Teachers are not prepared to adapt their instruction to the needs of their students; therefore, choices are often limited. This problem is long-lasting, and writing needs must be met while children are still in school. Insufficient writing skills not only hinder students' ability to flourish in their academic careers but also have lasting consequences as they enter the workforce.

This problem affects schools on the state level as well. Even though New Jersey emphasizes the importance of English language arts instruction, writing often receives the least amount of daily instructional time or is even skipped in the classroom (Graham, 2019). According to the 2021 New Jersey Start Strong Assessment, a fall assessment measuring students' English language arts ability from the previous grade, 71% of fourth-grade students receiving special education accommodations fell into the "strong support needed" category across the state (New Jersey Department of Education, 2021). This is the second-highest percentage of students needing strong support, after English language learners, at 80% (New Jersey Department of Education, 2021). Writing is necessary in English language arts, and students are not gaining the skills necessary to meet the state requirements.

In my local school district, the ability levels in writing remain a critical concern among special education students. According to the 2021 New Jersey Start Strong assessment, 50% of students with special education accommodations in my school district fell into the category of strong support needed. In contrast, only 13.4% of all students tested fell into this category. 0% of students receiving special education accommodations fell into the level 5 category of advanced proficiency. Of all students tested, 16.7% of students fell into this category (New Jersey Department of Education, 2021). This data demonstrates the significant discrepancy between special education and general education student's English language arts abilities. This stark difference highlights the need for high-quality, engaging writing instruction in special education classrooms.

Having worked in both special education and general education settings, I have witnessed firsthand the challenges students with specific learning disabilities face in writing. Accessing the curriculum can be extremely challenging for students with special needs, and it is frequently a requirement for students with specific learning disabilities to follow the same curriculum as their general education peers. I have observed their struggle to write on topics they do not understand or write in ways that challenge them beyond frustration. Students become apathetic, and unengaged when they feel behind. "Researchers have found students with and at-risk for academic and behavioral challenges [and learning disabilities] are less academically engaged in the classroom (often less than 50% of the time) than their peers (often exceeding 75%) (Ennis et al., 2020). This apathy and disengagement is extremely dangerous to the motivation and achievement of students.

Writing, for many people, can be a great joy and provide comfort. It is a very personal process, and I do not believe there to be a one-size-fits-all approach to writing instruction or

writing practice. Writing can be a very freeing experience where the writer feels they are in charge. Each person, each student, should decide what their experience with writing will look like. I believe students should have choices when it comes to their writing experiences. They should be able to choose what they would like to write about, how they would like to write, where they would like to write, and more. I believe the more choices students have, the more engaged and motivated they are in their education, especially in their writing.

Research Questions

Based on the challenges special education students face in writing instruction, as identified above, the general problem focuses on how special education students have much lower achievement in writing than their general education counterparts. I seek to investigate the impact of student choice in a second-grade resource replacement classroom of special education students. I plan to focus on the effects of incorporating choice in writing on student motivation, engagement, and writing quality.

I will explore the potential benefits associated with incorporating student choice in writing instruction. I aspire for this research to extend beyond the special education classroom into the general education field as a means of differentiation. Students deserve to have a voice and choice in their learning, especially in their writing. I seek to find whether providing students with choice impacts their educational performance, writing quality, motivation, and engagement. The primary research question is:

How does integrating student choice in elementary writing instruction impact second-grade special education students' writing quality?

In addition to the primary research question identified above, this study also examines the following question:

How are the motivation and engagement of students impacted while utilizing student choice in writing instruction?

Definition of Terms

This section provides definitions of terms that will be used throughout the research study. This study will be designed to answer the following research question; How does integrating student choice in elementary writing instruction impact second-grade special education students' writing quality?

Children/Students: Children/Students in this study refers to the boys and girls in my second-grade special education classroom between the ages of 7 and 8 classified with a disability and receiving special education supports.

Differentiation: Differentiation in this study refers to changing or modifying the general education curriculum in a classroom to better meet the student's needs.

Individualized Education Plan (IEP): In this study, the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) refers to a legal document providing a child with special education services. IEPs "take into account a child's present levels of academic achievement and functional performance, and the impact of that child's disability on his or her involvement and progress in the general education curriculum" (New Jersey Department of Education, n.d.). IEPs explain a child's exact disability, qualification for special education, educational goals, and related services that may be necessary.

English Language Arts (ELA): In this study, English Language Arts (ELA) refers to the study of reading, writing, and phonics instruction.

Special Education: Special Education in this study refers to the specialized system of supports put in place for students who fall into one of the 14 disability categories as explained by the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (IDEA, 2004;

ESSA, 2015) and whose disability has an impact on their educational performance. Students

receiving special education services have been provided with parental consent and require

additional academic support.

General Education: General Education in this study refers to the classroom and population of

students who do not receive special education services and do not have modifications or

accommodations to the curriculum.

Specific Learning Disability (SLD): Specific Learning Disability (SLD) in this study refers to the

neurological disability that hinders a person from being able to acquire, process, or apply certain

skills, such as reading, writing, or math, despite having average intelligence in other areas.

Children with a specific learning disability that hinders their academic achievement generally

will qualify for special education services.

Communication Impairment: A Communication Impairment refers to a language disorder in the

areas of semantics, morphology, pragmatics, or syntax that negatively affects a student's

academic performance and is not due to an auditory impairment such as a hearing loss or

deafness.

Student Choice: Student choice in this study refers to the practice of allowing students to make

decisions about how they will learn or demonstrate their understanding. Student choice falls into

several categories but allows students to select from 2 or more options that best align with their

preferences, interests, and learning styles. In this study, student choice involves instructional

choice regarding writing practice. Students have the choice to choose their spot in the classroom,

the order of task completion, the topic of their writing, their writing utensil, and their writing

medium (notebook, packet, loose-leaf paper, etc.).

Motivation: Motivation refers to the inner feelings, drive, enthusiasm, and determination students feel toward their learning experiences. Motivation can be intrinsic, stemming from within, or extrinsic, stemming from external reinforcement. For the purposes of this study, motivation refers to intrinsic motivation.

Engagement: Engagement refers to students' involvement and participation in learning activities or lessons. Active engagement involves students participating actively and first-hand.

Autonomy: Autonomy refers to students' independence and self-directed decision-making in their learning and activities. Autonomy allows students to have control over their work and experiences.

The Resource Room: The resource room in this study refers to the placement of special education students who are removed from the general education classroom for English Language Arts instruction. Students are placed in small groups with a low teacher-to-student ratio, with a certified special education teacher. The general education curriculum can be modified in this placement to meet the goals and needs of the students.

Writing Quality: Writing quality in this study refers to the level of proficiency and effectiveness displayed in writing samples. It encompasses the development of fundamental writing skills, such as spelling, grammar, punctuation, organization, clarity, and the ability to convey ideas, information, or narratives in an age-appropriate manner.

Writing Conferences: Writing conferences include meeting with an individual student to teach specific writing skills and strategies and work on a specific writing piece. Conferences consist of questions about the writing process, discussing how writing is going, and addressing any needs students may have.

Writing Quality Rubric: The writing quality rubric is the scale used to score students' writing. This rubric has been adapted from Lucy Calkin's Units of Study (2013) to fit the needs of my students.

Theoretical Framework

This section presents the educational theoretical framework in which this research is grounded. The research question is; How does integrating student choice in elementary writing instruction impact second-grade special education students' writing quality? This question was used to identify the theoretical framework. This framework includes the constructivist theory of learning, and the Self Determination Theory (SDT).

This research is grounded in constructivist learning theory. Constructivism is based on the belief that children create their own knowledge based on their lived, personal experiences. Constructivists believe lived experiences determine your academic reality as a learner (Western Governors University, 2020). Constructivism emphasizes the construction of knowledge being active and how learning can only take place when the learner is actively engaged (Tracey & Morrow, 2006, p. 47). Incorporating student choice in writing allows students to be active participants and creates an interactive student-centered classroom. (Western Governors University, 2020). Constructivism requires teachers to step back and adjust their instruction to meet the needs of students and match the learner's appropriate levels of understanding (Western Governors University, 2020). I feel this research is grounded in constructivism as the roles are shifted, and students are making the instructional decisions for themselves. Students are in charge of their learning by making choices, and I, as the teacher-researcher, am able to adjust my teaching to meet the needs and interests of my students.

Another appropriate theory backing this research is the Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Researchers and psychologists Ryan and Deci introduced the SDT (2000). This theory emphasizes that learners have an innate drive to explore and grow. Learners naturally possess an inclination to explore, learn, and grow. The educational goal of the SDT is to nurture and harness this inherent interest in children. However, many students lose enthusiasm for school as they get older. The belief of Self-Determination Theory overlaps the interaction between external influences and forces affecting individuals and the internal motivations and inherent human needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000). SDT challenges existing educational practices that hinder motivation and recognizes that teachers' motivation is crucial in the classroom, and empowering them positively impacts students in the long run. Creating an autonomous, motivational school climate benefits everyone, according to Deci and Ryan (2000). SDT encourages a critical perspective on education policies, promoting autonomy, motivation, and engagement among both students and educators.

Educational Significance

This study aims to examine the research question; How does integrating student choice in elementary writing instruction impact second-grade special education students' writing quality? This question is extremely significant because it is important for teachers to learn more about special education children's writing abilities and whether or not incorporating instructional choices for students increases the quality of their writing and the overall engagement and motivation attached to their writing. The achievement gap in writing proficiency is not merely an academic concern but a social justice issue with far-reaching implications. Special education students are at a disadvantage in terms of writing instruction due to the complexities of their individualized education plans and the intricacies of their disabilities.

By investigating the potential of student choice as a means of addressing this gap, I aim to contribute to the discussion on equitable education. Allowing students, particularly young students, to have choices in reading has shown significant promise (Ennis et al., 2020; Keelen, 2015; Littlefield, 2011), therefore, I aim to understand if giving choices in writing has similar impacts. Successful implementation of student choice in writing instruction has the potential to improve academic writing skills and enhance students' engagement and motivation (Ennis et al., 2020), minimize negative behaviors (Jolivette et al., 2002), and positively influence overall educational experiences. "75% of students with academic and behavioral challenges are served solely in general education classrooms. Therefore, it is essential that general educators are well prepared to meet the needs of [these] students … in the general education context" (Ennis et al., 2020). This work can extend beyond the special education classroom into general education settings as a means of differentiating to meet the needs of all students, whether classified within special education or not.

Beyond the classroom, it has been found that "most students do not possess the writing skills needed for academic or occupational success" (Gilbert & Graham, 2010, p. 495). Teachers are not provided with the necessary skills or training in order to prepare their students for these successes. "28% and 71% of primary grade and high school teachers, respectively, indicated that their teacher education coursework did not adequately prepare them to teach writing" (Gilbert & Graham, 2010, p. 495). Therefore, this study may offer insights and strategies for policymakers, educators, and administrators, facilitating informed decision-making and positively impacting the academic careers of elementary students within our community.

Chapter II

Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter reviews the literature that is relevant to the primary question identified in this study. This research question is how does integrating student choice in elementary writing instruction impact second-grade special education students' writing quality? This review of the literature examines research studies that looked at the impact of instructional choice, student engagement and motivation, and autonomy.

Instructional Choice

Instructional choice can be implemented in several different manners in classroom settings. The following research highlights the many benefits of instructional choice and the careful considerations teachers must make when employing instructional choice in their classrooms. Researchers have found choice to be feasible and advantageous in several different disciplines across education, particularly in special education classrooms.

Cheng et al. (2023) investigated the effectiveness of a multi-component reading fluency intervention that incorporated student choice of reading topics and instructional passages. This study took place in a private Catholic elementary school in Western Canada, the research focused on four fourth-grade students who were identified as experiencing reading difficulties and performing below grade-level expectations. The study employed multiple baseline assessments across eight weeks to assess the effects of the interventions.

The study's findings revealed that the reading fluency intervention, which allowed students to choose both the reading topics and specific instructional passages, led to significant gains in reading fluency on the instructional passages for all four participants. Researchers

looked at overall gains and within-session gains. The within-session improvements in decoding accuracy and fluency were substantial and exceeded the average gains typically observed in similar fluency-building interventions with elementary students.

Additionally, the study explored if fluency gains could transfer to untaught, standardized passages. It was found that three out of the four participants demonstrated generalized fluency gains on unassigned passages, indicating that the skills were transferred beyond the taught material. Overall, the study's findings suggest that incorporating student choice of instructional materials in reading can effectively improve reading fluency and promote overall fluency gains. Future research in this area could look deeper into the influence of student interests on instructional materials and explore the impact of student choice on reading abilities outside of intervention sessions.

