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Student Ownership, Engagement, and the Love of Learning: Investigating the Correlation of Student Ownership to Student Engagement

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Abstract

This research study sought to determine whether providing students with increased student ownership opportunities leads to increased student engagement. Previous literature showed that when teachers allow increased student ownership, the engagement of students in class increased. One hundred and five students participated in this three-week study in an upper level English composition and literature class. For this study, students were surveyed to identify the correlation between student ownership of learning and their overall levels of student engagement in learning. The results, as a whole, confirmed that students are more engaged in learning when given more ownership opportunities.

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Investigating the Correlation of Student Ownership to Student Engagement.

By

Kevin Koeman

B.A. Trinity Christian College, 2003

Action Research Report
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the
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Dordt College
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May 2018

Student Ownership, Engagement, and the Love of Learning:

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by

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Abstract

This research study sought to determine whether providing students with increased student ownership opportunities leads to increased student engagement. Previous literature showed that when teachers allow increased student ownership, the engagement of students in class increased. One hundred and five students participated in this three-week study in an upper level English composition and literature class. For this study, students were surveyed to identify the correlation between student ownership of learning and their overall levels of student engagement in learning. The results, as a whole, confirmed that students are more engaged in learning when given more ownership opportunities.

In his book, *You Are What You Love*, Smith (2016) asked, "What if education weren't first and foremost about what we know but about what we love?" (p. 138). For many educators, this love is a love of learning that they want to instill and encourage in their students. Whether it is the sciences, language arts, music, art, physical education, or the histories, what often drives teachers is the love of learning and passing that love to the next generation. Allowing and inspiring students to catch this love of learning should be one of the primary goals of a highly effective teacher. Education needs to be holistic, reaching all of every student. Students, after all, are not just "brains on sticks," so it should be the goal of every teacher to get at the heart of each of their students (Smith, 2016). Education is, at its best, a process that both equips minds and nurtures hearts; and each aspect should be intentionally and thoughtfully implemented. "Too often we feel we either have to be relational or academic, but we embrace the genius of the AND - Relational and Academic…The fullness of one requires the fullness of the other" (Meester, 2017). When education is the fullness of both, that love of learning often shines brightly.

Learning must be engaging, relevant, and meaningful. This type of learning happens in a variety of ways, but is clearly evident when there is a genuine love of learning that is modeled by teachers for their students. That passion can be deeply contagious. Increasing student ownership of learning could be a way to ensure that it is engaging, relevant, meaningful, and is steeped in a holy curiosity that fosters a genuine love of learning. Higher levels of student ownership should lead towards higher levels of student engagement and learning. The purpose of this study is to determine whether student ownership of learning increases student engagement.

Research Questions

For the purpose of this study, two research questions were explored:

1) Does increasing student ownership lead to higher levels of student engagement?

2) Does relying on teacher-directed instruction as the primary method of teaching result in lower levels of student engagement?

Definitions

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions were used. All definitions are the author's, unless otherwise indicated.

Autonomy – refers to independence or freedom of one's actions.

Literacy – basic literacy is the ability to read and write; functional literacy includes a person's knowledge of a particular subject/field.