In the following study, Lane et al. (2015) conducted research in an elementary school in the Midwest over 8 weeks. Researchers aimed to investigate the impact of instructional choice on student engagement and behavior and encourage teachers to utilize instructional choice in the classroom. The study involved two participants: one student with autism receiving special education services (Neal) and another student receiving tier 2 reading intervention support (Tina). The research used an alternating treatment day approach (A-B-A-B) incorporating within-task and across-task instructional choices. Within-task approaches were choices such as whether to work with a colored pencil or a pen or to work with a partner or independently. Across-task choices were choices such as starting with illustrations first or starting with writing first. Data collection consisted of behavioral observations, social validity assessments gauging the thoughts and opinions of those involved in the study, and teachers' self-assessment.

Researchers noticed a functional relationship between instructional choice conditions, increased academic engaged time (AET), and decreased disruptive behaviors for Tina. During the second introduction of choice conditions, the other student, Neal, showed improvements in AET as well. This study demonstrated that teachers could implement instructional choice interventions successfully. Additionally, evidence was found of a functional relationship between choice conditions and improved AET and disruptive behavior, particularly for Tina. However, Neal's response to the intervention was less pronounced, indicating that further research is needed to explore student responsiveness to choice conditions in students with autism. The study emphasized the importance of replication in different, larger, inclusive settings. While this study was limited due to its small size, it suggested different possibilities for future research and provided teachers with manageable instructional choice strategies to implement.

Hua et al. (2014), aimed to investigate how presentation format and choice opportunities affected the academic productivity of 4th-grade students with learning disabilities. The research took place in a public school in a large urban district in Southeastern Pennsylvania. The study involved three 10-year-old participants named Ben, Mica, and Mandy.

The study incorporated two task presentation formats: worksheets and paper slips. Each student received assignment packets containing more problems than they could complete in a 5-minute session. Teacher-assigned worksheets, teacher-assigned paper slips, and student-selected worksheets or paper slips were the three controls in this study. Students were timed during work periods using a stopwatch for each session. This time was then used to calculate the digits correct per minute (DCPM) as a measure of academic productivity.

The primary focus of the research was to explore the influence of choosing between different task presentation formats on academic performance, particularly within the context of

students with learning disabilities. The students varied in their preferences, but it was highlighted that there was a higher DCPM on the self-selected activities over the teacher-selected worksheets or paper slips. Researchers discuss how these findings demonstrate that similar activities with different presentation formats can improve achievement and do not compromise academic integrity. They conclude that providing choice is an effective way to reinforce skills. The researchers suggest further study to investigate the limitations choice presents in a typical classroom setting and warn of providing choices that limit or alter the curricula being presented.

Graham, et al. (2022) conducted a study focusing on teachers and students in Chile. This study looked into the practices of Grades 4 to 6 teachers, aiming to uncover the frequency of adaptations they made to support their weakest writers. The study engaged 254 teachers from various municipal and private subsidized public urban schools across 15 regions of the country. Utilizing a quantitative research design, the primary tool for data collection was a detailed survey. This survey covered a broad spectrum, from teacher demographics to their beliefs about writing instruction and the specific adaptations they utilized to support struggling writers.

The findings of this study demonstrated these teachers' commitment to supporting their weakest writers. It revealed that teachers commonly made a diverse range of instructional adaptations, including but not limited to providing guidance on grammar, spelling, planning, revising, handwriting, text structure, instructional choice, and more. What stood out was the frequency of these adaptations, with the majority of teachers implementing them at least once a week or even more frequently. The majority of respondents indicated that they employed instructional choice as an adaptation between once a month and once a week, 29.0% and 23.1%, respectively. Teachers were more likely to provide instructional choice, along with partner pairing, than several other writing adaptations.

The implications of this study extend to teacher training programs and educational policies, emphasizing the importance of preparing teachers to confidently and effectively teach writing while accommodating diverse student needs. Future research endeavors are recommended to examine the reasons behind these adaptation patterns and their impact on different student populations.

Student Engagement and Motivation

It is essential in education to ensure students are engaged and motivated in their learning. The research studies below evaluate how building student motivation and engagement can benefit students academically, behaviorally, as well as socially. Researchers have found that students who are more engaged in learning tasks have higher success rates and stronger academic skills. These research studies highlight how incorporating student choice can lead to higher rates of engagement and motivation and the important factors for teachers to pay attention to.

In the study by Schneider, et al. (2018), researchers sought to understand the intricate relationship between choice, motivation, and learning outcomes. With 79 secondary school students participating in the study, the researchers aimed to determine the impact of offering choices within the learning materials. These students, in the 11th or 12th grade, attended a vocational secondary school. The study employed two control groups in a quantitative research design, relying on webpages for the learning materials and prior knowledge questionnaires to assess autonomy, motivation, cognitive load, and learning outcomes.

The main focus of this investigation was the concept of "feigned choice." The study investigated whether providing learners with options to choose from, without altering the content of the learning materials, would enhance their perception of autonomy, intrinsic motivation, and,

ultimately, their academic performance. Results from the study showed that feigned choice indeed had a positive impact on the control group. Learners who experienced this form of choice reported increased autonomy and intrinsic motivation, enhancing performance. Furthermore, the study revealed that feigned choice also reduced intrinsic cognitive load, which is linked to task difficulty. The results questioned the belief that intrinsic motivation acted as the intermediary on how choice affected learning results, proposing instead that autonomy had a more direct and crucial influence on the learning process.

This study shed light on the potential benefits of integrating choice into learning materials, even when those choices do not modify the content. The perceived autonomy of students has positive benefits across several areas. Teachers and curriculum designers can include this information in several ways within their work. Choice does not have to modify the task; it can be unrelated to the task and still hold significant benefits. The researchers caution against overusing this feature. The study also highlighted the need for further research, exploring the long-term effects of choice on diverse populations in digital learning and the optimal types of choices that can maximize motivation without overwhelming learners.

Waterschoot et al. (2019) study of intrinsic motivation among elementary school children by examining the effects of providing choices in an educational setting. The primary research question concerned understanding how offering choices to young students influenced their autonomy satisfaction, competence satisfaction, and overall intrinsic motivation. The study occurred in an elementary school and included 126 participants between 9 and 12 years old.

Researchers used a quantitative research design, where the study analyzed the data gathered from surveys and questionnaires that assessed various aspects of participants' motivation and engagement. The findings showed that when children were given choices, their

autonomy and competence satisfaction significantly improved, and they exhibited greater intrinsic motivation. However, the study unveiled an unexpected result—indecisiveness played a crucial moderating role. Children who were less indecisive felt more substantial benefits from the choices offered. The researchers discussed how future research should look at the nature of the choices and understand the attractiveness of all options. They also discuss using a behavioral indicator to understand how students are interacting with or without having choices.

This study has shown the positive benefits of including instructional choice in the elementary school classroom. Choice can increase intrinsic motivation, engagement, and achievement. The articles above give heed to offering students too many choices or providing students with choices that differ significantly. Special education students, in particular, have shown a decrease in disruptive behaviors when provided with instructional choices relevant or irrelevant to the content. When implemented well, instructional choice can be a beneficial task for students and teachers.

In Patall's independent study (2013), research focused on investigating the influence of choice on motivation and performance in educational tasks, with a particular emphasis on how task interestingness and individual interest moderate these effects. The research was conducted online with 172 college students from a large southern school in the United States and used a quantitative approach with a series of experiments. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 26, representing a diverse population of students.

The research findings shed light on the complex interaction between choice, task characteristics, and individual interest. Choice was found to have contrasting effects on motivation and performance depending on the perceived interestingness of the task and the student's interest. When applied to tasks considered boring, choice significantly boosted

motivation, including feelings of interest, perceived competence, task value, liking, and engagement. In contrast, when applied to inherently interesting tasks, choice appeared to diminish motivation in some participants. However, it was found consistently that providing choices led to improved task performance, regardless of task or individual interest.

These findings have important implications for educators and researchers in educational settings. They highlight the importance of tailoring instructional choice strategies to the specific context, considering task characteristics and the students' interest levels. Teachers should encourage choices in the classroom and incorporate student interests whenever instructionally feasible. The researcher discusses how further research should explore the underlying cognitive processes behind choice on performance in other real-life choice-making scenarios.

Autonomy

Students value perceived autonomy, and instructional outcomes are improved when choice is utilized. Students often perform better when they have autonomy over their educational experiences. Autonomous learners need to have a sense of freedom, choice, and control in their learning to become self-sufficient, responsible learners.

Aitken et al. (2022) focused on understanding how choice and preference influence undergraduates' writing skills in an introductory special education course. They investigated whether granting students the autonomy to choose their writing positions would improve writing outcomes. This study involved 224 undergraduate participants who were placed in different groups and allowed or disallowed choice in writing tasks over 3 days.

Researchers were able to use a large group of subjects to demonstrate that choice and autonomy positively impact writing skills and discovered that preference does not have

statistically significant impacts. Meaning, there was more of an impact on choosing one's own topic rather than being assigned a topic, even if it is on a topic of your preference. It is suggested that teachers allow students free choice and inform them that their choice is being allowed, not select a topic, even if it is of believed preference. These findings provide valuable insights for educators, suggesting that providing choice and allowing students autonomy in writing assignments can empower students and boost their writing quality, especially when it enhances their perceived competence.

Additionally, the research emphasized the importance of replicating these findings in diverse student populations and with different writing tasks. Future studies should further explore the intricate dynamics between choice, autonomy, perceived competence, and writing outcomes, aiming to provide comprehensive guidance for educators seeking to optimize writing instruction. While this study advances our understanding of the role of choice in writing, it also highlights the complexity of choice versus preference and how teachers can navigate this understanding.

Patall et al. (2018) investigated the intricate relationship between students' perceptions of their teachers' autonomy-relevant practices and their daily motivation and engagement in high school science classrooms. Over a span of six weeks, researchers conducted a quantitative investigation employing the diary method to collect data from 208 students between the ages of 13 and 18. This research took place across 8 public high schools across the southwest United States. They explored how various teacher practices, categorized as autonomy-supportive and autonomy-thwarting, influenced students' motivation and engagement on a daily basis.

The findings of this study corroborated the Dual Process Model within the self-determination theory, highlighting that autonomy-supportive practices, such as considering

students' preferences and providing rationales, consistently fostered increased autonomous motivation and engagement. Conversely, autonomy-thwarting practices, like controlling messages and monotonous activities, were linked to heightened controlled motivation and disaffection. This research displays the negative impact of autonomy-thwarting practices on students' perceptions. Lastly, the study highlighted the role of specific practices, such as choice provision, in enhancing engagement, while suppression of student perspectives correlated with increased disaffection.

This research stresses the importance of autonomy-supportive teacher practices in shaping students' motivation and engagement on a day-to-day basis. It validates the Dual Process Model, affirming that autonomy-supportive practices cultivate autonomous motivation and engagement while autonomy-thwarting practices lead to controlled motivation and disaffection. Additionally, the researchers suggest that a balance between autonomy-supportive and thwarting practices may influence students' motivation positively, stating that choices be overwhelming for students at times. Future research endeavors should look deeper into these findings, replicating the current study while considering experimental designs that look beyond students' own reports of engagement and frustrations. Further research and emphasis should also be placed on gender and stereotypes, as the research results showed females reported less engagement than their male classmates.

Ivey and Johnson's study (2015) focused on the evolution of engaged reading within eighth-grade English classrooms over a span of four years. The primary research questions explored the transformation of teaching practices removing assigned reading activities and replacing them with student-selected texts. The study took place in a public school involving four eighth-grade teachers and their 258 students. Researchers used a qualitative research design.

The study incorporated various research tools, such as interviews with teachers and students, classroom observations, and recordings of student-led discussions.

Over the course of the study, significant transformations happened within the classroom activities. The teachers shifted their instructional focus from assigned readings to student-selected, self-paced reading materials that incorporated students' personal interests. This shift resulted in positive outcomes, including increased reading volume, reduced student failure rates on standardized tests, and notable changes in peer relationships, self-regulation behaviors, and students' self-conceptions. This research highlighted the reciprocal relationship of these transformations, showing that as pedagogical practices evolved, so did the perceptions of both teachers and students.

This study challenged the idea that engaged reading is solely an individual cognitive process and emphasized its inherently collective, relational, and emotional nature. Furthermore, the study underscored the value of providing teachers and students with autonomy and encouraging collaboration to drive transformative changes in teaching practices. This study calls for further research that explores community-centered engagement and autonomy practices and their potential to shape the landscape of literacy teaching and learning in educational settings.

Summary of the Literature Review

This section provides a summary of the studies used in this literature review. Studies were selected for this literature review based on the research question. The research question is, how does integrating student choice in elementary writing instruction impact second-grade special education students' writing quality?

Across the studies, a common thread emerges focusing on the positive impact of instructional choice on various aspects of student learning and engagement when used appropriately. Allowing students to choose the presentation format or reading topic improves gains in reading fluency and academic productivity (Cheng et al., 2023; Hua et al., 2014). Beyond reading, instructional choice and autonomy improved writing quality in several students demonstrating how choice and autonomy empower students (Aitken et al., 2022). Expanding on this, it was observed that while choice can increase engagement, it can also decrease disruptive behaviors (Lane et al., 2015) and benefit special education students in several ways (Graham et al., 2022; Hua et al., 2014). Having autonomy and control has demonstrated a positive result for children with disabilities as it provides them with some control over their education, resulting in more interest in the task at hand. These research studies demonstrate the benefits of incorporating instructional choice into educational practices as a means to empower students and enhance academic outcomes.

While all studies found some positive effects while incorporating student choice in the classroom, some researchers cautioned against overusing choice as an instructional approach (Schneider et al., 2018). Choice can encourage and motivate students to learn but can also overwhelm or overstimulate children (Schneider et al, 2018; Patall et al., 2018). Children can feel anxious when given too many choices or when provided with choices that differ greatly. It is important for teachers to provide choices that are similar and do not overwhelm students. In addition, Patall (2013) found that choice negatively impacted motivation when a task was inherently interesting. For these reasons, it is important that choices do not have to affect the content in order to be meaningful to students (Schneider et al., 2018). Choices can be simple and still have a profound effect on outcomes. Some studies focused on special education students and

found varying outcomes, demonstrating that each child is unique and outcomes will vary from setting to setting and child to child (Lane et al., 2015). Teachers must pay close attention to interests, and behavior to understand how incorporating choice impacts their students (Patall, 2013; Cheng et al., 2023; Ivey & Johnson, 2015).

Additionally, it is important to recognize that context matters. Several studies took place in an elementary school setting (Cheng et al., 2023; Lane et al., 2015; Hua et al., 2014; Waterschoot et al., 2019; Graham et al., 2022), others took place in a middle or high school setting (Ivey & Johnson, 2015; Schneider et al., 2018; Patall et al., 2018), and finally in an undergraduate college setting (Aitken et al., 2022; Patall, 2013). Regardless of the setting, it is notable that choice positively impacted students in various ways across age and setting. While it is not a one-size-fits-all approach, instructional choice can improve student outcomes, whether that be enjoyment, engagement, motivation, or quality of work.

CHAPTER III

Research Design

Introduction-

Writing can be challenging for many students, especially those with a special education classification. In second grade, writing instruction is designed to build upon foundational skills acquired in earlier grades, fostering students' ability to express themselves through writing. Second-grade students are focusing on constructing grammatically correct sentences with proper capitalization and punctuation, expanding their vocabulary, writing across several genres and purposes, and developing editing and revising skills.

As curriculum develops, students are allowed more autonomy and freedom in their writing production, and this study seeks to answer the research question: how does integrating student choice in elementary writing instruction impact second-grade special education students' writing quality? This chapter will explore the research setting, research participants, and data sources of this study.

My role in this study was that of teacher-researcher and participant-observer. This study employed a mixed-methods model to determine the effects of student choice on writing quality and engagement. The study took place daily over the span of three weeks. The study ran in a second-grade resource replacement classroom. I received consent from the parents of all students, and assent from every student to participate in the study. All five of the second-grade students in the resource-room class participated in the study.

By using both qualitative and quantitative methods, the study aimed to gain a well-rounded understanding of the outcomes related to special education students' writing experiences. Utilizing both methods ensured a fully-developed understanding of the outcomes

uncovered in the study. Special education students, especially those with a communication impairment, can struggle to express their thoughts and feelings. Therefore, utilizing multiple methods, I was able to understand their experiences in the most effective way possible. Qualitative research included field notes, observations, and writing conferences to gather non-numerical data, focusing on students' experiences, preferences, motivation, engagement, and perceptions of choice during writing instruction. The study also used quantitative data sources, such as rubric-scored writing samples, tracking using a choice chart, and exit tickets to assess the impact of student choice on writing quality and motivation. The integration of these two methods provides a holistic perspective on the research question, offering insights into both the qualitative and quantitative aspects of the topic (Efron & Ravid, 2019).

Research Setting

This section presents the research setting for the study. This study was designed to answer the research question: how does integrating student choice in elementary writing instruction impact second-grade special education students' writing quality? The research took place in a public school in a town located in the New York metropolitan area of northeastern New Jersey with a population of 29,565 in 3.42 square miles of land. The demographics of the population are as follows: 73.8% White, 3.4% Black/African American, 0.3% Indigenous, 10.8% Asian, 0% Pacific Islander, and 5.8% from two or more races. The Hispanic/Latinx population is 19.1%. The estimated median household income is $105,000, and 4.9% of the population is considered to be below the poverty line.

The public school district in this town consists of five elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. The district serves 4,319 students from Pre-K to grade twelve.

There are 330 students enrolled in grade two across the district. English is the primary language spoken, with about 88.4% of students speaking English as a native language. The majority of students in this district are White (52%) and Hispanic (27%). The district enrolls 3% Black/African American students and 12% Asian students. 11.4% of students are considered to be economically disadvantaged and 23.09% receive special education services. There are 336 teachers in the district with an average experience of 11.1 years in the public-school profession. Of those teachers, 47.3% hold only a Bachelor's degree, and 52.4% percent also hold a Master's degree. The district has a student-to-teacher ratio of 11:1.

The elementary school where this study takes place serves 349 students with 49 students in second grade. This school serves students in kindergarten through sixth grade. 11% of students at this school are considered economically disadvantaged and 29.7% have disabilities. 2.8% of students are English learners. The majority of students in this school are White (60%) or Hispanic (24%). Students of other races are as follows: 2% Black or African American, 7% Asian, 1% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 0% Native American, and 6% identifying as multiple races. There are 39 teachers in the school with an average of 8.4 years in the public-school profession. Performance reports on statewide assessments New Jersey Student Learning Assessments in English Language Arts indicated that this school "met state" requirements at 70.2%. However, in math, the target goal was "not met" and scored at 43.1%.

There are 23 total classrooms in the school, 14 general education classrooms with two classes per grade level, six special education Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) classrooms, and three special education resource room classrooms, two of which are shared between two teachers. In the general education classrooms grades kindergarten through fourth, teachers provide all four subject areas and health. Grades 5 and 6 are departmentalized with one teacher

responsible for ELA and Social Studies instruction, and one for Math and Science instruction. ABA classroom teachers are responsible for all subject instruction with the exception of special areas. Students received instruction in related specials classes by specialized teachers: Physical Education, Art, Music, Media, and Spanish. There are before and after-school programs for families to participate in. Related services provided at this school include speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, counseling, and English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction. There is a Basic Skills Instruction (BSI) program with two full time teachers for students requiring academic assistance, but not qualifying for Special Education services. There was also an in-house full-time behaviorist, learning disabilities teacher consultant (LDTC), school psychologist, guidance counselor, and two nurses.

In my special education resource room classroom, there were six total students, four males, and two females. Five of the students were in second grade, and one student was in first grade, instructed by another teacher. All of the students in this classroom were classified with an IEP and received special education services under the classification of specific learning disability, or communication impairment. In the classroom, there were two laptop computers belonging to the teachers, iPads, a SmartBoard, and a document camera that projects to the SmartBoard. iPads were used for reading, phonics practice, and publishing writing pieces in the area of ELA. Chromebooks were available to borrow from the library, or homeroom teachers.

The district follows the Reader's and Writer's Workshop approach to literacy instruction. The curriculum was recently modified to include social justice and diversity standards. The resource room placement allowed teachers the freedom to modify the curriculum to meet the needs of the students in the classroom. In the resource room, teachers used the Wilson Reading System to teach reading and phonics instruction. The ELA block for grade 2 is 120 minutes

daily. During this time, students are engaged in mini-lessons with modeling and direct instruction, multisensory approaches, and collaborative and independent practice. Reading, writing, and phonics instruction take place daily.

Research Participants

This section will explain the participants in the research study. As the participant-observer, I will begin by providing information about myself. I am working as a special education teacher in this elementary school. I have worked in this school and district for three years. As a special education teacher, I have often taught grades simultaneously. The grades I have taught are first, second, third, fifth, and sixth grades. I have been teaching second-grade special education for two years. Before that, I taught third-grade general education and special education for 4 years, fifth-grade special education for two years. Additionally, I spent one year teaching Gifted and Talented students. I have taught for a total of 7 years. I possess three New Jersey teaching certificates-Elementary Education, Teacher of Students with Disabilities, and Preschool-Grade 3. I am a certified Wilson Dyslexia Practitioner and hold the Level 1 Certification in the Wilson Reading System.

The participants in this study were one special education teacher, and five second-grade students receiving special education services placed in the resource room. These students are pulled from two different second-grade homeroom classes. All students in this class were classified with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for various disabilities.

Student 1 is a seven-year-old girl in the second grade. This student is classified with a Specific Learning Disability (SLD) in the area of basic reading skills and oral expression. This student is reading at a kindergarten reading level and missed much of first grade due to medical concerns. This student has sickle cell anemia and sleep apnea. This student underwent surgery

for a tonsillectomy and adenoidectomy in the past. Student 1 receives speech therapy once a week as a related service. This student often struggles to find topics to write about and spends much of writing time off task. This student will remark that they do not know what to write, or write about. This student's spelling does not display letter-sound correspondence and they cannot read back their written work most of the time. Student 1 has good home support and is provided with academic help outside of school.

Student 2 is an eight-year-old boy in the second grade. This student is classified with a Specific Learning Disability (SLD) in the area of oral and written expression. This student is new to the school this year and was previously retained in their prior school. This student receives speech therapy as a related service twice a week. Student 2 enjoys writing but often does not know what to write about. When this student meets with a teacher and talks out their ideas, they tend to do better. This student can be very silly but is usually on task during writing instruction. This student is reading on a kindergarten reading level and does not have strong decoding or encoding skills. Regardless, this student is able to read their writing back and go back to improve it upon further read-throughs. Student 2 has good home support, and a sibling in the same school. Student 2 does not consistently turn in homework, but parent responses have been positive and productive.

Student 3 is a seven-year-old boy in the second grade. This student is classified with an IEP under the classification of Communication Impairment (CI). Student 3 is also a Multilingual Learner who speaks both Spanish and English at home. This student is part of the ESL program and receives ESL services weekly. This student receives speech therapy once a week as a related service. Student 3 is reading on a beginning of second grade level. This student does not receive special education services for mathematics, only for ELA. This student reports that they do not

enjoy writing, and they often find it challenging. This student has strong decoding and encoding skills but does need teacher guidance to get started in writing usually. He can get stressed out or upset during writing instruction on occasion and is very sensitive. Working with peers or teachers for check-ins helps mitigate this student's stress levels. This student reads nightly and has strong home-school support.

Student 4 is a seven-year-old girl in the second grade. This student is classified with an IEP with the classification of Specific Learning Disability in the area of Basic Reading Skills, Mathematics Calculation, and Mathematics Problem Solving. This student is reading on a kindergarten reading level and has made minimal progress over the past two years in special education services. This student has started working through a reading program for students' which phonics-based instruction does not otherwise work. This student does not have letter-sound correspondence, and cannot consistently identify their letters or sounds. Words are often a random string of letters or scribbles. This student receives occupational therapy once a week as a related service. Student 4 enjoys writing but is unable to read their writing back to teachers, or themselves. This student benefits from sitting 1:1 with a teacher to stay on task and talk through their writing ideas. They have solid home support, but nightly reading and homework are not consistently completed.

Student 5 is a seven-year-old boy in the second grade. This student is classified with an IEP with the classification of Specific Learning Disability in the area of Listening Comprehension. This student also is diagnosed with moderate ADHD, combined type. This student receives speech therapy twice a week as a related service. This student is reading on grade level and is a proficient writer. Student 5 greatly enjoys writing and often remarks that it is their favorite thing to do. This student is very independent during writing time when it comes to

ideas and topics. They need frequent and consistent check-ins to keep them on task and limit distractions. There are times this student can be a distraction to other students, and themselves based on off-task behavior. This student can get very frustrated when they are distracted but works hard to stay on task. They have very strong decoding and encoding skills and includes dialogue, details, settings, and illustrations in their writing.

The methods for this study transitioned from non-choice activities into choice activities. In the first week of research, students completed a writing piece on a prompted topic "Write about the first day of school". Students all were present on the first day of school, and it was recent enough that they should be able to remember some part of the school day. Students were not able to choose their writing spot for this week of data collection. All students sat at desks with standard chairs. Students also did not select their writing paper or writing utensils. Students did not have the choice of starting with writing or illustrations first, they all started with writing first. Students completed exit tickets daily reflecting on the writing class that day. At the end of the first week, I collected students' writing pieces and I then scored these based on the writing quality rubric (see appendix).

After the first week, students were able to select choice activities. Students wrote a personal narrative writing piece on the topic of their choice. Students had free choice to select their writing location. Students could select any reasonable spot in the classroom to complete their writing. I encouraged them to pick a "smart spot" where they would not be distracted but did not intervene if they did become distracted. I would not change their spots unless they were inattentive and could not be brought back to focus even after several check-ins from a teacher. This did not need to take place for any student. Students had free choice when selecting their writing paper and writing utensil as well. Writing paper options varied including illustration

boxes, notebooks, plain lined paper, etc. Students could select different writing utensils as well where they can either choose a plain pencil, a colored/sparkly pencil, a marker, or a gel pen. Finally, students had the choice to start with writing first, or illustrations first during this data collection. Later on in the study, based on feedback from students, I included timing and partnerships as a choice students could make. From day 6 onward, students were able to work with a partner if they chose to do so. From day 8 onward, students were able to dictate when they were finished writing for that day. After I gave directions, I allowed students to work and let me know when they felt they were finished. During this time, I was tracking the choices students selected.

These are all within-task choices because they do not change the content that is being taught. Students will complete the exit tickets daily in the same manner as without choice. The writing piece was then scored utilizing the rubric upon completion of the writing piece, which students decided when their writing piece was completed. Mini-lessons took place guiding students on the parts of a personal narrative writing piece during both choice and non-choice data collection.

Data Sources

Professional Journal

This data source was used to collect my anecdotal notes and observations during the study. This journal contained my reflections on lessons, notations of choices offered and choices selected by students, behaviors observed, and lesson plans. Here I took notes on conversations with students and track their perspectives.

Student Discussions and Conferences

This data source was used to understand students' writing experiences. I used the following questions to discuss choice and non-choice writing periods.

Discussion Questions-

- Questions-without choice:
    - How did you feel about that writing assignment? How did you feel about that writing spot? Did you enjoy writing today? What would make writing better?
- Questions-with choice:
    - Why did you choose to write about that topic? How did you feel about your writing choice? Why did you choose to sit in your spot? How did you feel about that spot? Did you enjoy writing today? What would make writing better?

Student Writing Journals

This data source housed students' writing pieces throughout the study. Students will use this journal daily to complete their writing assignments. Student writing journals contained all work related to the instruction that students completed. This source served as a way for me to understand how students were able to write independently during choice, or non-choice days. This data was collected every week during the study, which allowed me to gather this information at different points throughout the study

Exit Tickets

Exit tickets were used to understand students' perspectives on the writing period. These tickets were given to students at the end of each writing period. Students scored themselves using 5 emoji pictures (ranging from very sad to very happy) on how they felt during writing that day. They then were asked to explain why they chose that emoji in one or two sentences. Most

students chose to dictate their reflective sentences rather than write them. These reflections were kept by the researcher and tracked throughout the study.

Choice Chart

This data source will be utilized to track what choices students were making, and on which day. This allowed me to track how students made instructional choices, which choices were utilized the most, and correlate how and if students' writing performance improved based on these choices. I used the choice chart during the choice sessions of research daily tracking each student and their instructional choices.

Writing Quality Rubric

This data source was used to score students' narrative writing abilities. The rubric scored the topic, lead, organization, elaboration, and craft of writing.

Pages Chart

This data source was used to keep a log of how many pages students wrote or illustrated per day.

Data Analysis Procedures

This section presents the data analysis procedures that were used in this study. The data collection was used to determine how student choice impacts students' writing quality, motivation, and engagement took place over the course of a three-week study. I used a mixed-methods approach to track patterns, trends, and scores when utilizing choice and when excluding choice. The patterns identified led to finding themes across the data sources.

My research design incorporated a mixed-methods approach, with a stronger emphasis on qualitative methods. Therefore, this is an embedded design of mixed methods research (Efron & Ravid, 2019). As a special education teacher conducting this study, I sought to gain a

comprehensive understanding of how integrating student choice in elementary writing instruction impacts the writing quality, motivation, and engagement of second-grade special education students. This approach allowed me to delve deep into the experiences and perspectives of the students, shedding light on the "how" and "why" behind the outcomes.

During each 30-minute writing period, I took field notes on choices used, conversations had, and topics chosen. I also collected students writing samples weekly. I then coded this data to identify patterns and themes. Coding these notes and observations allowed me to track students' experiences and identify patterns and trends that emerged in this research. I reflected on these notes and observations daily. These reflections helped me monitor my students' experiences throughout the study. Additionally, I tracked the choices students selected, and quantified these choices using the choice chart. I then cross-examined these choices with the exit tickets and writing quality rubrics to identify if choices improved their writing experience, and writing quality.

I collected student writing samples and student writing journals weekly to score and quantify student writing growth. The first writing piece was compared to the final writing piece quantitatively to observe growth. I then looked for trends, means, medians, and modes within this data. I present the assessment of writing quality by scoring the first writing piece and the second writing piece using the same rubric. The writing scores of each student without choice, and finally with choice were compared, and a growth percentage was quantified. This data was then quantified in a chart, allowing me to visually display whether or not students' writing quality scores changed throughout the study.

Lastly, student exit tickets were utilized and collected daily. Exit tickets looked at students' perspectives on choice utilizing a rating scale appropriate for students to comprehend. I

utilized a range of Emoji faces where students can select the face that they most identify with. I then charted the emojis visually to look at trends that may emerge. Students then had a chance to write a sentence about why they chose that emoji and how they felt about writing class today. Students also had the choice to dictate their sentences and I wrote for them. I then coded and analyzed these sentences looking at how students felt in writing that day, and across the study. This allowed students to reflect on their writing instruction and the choices they made or did not make during the period. I examined this data to see if there are trends with students' experiences across writing instruction. I analyzed to see if these trends were present among several students or if they were only present with particular students. This data then was cross-examined with the choice chart, writing rubric, and field notes.

Validity and Reliability

This study was designed to answer the research question: how does integrating student choice in elementary writing instruction impact second-grade special education students' writing quality? This section outlines the validity and reliability of this study.

Students, and their parents/guardians, all provided consent and assent to participate in this study before analyzing data. To enhance validity, the study utilized both quantitative and qualitative data sources, which provided a comprehensive understanding of instructional choice. Quantitative data from rubric-scored writing samples, a choice chart, and exit tickets, as well as qualitative data from observational field notes, student conferences, and writing journals, offered a well-rounded understanding of the research topic (Efron & Ravid, 2019). Students completed these activities in my classroom routinely, so students were already accustomed to all of these behaviors taking place.

By combining these data sources, the study aimed to provide a well-rounded and balanced analysis of the impact of student choice on writing quality and motivation. Triangulating the same data in both quantitative and qualitative methods adds to the validity and reliability of this study (Efron & Ravid, 2019).

In addition, the small sample size within the special education classroom setting adds to the study's reliability as it maintains a controlled and consistent research environment. Special education teachers must follow the requirements of their student's IEPs as mandated by law (New Jersey Department of Education, n.d.). Therefore, students all participated in valid learning experiences which meet the goals and objectives outlined in the IEP. In addition, my knowledge of these students is credible due to the prolonged engagement and exposure to these students. I have worked with some of these students for over a year, while others are new to me this school year. Due to this, I have had prolonged exposure to some of these children and understand their needs deeply.

Limitations

This section outlines the limitations of this study. This study seeks to answer the research question: how does integrating student choice in elementary writing instruction impact second-grade special education students' writing quality? There are limitations present in this study, and this section identifies those.

A notable limitation of this study was the relatively short research timeframe and the time of year the study is taking place. This study is not taking place over the course of the school year, it took place over three weeks of instruction throughout November and December. There are several four-hour sessions in November, and the standard 5-day school week schedule is not

routine in the month of November. Students are out of their normal routine which may be a limitation in this study.

The small sample size was also a limitation of this study. This study consists of five second-grade special education students. It may be challenging for this study to be replicated in other settings due to the uniqueness of students with disabilities. It also may be challenging to generalize this into a non-special education setting with a larger group of students.

An additional limitation in this study is that Student 3 was absent for 3 days of the 15-day study, and Student 2 was absent for 1 of the 15 days.

Finally, a limitation of this study is the fact that I act as both the student's teacher and the researcher. There is the potential for bias in data collection and interpretation. Efforts will be made to minimize bias, but the influence of my presence in the classroom cannot be entirely eliminated.

Chapter IV

Findings

Chapter 4 provides the findings based on the analysis of data that was collected and described in Chapter 3. Data was gathered from a variety of sources including conference feedback, field notes, writing rubrics (see appendix), self-assessment Likert style scales (Jamieson, 2023) (see appendix), and writing samples. Qualitative data was coded and analyzed for themes. This data was then cross-examined with quantitative data to find connections and understand outcomes. Recurrent themes and patterns emerged through triangulation and coding of the data.

Targeted writing instruction was provided to five students through instructional choice over three weeks. This mixed methods research study was conducted to explore the problem of the achievement gap between second-grade special education students and their general education peers. I focused on encouraging students to feel engaged and motivated through utilizing instructional choice techniques. The research of this study was conducted to answer the question: 1) How does integrating student choice in elementary writing instruction impact second-grade special education students' writing quality? and 2) How are the motivation and engagement of students impacted while utilizing student choice in writing instruction?

Data Collection

Throughout this study, my students wrote two personal narrative writing pieces. One writing piece was a prompt provided to them, which they could not choose the topic, or writing conditions. The second piece's topic was up to them, as were the conditions of writing. During the first week of writing instruction, students were not able to choose their location in the classroom, type of seat, writing utensil, writing paper, order of tasks (writing first versus drawing

first), or writing topic. In the following two weeks, students were able to choose all of these conditions themselves, in addition to the length of writing time, and whether or not to work with a partner, providing autonomy and choice to students.

Findings

The results of the data sources in the three-week study developed into three main themes found throughout the study time frame. The first theme was: the impact of choice and autonomy on students' engagement and motivation in the writing process. The second theme found was; the impact of choice and autonomy on student writing quality. The third theme was: individualized learning experiences and challenges. This data was analyzed to determine patterns among students who expressed these three themes.

Impacts of Choice on Students' Engagement and Motivation in the Writing Process

Throughout the three weeks of the study, five second-grade students with IEPs in a resource room setting were studied on their feelings toward having or not having choice and autonomy during their independent writing time. The data primarily points to a prevalent theme of positive feelings toward autonomy and increased motivation and engagement as a result. It is evident throughout the observations, and conference notes the significant influence that autonomy and decision-making have on students' attitudes toward writing. This theme stresses the idea that when students are empowered to make choices, such as selecting their writing spots, choosing their writing tools, or picking their own writing topics, it positively affects their engagement and motivation.

Positive Feelings Toward Autonomy

Throughout the study, students expressed positive feelings toward choice and autonomy. This emerged prominently as students' emotional responses were examined throughout the study.

Initially met with audible signs of discontent and frustration, such as sighs and grunts as observed during directions on non-choice days. Student 5 slammed his hands on the desk on day 1 when I gave directions on where to sit and what to write about. This type of behavior was never witnessed during non-choice days. Similarly, students like Student 5, Student 3, and Student 4 experienced a notable transformation in their sentiments as they gained greater autonomy over their writing experiences.

As the study progressed, positive emotions became more apparent in students' expressions. Student 5's excitement, as indicated by his statement, "I liked that I got to pick my own story!" when I asked him "How did you feel about writing today?", and Student 4's positive reflection, "Nothing would make writing better today," when prompted with "What would make writing better today?" during our writing conferences. These sentiments stress the transformative power of autonomy in cultivating positive feelings toward the writing process. The newfound freedom to choose writing spots, tools, and topics not only provided a sense of ownership but also contributed to a more positive and enthusiastic approach to writing.

The positive emotions expressed by students stress the pivotal role that autonomy plays in shaping students' attitudes, turning what was initially met with reluctance into a source of enthusiasm and engagement. As stated by Student 3 on day 7 "I think now I like writing!"

Furthermore, these positive feelings toward autonomy extended beyond compliance; they became integral to the student's intrinsic motivation. On the first day of choice conditions, day 6, Student 4 expressed writing was great "because we got to pick our own spots and got to pick our own paper." On day 7, Student 2 expressed that writing was great "because I could draw and write and I like using the fun pens." Even students, such as Student 1, who initially struggled with choice later came to prefer it as demonstrated by her statement on day 8 "I liked it and I

liked picking my spot. I liked that we, my, I haded a fun time. I liked using a gel pen." The joy expressed by students in choosing their spots, pens, and writing topics reflects a sense of agency that positively influences their overall engagement in the writing process.

On-Task Behavior

When provided with choice conditions, on-task behavior increased. Throughout the non-choice conditions, several students exhibited off-task behavior. The first writing piece students were supposed to write was about the first day of school. They were given the prompt "tell me about the first day of school." Students 1, 3, and 4 strayed from the original writing prompt and chose their own writing prompt. Student 1 strayed from the topic and wrote a story about her mom. Student 3 wrote a story about the second and third days of school, and Student 4 wrote a story about Halloween. Student 5 wrote a story about their first day of preschool, but I did not specify which first day of school to write about, so I considered this to be on topic. Student 2 did not stray from the original prompt.

In addition to being off-task with the writing prompt, students also struggled to remain in their seats throughout non-choice days. Students 2, 4, and 5 left their assigned seats throughout the writing period and tried to select another spot to sit. Students always came back willingly and this redirection was not met with any negative feelings, but connecting these behaviors and their reflections, demonstrates that they would have preferred a different location to write in. Students were often off-task chatting during non-choice days. They were redirected to discuss on-topic conversations if they wanted to talk but often strayed from discussing writing. These distractions lead to negative feelings from students. When asked "Did you feel focused?" Student 4 stated "Not really because everyone was chit chatting" on day 4. Also on day 4, Student 1 stated "I got

a little of distraction. But I kept on doing my thing. People were talking and I couldn't undistract myself. But I tried to focus."

These behaviors all diminished when students were presented with choice conditions. Students did not stray from their selected writing topic, and off-task conversations happened less often, albeit did not completely stop. Students also had the freedom to work with a partner during the second two weeks of the study. Student 5 commented on the eighth day of the study that writing would be better "if we didn't, If I didn't do it alone. I want to work with a partner. Working with a partner would help me so I'm not so alone." I let him know that he could work with a partner and discussed it with the class the next day. When I asked if anyone wanted to work with a partner, every student raised their hand. They partnered up, Student 1 with Student 4, and Students 2, 3, and 5 in a group of three. Students 1 and 4 discussed their stories and shared about what happened. Student 1 asked Student 4 "Did that really happen to you?" showing engagement in the activity. The group of 3 worked at the table together but did not discuss their stories or collaboratively work that day. However, Student 5 remarked "everybody liked my story and I got to work with a partner like I always said I just want to work with a partner!" during our post-writing conference. Regardless of actual collaboration, Student 5 felt he was working with others and it led to greater enjoyment. Contrarily, Student 3 shared "to make writing better I want to work alone" on that same day. I discussed with him that he does not have to work with a partner just because everyone else is with a partner and he said he felt better about working alone.

Off-task talking was significantly reduced when they were working with a partner and had the freedom to choose writing conditions. Because students were free to select their writing spot, changing seats was not seen as a negative behavior during choice conditions. It was a

positive behavior for Student 3 and Student 4 when they were distracted, they chose to move to a new spot on various days throughout the study. Overall, on-task behavior increased along with students' engagement and motivation in writing.

Negative Feelings Toward Autonomy

Throughout my study, there were a few instances in which I observed, or students shared negative feelings toward autonomy. On the first day of students being allowed instructional choice, day 6, Student 1 reported "I didn't know what to write and I was kind of worried. I didn't have enough time to think." This day she only wrote 1 word on their paper in the entire writing period and scored their emoji scale a 2 out of 5, indicating that writing was 😠 or "Somewhat Bad" today. Scores range from 1-5 with 5 being 😍 or "Great!" and 1 being 🙁 "Really Bad" Student 3 also reported on day 6, "I don't know what to write about I want to write both stories but I don't know what to choose" indicating that choice was hard for him. Later on, this same student told me "In school, it's hard to choose because there's a lot of choices and a lot of stories to write so it's hard to decide. That's why I made a double story." These students both felt anxiety relating to having choice or having to make choices for themselves. Student 2 also struggled with selecting a writing topic on Day 6 stating "What am I supposed to write about?" but after a quick conference with a teacher and a check to the "Idea Bank" he created in the beginning of the year full of writing topics he may want to use, he was able to select a topic and begin writing independently.

On Day 12, Student 4 reported on their emoji scale a score of 2 out of 5. This student told the researcher "Everyone was talking and I just wanted some space." Throughout the study, this student frequently reported that other students talking or distracting her detracted from the writing experience. While this student had the freedom to change spots to a less distracting spot,

and sometimes did so, she did not do so consistently, and the distractions were notable to her. These distractions negatively impacted her overall writing experience. Having choices may be overwhelming for this student, or she may feel the negative social repercussions of changing spots due to her peers being distracting.

Impacts of Choice and Autonomy on Student Writing Quality

Students wrote two writing pieces throughout this study. Students first wrote a writing piece under non-choice conditions where they were provided with a prompt "Write About the First Day of School". In the second writing piece, students had within-task and across-task free choices regarding writing, as mentioned above.

Figure 1 shows the scores students received on the first writing piece per section when scored using the writing quality rubric (see appendix).

Figure 1

Writing Quality Scores-Piece 1
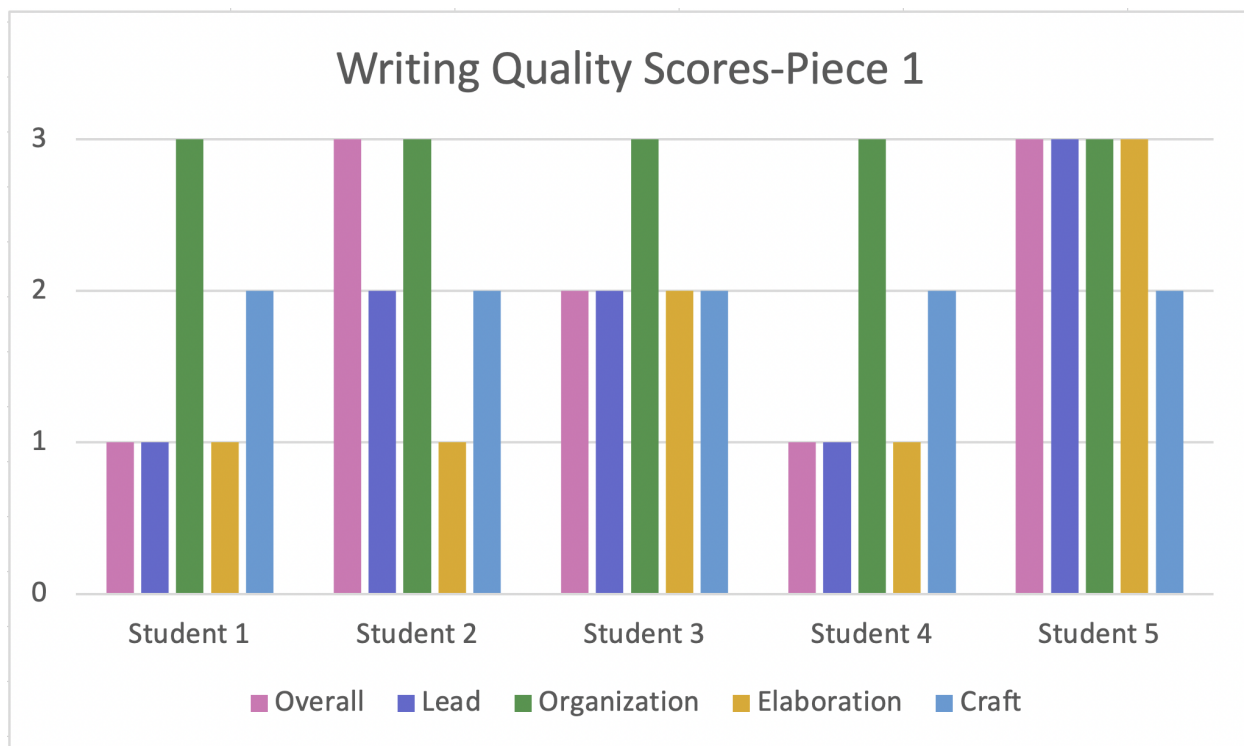
These scores indicate writing as a weakness for Student 1 and Student 4. Both students scored 8 out of 15 on this initial writing piece. Their writing did not stay on topic only writing about "one time when I did something" (see rubric in appendix). Additionally, both of these students did not follow a structure in this story with "action, talk, or setting that would make a good beginning" (see rubric in appendix). Finally, neither student included dialogue or actions their characters did in this initial story. These skills were all previously taught in mini-lessons, and brought up again in writing conferences. According to his writing quality rubric, Student 2 has both strengths and needs in personal narrative writing. This student has kindergarten-level reading abilities and at times struggles with coming up with ideas during writing. He was scored at "Starting To" in the area of Lead and Elaboration indicating he understands the concept but does not fully apply it, or only partially meets the requirements. He has strong skills in the Overall, and Organization sections. He did not include any dialogue or character action in this story, which is why he received a score of 1 in "Elaboration." This data also indicates that student 5 is a strong writer with strong skills across the board. The only area he needed additional work in was the area of "Craft" where he had to use "strong words to help readers picture my story."

After the second writing piece was complete, students were scored again using the same writing quality rubric. Figure 2 shows the scores students received on the second writing piece per section when scored using the writing quality rubric (see appendix).
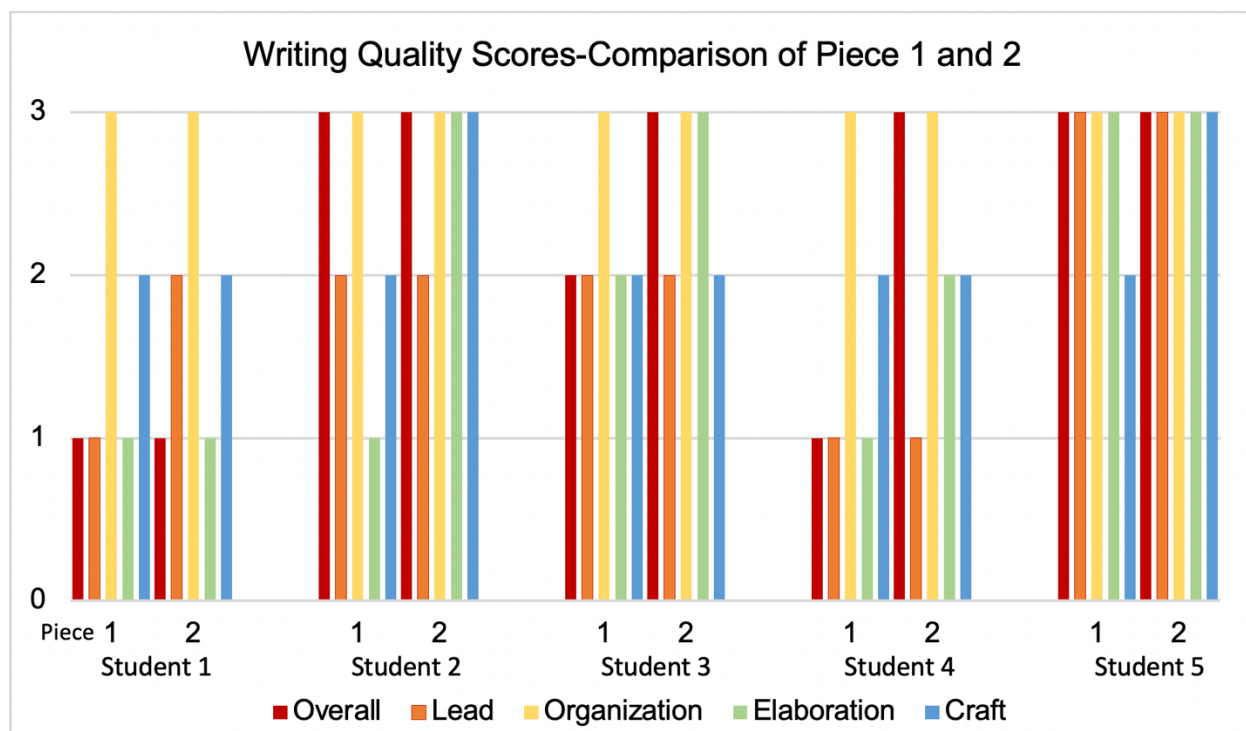
Figure 2

Writing Quality Scores-Piece 2
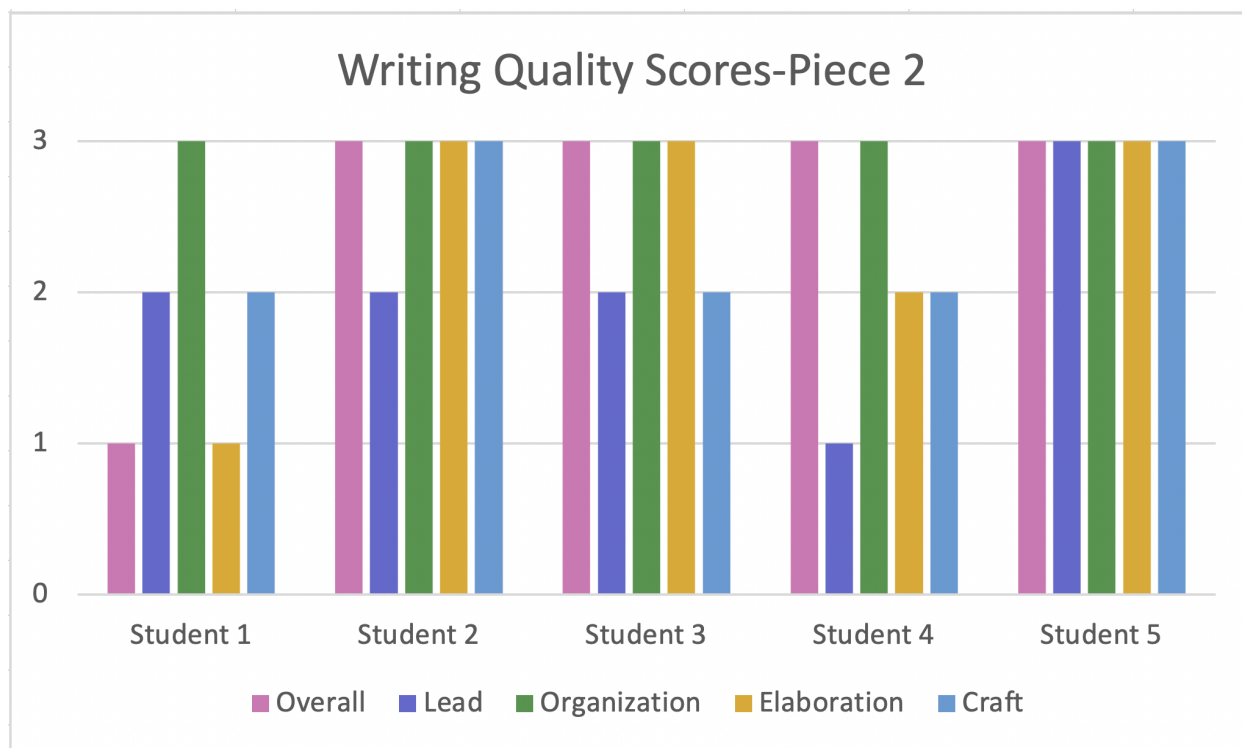
These results indicate that all students showed improvement in their writing skills when provided with choices. Students 1 and 4 still struggled more than their peers but were still able to improve their writing quality. Student 1 demonstrated strength in the organization of their story, and a relative strength in the Lead and Craft areas. It is important to notice Student 4's improvement in writing quality. This student had a stronger understanding of personal narrative writing and felt more confident in their writing in the second piece. It is clear from looking at the rubric that the area of Lead and the structure of her story is still an area of weakness, but noteworthy improvements were made. While writing is still a struggle for these students, they both have shown improvement in multiple areas.

Figure 3

Side-by-side comparison of writing quality scores

Figure: Writing Quality Scores-Comparison of Piece 1 and 2. Legend: Overall, Lead, Organization, Elaboration, Craft.

When looking at the comparisons side by side, as in Figure 3, it becomes clear the areas that students improved. A notable shift is clear in student 2 with improvements in the areas of Elaboration and Craft. Student 4 also had a large amount of growth in her writing. She improved in the areas of Overall, and Elaboration. This was evident in her story where she added details, character dialogue and actions. Additionally, she understood and applied the overall skill of writing about "One time when I did something" rather than writing about several months as seen in her first story.

Table 1 shows the total score each student received on both writing pieces when scored using the writing quality rubric (see appendix).

Table 1

Raw Writing Quality Scores and Growth Percentages

Student	Raw Writing Quality Scores		Growth (Percentage)
	Writing Piece 1	Writing Piece 2	
Student 1	8/15	9/15	7%
Student 2	11/15	14/15	20%
Student 3	11/15	13/15	13%
Student 4	8/15	11/15	20%
Student 5	14/15	15/15	7%

Every student's writing scores increased after being introduced to choice conditions. Increases in writing scores ranged from 7% to 20% with a mean increase of 13.4%. The results of the writing quality scores indicate that utilizing instructional choice had a significant effect. This means that the intervention had an influential effect on the participant's writing scores. The growth percentage in Student 2 and Student 4 is important to note. These students responded well to having choice, and their writing quality improvements and work samples below show that.

Figure 4

Student work Sample-Student 2, Piece 1
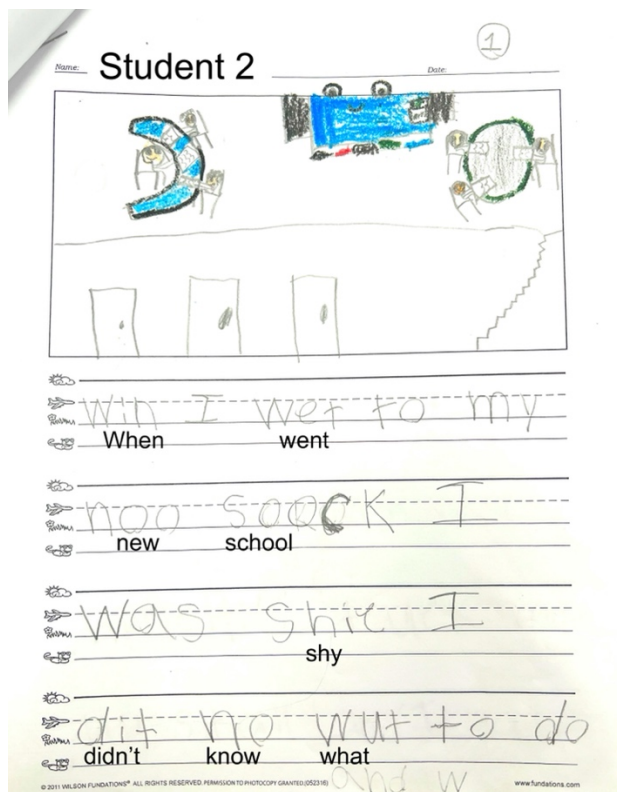
Figure 5

Student Work Sample-Student 2, Piece 2
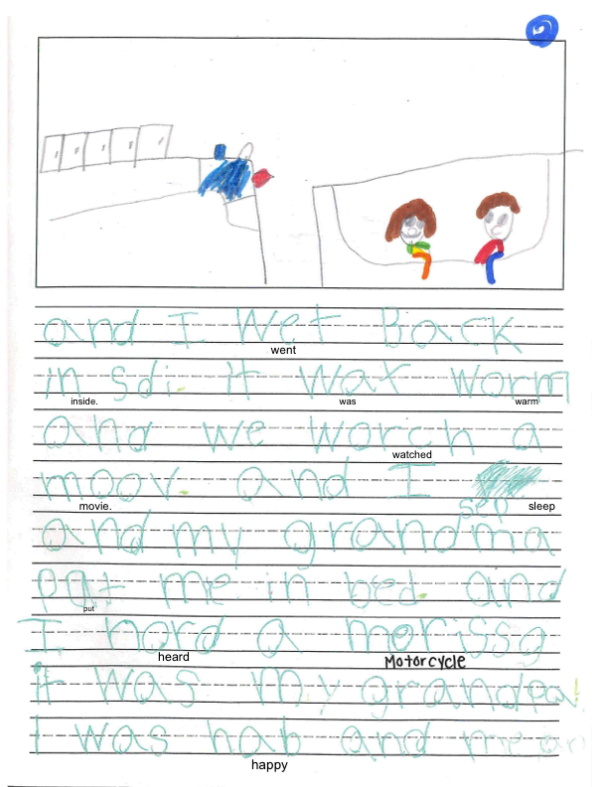
Figures 4 and 5 show samples of Student 2's first and second writing pieces. Student 2 improved by 20% from writing piece 1 and writing piece 2. His first writing piece was relatively short, and did not include details. When he met with a teacher in week 2 and discussed what needed to be improved in his writing, he was able to apply these and was more willing than during the first week of the study. His second piece was longer, included dialogue, and details demonstrating an improvement in his writing quality.

Figure 6

Student Work Sample-Student 3, Piece 1
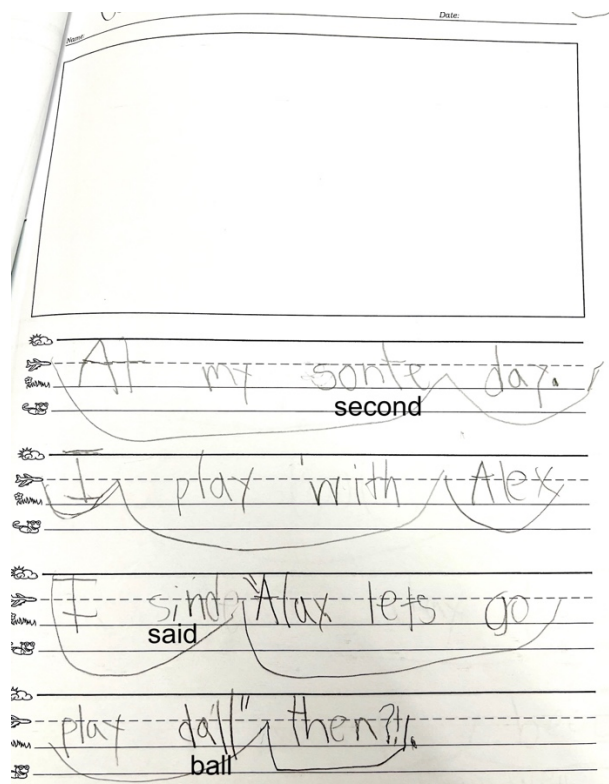
Figure 7

Student work Sample-Student 3, Piece 2
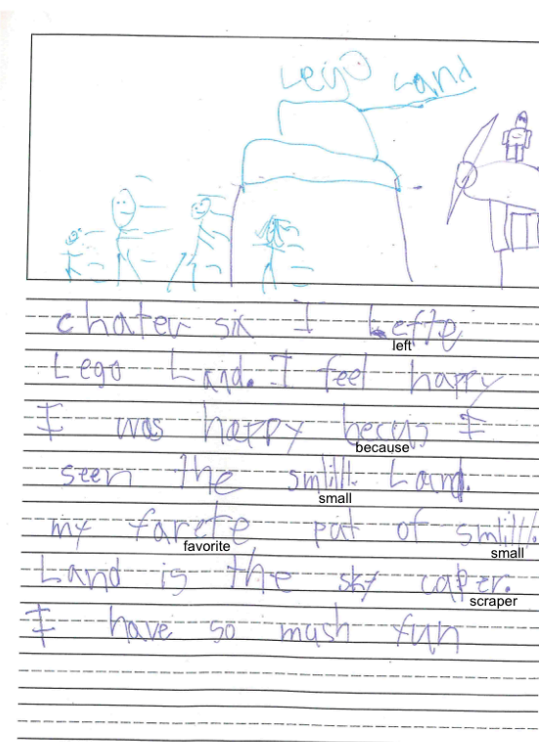
Figures 5 and 6 show work samples from Student 3's stories. Student 3 struggled with engagement during the first week of the study under non-choice conditions. He frequently was staring into space, or drawing "fluency scoops" as seen in Figure 6. This is considered an off-task behavior as this is something done during phonics and reading, but not during writing. He drew fluency scoops every day during non-choice conditions, but never drew them during days with choice. His writing improved by 13% from piece one to piece 2, indicating that this improved engagement increases writing quality. His self-reported emoji scores, as displayed in Figure 8, below, significantly improved demonstrating that choice led to increased engagement, and in turn, increased writing quality

Individualized Learning Experiences and Challenges

The final theme of this study, individualized learning experiences and challenges, is prominently evident in the observed data, emphasizing the importance of tailoring educational approaches to suit the unique needs and preferences of each student. Special education students often have had challenging learning experiences before being classified, and it is important to recognize their emotional needs as well as their academic needs (Banks, 2022).

This theme emerged due to the wide range of preferences, needs, and feelings students experienced during this study. Diverse learning preferences are observable, with some students thriving in collaborative settings, while others prefer solitude during the writing process. Students also expressed different preferences on the order of tasks completed. Some students chose to work on writing first, while others chose to focus on their illustrations first. Additionally, students had different preferences concerning their writing location in the room. Students also felt different preferences regarding the completion of writing, both concerning timing, as well as the length of their stories. Recognizing and respecting these differences is crucial for educators looking to create an inclusive learning environment. The theme also highlights the positive impact of autonomy in allowing students to choose their writing tools, spots, and materials, contributing to enhanced engagement and writing quality.

Sensitivity to emotional responses and a degree of flexibility in instructional approaches are essential aspects of addressing the challenges associated with individualized learning experiences in students with disabilities. Striking the right balance ensures that students receive personalized support while maintaining a structured and focused learning atmosphere, contributing to a more inclusive and effective educational experience. Student 3 is a prime example of individualized difficulties and preferences. On day 6, this student cried while

cleaning up because he felt that he did not have enough time to complete his work. This student had just returned from being sick and was still not feeling well. This was an unexpected result but important to note. Additionally, he has told me in the past, and throughout the study "I don't like writing" and after choices were introduced, later told me "I think now I like writing!" indicating that having choices created positive changes for this student. Education is a very individualized experience and feelings differ on a student-to-student basis.

After hearing from several students, Students 1, 3, 4, and 5, that time was a factor that caused them stress, I decided to include time in instructional choices. From day 8 onward, students were able to dictate when they were finished writing for that day. After I gave directions, I allowed students to work and let me know when they felt they were finished. Students seemed to prefer being in charge of the timing of their writing. When they felt out of ideas, or no longer felt comfortable writing they had the freedom to move on. Every student worked for at least 20 minutes, and I did not feel any student was taking too much or too little time writing.

Figure 8

Self-Reported Mean Writing Scores

Self-Reported Writing Scores

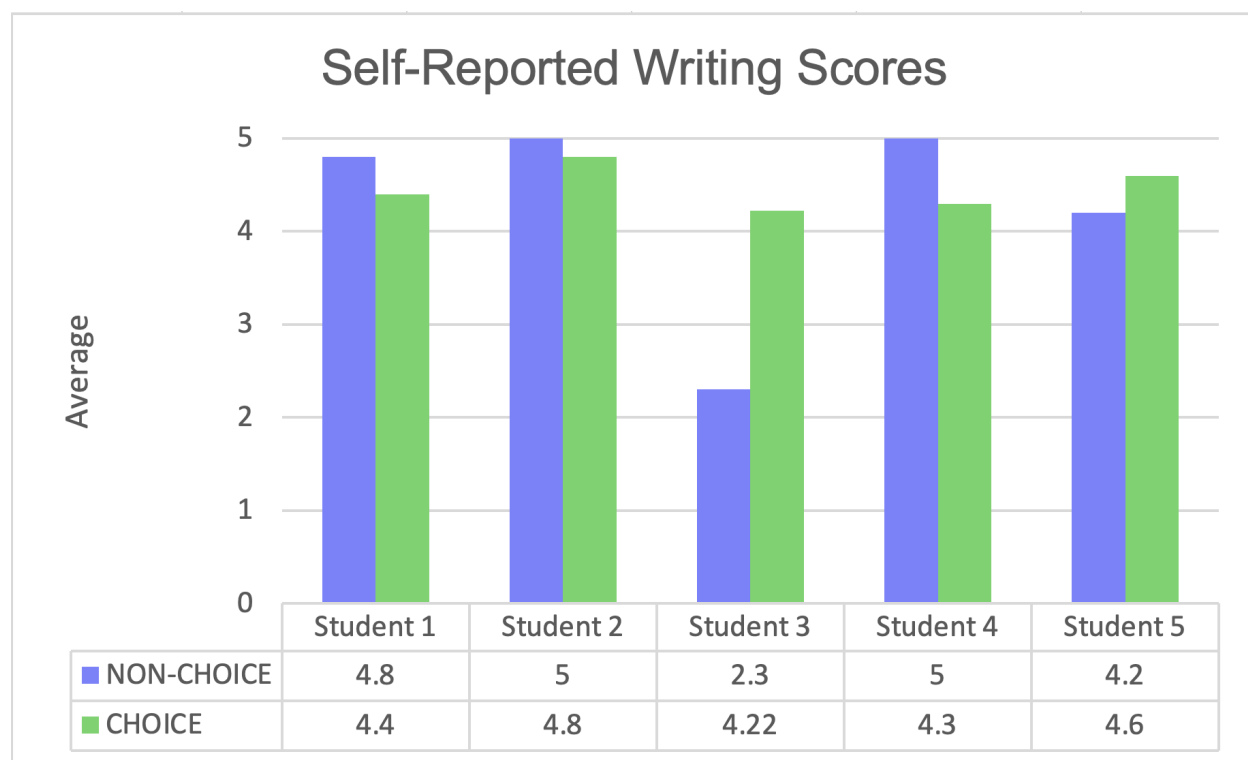|	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4	Student 5
NON-CHOICE	4.8	5	2.3	5	4.2
CHOICE	4.4	4.8	4.22	4.3	4.6

Figure 8 displays the mean scores each student gave themselves daily after the completion of the writing period for that day. Students scored themselves based on how they felt about writing that day by circling the emoji that best represents their feelings. This graph presents the mean score each student gave themselves each day. Bar 1 represents the non-choice days (days 1-5) and bar 2 represents the data collected on choice days (days 6-15). Student 1's mean score decreased by .4 points, Student 2 decreased by .2, and Student 4 decreased by .7. Student 3 increased by 1.9 points, and Student 5 increased by .4 points. This aligns with the prior findings that higher-ability-level students have more comfort with choice, and students with lower ability levels find choice more challenging.

Table 2 below shows the statistical scores for each student's emoji scores over the course of the study.

Table 2

Non-Choice and Choice Mean, Median, and Mode Scores

Student	Self-Reported Writing Scores Non-Choice			Self-Reported Writing Scores Choice		
	Mean	Median	Mode	Mean	Median	Mode
Student 1	4.8	5	5	4.4	5	4
Student 2	5	5	5	4.8	5	4
Student 3	2.3	2	No mode	4.2	4	4 and 5 (Bimodal)
Student 4	5	5	5	4.3	5	5
Student 5	4.2	5	4 and 5 (Bimodal)	4.6	5	5

When comparing the qualitative data on the students' exit tickets with this quantitative data, it provided a somewhat ambiguous understanding of students' experiences. In analyzing the data, student's quantitative scores would not always match their qualitative responses. For instance, on day 4, Student 2 scored himself a 5 out of 5, indicating that writing was great, however, when I asked him "What would make writing better?" he responded "Let us write what we want. Maybe write about math, this one is boring." Another example is when Student 4 responded "I got to sit in this chair I get some space and I got to concentrate. I like choosing the pens. I liked coloring my pictures" yet scored themselves a 2 out of 5.

Another factor that influences their scoring is external factors, such as being tired or sick, or other factors that do not have to do with choice or non-choice conditions. Figure 4 displays data from Student 5 demonstrating a situation that did not have to do with the conditions of the study, but impacted him that day.

Figure 9

Student Exit Ticket Sample-Student 5, Day 1

Due to these challenges with collecting self-reflective scores, I found the observations, writing conferences, and discussions I had with my students to be a much truer representation of their feelings than the emoji rating scale appears to be.

Collaboration vs. Independence

Challenges arose in finding a balance between autonomy and the need for structure, as excessive freedom may lead to distractions. Additionally, varying levels of support were required, with some students benefiting from teacher or peer assistance, while others preferred a more independent approach. When asked "What would make writing better today?" Student 5 stated "I want to work with a partner. Working with a partner would help me so I'm not so alone." Similarly, on day 10, Student 4 reflected that writing was great "because I like we get to pick partners." On the other hand, when Student 3 felt positive and reflected on their writing, they stated that writing was "Good and my back doesn't get hot today. Sometimes when there's a

big word my back gets hot. And I liked my spot. I like alone spots I can focus more when I'm alone not with somebody". This student shared several times throughout the study how he likes to work alone, and not with partners. He also chose to sit or work independently 88% of the time. On day 2, when he did not have the choice to select a spot, in our post-conference he reflected, "It's so hard in the spot, it's hard to think." Other students did not share a strong preference for working collaboratively, or independently, and selected both conditions on different days throughout the study.

Ability Levels and Structure

Through analyzing the data and making observations, it was surprising to witness the journey Student 1 and Student 4 experienced. Both of these students have low-ability levels and typically struggle with writing. They need significant assistance from teachers during writing time and often feel very lost with what to write. These students both do not have letter-sound correspondence and usually cannot read their writing back after having written. Both students struggled to read their stories after completing and sharing them with classmates during the study.

During the first two days of the study when students were not presented with choices, Student 1 and Student 4 were initially successful. The data shows they started writing immediately after directions were given, and they needed less assistance than usual. They stayed on task and were quite successful during this time, while the other students with higher ability levels had a more challenging time and expressed strong dissatisfaction over the writing prompt, location, or order of tasks (writing first versus illustrations). Students also had difficulty following directions when not presented with choice. Upon day 3, 3 of the 5 students wandered from the original writing prompt regardless of non-choice conditions. During non-choice days,

several students left their seats and tried to pick their own spot, but were ultimately redirected back to the original directions. These students were no longer following the non-choice conditions.

Initially, during day 6, when confronted with the opportunity to make choices, both Student 1 and Student 4 exhibited signs of difficulty. Their initial struggles were evident in expressions of uncertainty, seeking reassurance, off-task behavior, and, not completing any work. On day 6, student 4 only wrote 1 word in the whole writing period and stated "I didn't know what to write and I was kind of worried. I didn't have enough time to think" when discussing with me. Student 4 expressed "I was sad because it was too noisy" on day 7 and rated themselves a 1 out of 5 on the emoji scale for that day. Data shows that the higher-level students felt very successful that day and expressed happiness and excitement to have choices. Student 5 exclaimed "We finally got to pick our own spot. And we finally got to pick our own story. I liked that I got to pick my own story!" on day 6.

As the observations progress, a shift is noticeable in Student 4 and Student 1's interactions with choices in the writing process. While there were instances of distraction and a tendency to deviate from the given prompts, both students gradually adapted to the newfound autonomy. Their comfort level increased as they engaged more actively in making choices regarding their writing spots, tools, and materials. This adaptation is particularly evident in the later observations, where both Student 4 and Student 1 not only actively participated in making choices but also expressed enthusiasm about the aspects they enjoyed, such as selecting writing tools and picking spots. On day 6, Student 1 reflected "I liked choosing my spot and I liked choosing the paper." Student 4 reflected, "My favorite part about writing today was picking a marker because it helped me work better."

This positive evolution suggests a development in student's ability to handle choices within the learning environment. The initial challenges these students faced may have been rooted in uncertainty, challenge, or unfamiliarity with decision-making in the context of their writing tasks. Over time, however, they experienced positive outcomes and enjoyed the benefits of autonomy. Student 4 stated "If we could do this every single day, I would be happy" on day 9. Student 1 and Student 4 seemed to grow more comfortable with and even embraced the concept of choice.

Summary

This chapter presents the findings from the three-week study on integrating student choice into elementary writing instruction for second-grade special education students. Drawing from various data sources, including conference feedback, field notes, self-assessment Likert style scales, and writing samples, the chapter analyzes findings and identifies three main themes.

The first theme explores the impacts of choice on students' engagement and motivation in the writing process. Positive feelings toward autonomy were observed, leading to increased engagement and motivation, as evidenced by improved on-task behavior and excitement during choice conditions. However, a few instances revealed negative sentiments and anxiety among students when faced with making choices for themselves.

The second theme delves into the impacts of choice and autonomy on student writing quality. Students exhibited improvement in writing scores when provided with choices, suggesting a positive effect on writing quality. Higher-ability students demonstrated larger growth percentages in their writing scores than students with lower ability levels.

The final theme emphasizes individualized learning experiences and challenges, highlighting the importance of tailoring educational approaches to meet the unique needs and

preferences of each student. The chapter concludes by stressing the positive impact of autonomy in allowing students to choose their writing tools, spots, and materials, contributing to enhanced engagement and advocating for a balanced approach that accommodates varying levels of support and preferences among students.

Chapter V

Conclusions, Discussions, and Recommendations

The integration of student choice into elementary writing instruction has been explored in the preceding chapters, with a focus on five second-grade special education students. The research for this study was conducted to answer the question: 1) How does integrating student choice in elementary writing instruction impact second-grade special education students' writing quality? and 2) How are the motivation and engagement of students impacted while utilizing student choice in writing instruction?

This chapter provides an analysis and synthesis of the findings from Chapter IV, delves into comprehensive discussions around the study's implications, and concludes with recommendations for further research and practical applications in educational settings. From this data analysis is it concluded that 1) instructional choice positively impacts student's motivation and engagement during writing instruction, 2) instructional choice improves student's writing quality, and 3) instructional choice helps students meet their unique learning needs and preferences.

Conclusion I

Instructional choice positively impacts student's motivation and engagement in writing instruction.

Discussion

The first conclusion that can be made from the data is that the integration of instructional choice and autonomy-promoting practices in elementary writing instruction positively influences students' engagement and motivation. The positive feelings toward autonomy identified in the data in students' expressions of joy and excitement when provided with the choice to pick their

spots, utensils, and writing topics. This positive autonomy impact is further supported by observable increases in focus, enthusiasm, and active participation during writing activities. My students' emotional and academic needs were better met when instructional choice was added. Off-task behavior was minimized during writing instruction while students had instructional choice.

Comparing this conclusion to other research studies from the literature review, these findings align with research emphasizing the positive impact of instructional choice on student engagement and motivation. Studies by Cheng et al. (2023) and Lane et al. (2015) also identified the benefits of autonomy in improving reading fluency, writing choices, and student engagement in the classroom. Cheng et al. (2023) studied choice in terms of reading passages, therefore it was interesting to compare the results to writing instruction as I did in my study, and as Lane et al. (2015) researched. However, this research study is more targeted toward students with learning disabilities in a resource room setting, which the above studies did not focus on. Lane et al. (2015) researched one student with a disability, although the disability was Autism Spectrum Disorder, not a Specific Learning Disability. Regardless of the differences between these studies and my own, similar results were found that instructional choice improves some students' engagement and motivation. Lane et al. (2015) also found a functional relationship between instructional choice and decreased negative behaviors, as evidenced by my study as well.

Additionally, my study connects with Waterschoot et al. (2019) who found that when elementary school children were given choices, their intrinsic motivation significantly increased. This aligns with my conclusion that choice has a positive impact on motivation, as evidenced by the study's focus on the internal motivation and interest that students exhibit when provided with options. Waterschoot et al. (2019) included significantly more students, 126, and students were

older, 9-12 years old. However, this study aligns with my conclusion that instructional choice improves engagement and motivation in my students' writing.

In connection with the theories discussed in Chapter 1, my study conclusion aligns strongly with the Constructivist Learning Theory and the Self-Determination Theory (SDT). The active role of students in making instructional decisions aligns with the constructivist idea that learning is most effective when learners are actively engaged in the process (Brau, 2020). Similarly, the positive impact of autonomy on motivation echoes the principles of SDT, which emphasizes the innate drive of learners to explore and grow, highlighting the importance of nurturing this inherent interest in educational settings (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Allowing students to select their own writing conditions, topics, timing and more engages students and promotes students to be active learners and participants.

Conclusion II

Incorporating instructional choice in writing improves second-grade special education students' writing quality.

Discussion

The second conclusion focuses on the impacts of choice and autonomy on student writing quality. Through the analysis of writing quality scores before and after the introduction of instructional choice, it becomes evident that students, regardless of their initial writing abilities, demonstrated improvements when provided with choices. Students' writing improved by a mean of 13.4% with a range from 7% to 20%. Higher-ability students exhibited larger growth percentages, emphasizing the potential of autonomy in enhancing writing skills. Students reflected that they felt more focused, confident, and comfortable writing when they were

provided with free choice. On the second writing piece, most students produced higher quality writing, which stayed on topic and included details, dialogue, and actions.

Comparing this conclusion to the literature review, a clear connection is made between this study and Aitken et al. (2022), and Schneider et al. (2018). Aitken et al. (2022) focus on autonomy and writing skills, demonstrating that autonomy and choice in writing tasks positively impact writing outcomes. This supports the conclusion I have made in my study that instructional choice, when applied to writing assignments, can lead to improved writing quality. Aitken et al. focused on undergraduate students, while my study consisted of second-grade students. Both studies came to the conclusion that students writing quality, engagement, motivation, and confidence improved under choice conditions.

The study conducted by Schneider et al. (2018) provides valuable insights into the relationship between choice, motivation, and learning outcomes, which can be connected to the foundations of my study. Schneider et al. focused on the concept of "feigned choice" and investigated whether offering learners options without altering the content of learning materials could enhance autonomy, intrinsic motivation, and academic performance (2018). Similarly, my study aims to understand how providing choices within and across writing tasks impacts motivation, engagement, and writing quality. Schneider et al. (2018) studied secondary students, unlike my study which investigated the effects of choice on second-graders. However, both studies included the idea of "feigned choice" or within-task choices revealed positive results. Feigned choice refers to the occasions when the task is not changed, however, the conditions, such as order of completion (writing first vs. illustrations), or method of working (gel pens vs. pencils) can be manipulated by the students. Feigned choice occurred throughout my study and improved student's writing experiences. Such as when Student 5 shared that he wanted to work

with a partner, and selected a partner to work with. The partners did not talk to each other, of their own volition, simply sat and worked at the table yet after writing was over, he remarked "Everybody liked my story and I got to work with a partner like I always said I just want to work with a partner. Nothing would make writing better." This demonstrates how it was not the partnership that improved his writing experience, but rather the feeling of having the choice to select a partner if they so chose.

The positive impacts observed in my study as well as the studies completed by Schneider et al. (2018) and Aitken et al. (2022) align with the theoretical frameworks of Constructivist Learning Theory and Self-Determination Theory, supporting the idea that choice enhances learning outcomes. By recognizing the benefits of choice, my research extends this understanding to the specific context of improvements in writing quality for special education students, contributing to the broader conversation on the effectiveness of student autonomy in diverse educational settings. According to Constructivist Learning Theory, learning is an active process where individuals construct their knowledge based on personal experiences (Brau, 2020). In the context of writing instruction, allowing students to make choices in topics, writing styles, and mediums aligns with the constructivist principle of active engagement. By actively participating in the decision-making process, students are more likely to invest in and take ownership of their writing, leading to improved outcomes. Additionally, the Self-Determination Theory emphasizes the innate drive for exploration and growth in learners (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Allowing students autonomy and choices in writing taps into this intrinsic motivation, fostering a sense of ownership over their work. When students feel a sense of control and choice in their educational experiences, intrinsic motivation is likely to drive improved writing outcomes, contributing to the overall success of the instructional approach.

Conclusion III

Instructional choice helps students meet their unique learning needs and preferences.

Discussion

The third conclusion of this study is that special education students have unique and individual needs, and instructional choice helps students tailor their educational experience to meet these needs and preferences. The study emphasizes the diverse preferences, needs, and emotional responses exhibited by special education students during the writing process. Recognizing and respecting these individual differences emerge as crucial factors in creating an inclusive learning environment.

It was witnessed several times throughout the study where students felt differently from their peers or had a different experience than the rest of the students. It is important to recognize that several factors contribute to a student's enjoyment, engagement, and participation in learning. These factors need to be understood and acknowledged by teachers. This is evidenced throughout the third theme of my study where students needed individual assistance, check-ins, or adaptations. This sheds light on the dynamic nature of students' responses to autonomy, choice, and learning as a whole.

Choice may be an adjustment at first for students, who have been trained to allow the adults in their life to make decisions for them. Instructional choice should be introduced slowly and scaffolded along the way. Choice is a very personal concept with some students preferring certain conditions over others, as witnessed by Student 3 and Student 5's vastly different feelings toward working with partners. It highlights the potential for growth and adaptation, demonstrating how, with continued exposure and positive reinforcement, students like Students 1, 3, and 4 can develop the skills and confidence to navigate choices effectively. The progression

from initial hesitation to eventual acceptance shows the importance of patience, consistent support, and the recognition of individualized learning journeys in fostering a positive and empowering educational experience for all students.

There are many similarities between Ivey and Johnson's (2015) study and mine. Ivey and Johnson (2015) investigated choice regarding reading in eighth-grade English classrooms, while my study delves into the impact of integrating instructional choice in elementary writing instruction for second-grade special education students. Both studies emphasize the significance of recognizing and catering to individual needs within educational settings. Ivey and Johnson's focus on student-selected texts highlights the acknowledgment of individual interests, promoting a more personalized learning experience (2015). This connection is particularly relevant to when I noticed that students needed more time to work, or wanted to work with partners. These conditions were not something I had planned on including in my study, but based on my student's feedback I realized it would be beneficial for them. Both studies emphasize the collective nature of learning, challenging the notion that educational processes are solely individual experiences. It also highlights the importance of a student-centered classroom and encourages students to take a leadership role in their educational experiences.

The theoretical foundation for the conclusion that choice promotes individualized learning experiences is primarily grounded in Constructivist Learning Theory. According to this theory, individuals actively construct their knowledge based on their unique experiences (Brau, 2020). In the context of writing instruction, recognizing and accommodating the diverse needs, preferences, and learning styles of students aligns with the constructivist notion of student-centered education. Providing individualized learning experiences, such as allowing students to choose their topics, writing styles, and mediums, embraces the idea that each student's

educational journey is personal and something students should be in charge of. Additionally, the focus on autonomy and choice resonates with the principles of Self-Determination Theory. This theory underscores the importance of meeting students' inherent needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). By tailoring writing instruction to individual students, educators address their unique challenges and strengths, fostering a more supportive and engaging learning environment. Overall, the emphasis on individualized learning experiences aligns with constructivist and self-determination principles, contributing to a more effective and equitable approach to teaching.

Recommendations for Further Research

Based on the study's findings, several recommendations for further research emerge. Firstly, a longer study could be conducted to explore the long-term effects of integrating autonomy into writing instruction. Secondly, the research could be extended to investigate the impact of instructional choice in other subject areas to provide a more holistic understanding of student-centered education including instructional choice. Lastly, adapting autonomy-based strategies for various disabilities, or adapting instructional choice techniques to fit in a general education setting, with methods for teachers to employ, would be beneficial.

Concerning the discrepancies between the qualitative and quantitative data taken from the Emoji Exit Tickets, I would recommend future researchers utilize this tool carefully. The quantitative data taken from these exit tickets was not fully accurate when comparing it to observations or writing conference feedback. Students did not always select the Emoji that matched their feelings expressed verbally, and therefore scores were slightly skewed. I do not feel this is an invalid measure of student's feelings, but I feel the young age of these children makes self-scoring challenging. Students may need further guidance on what a Likert Scale

means (Jamieson, 2023), or researchers may need to consider an alternate form of quantitative data collection depending on the age range of students studied.

Recommendations for Teachers

Based on the findings of this study, recommendations for teachers include incorporating instructional choice into daily practices to enhance student engagement and motivation, as well as writing quality. When using choice, it is easy to adapt and differentiate without special education students feeling out of place or singled out. Choice should be introduced slowly and with caution to ensure students are not overwhelmed. Hearing from Student 3 that there are too many choices in school is a prime example of a student feeling overwhelmed by choice. Limiting choices, and ensuring there is not a large difference in choices, or an opportunity cost, will create a good environment for instructional choice to develop.

For many students, choice has not been a part of their educational experience, and teachers need to recognize that when planning to include instructional choice. Talking with students and listening to their wants and needs is a helpful way to understand what they feel would help them academically. This will help students be self-advocates in their academic career as well as their lives. Finally, teachers must find a balance between autonomy and structure. This is crucial for students to succeed, especially when considering the diverse learning preferences of students. Students with lower ability levels, such as Student 1 and Student 4, did well with structure, and took time to adjust to the lack of rigid structure instructional choice entails. Guiding these students, and working closely with them is advisable for greater chances of success. These recommendations aim to empower teachers to create a supportive and inclusive learning environment for their students.

Recommendations for Administrators

Incorporating instructional choice in a classroom can be a challenging yet rewarding endeavor for educators. Administrators should support their staff by promoting these practices and offering professional development opportunities for educators to equip them with the necessary skills for effective implementation of instructional choice. This could include training programs focused on fostering autonomy, managing and understanding diverse learning preferences, and addressing the individualized needs of all students, especially special education students. Administrators should have patience with staff members as they adjust to a student-centered classroom environment and provide impartial guidance on what appears to be working and what needs to be adapted.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Self-Reporting Emoji Likert Style Scale

Appendix B

Writing Quality Rubric

	Grade 2	NOT YET	STARTING TO	YES!
	Structure			
Overall	I wrote about *one time* when I did something.	☐	☐	☐
Lead	I thought about how to write a good beginning and chose a way to start my story. I chose the action, talk, or setting that would make a good beginning.	☐	☐	☐
Organization	I wrote a lot of lines on a page and wrote across a lot of pages.	☐	☐	☐
	Development			
Elaboration	I tried to bring my characters to life with details, talk, and actions.	☐	☐	☐
Craft	I chose strong words that would help readers picture my story.	☐	☐	☐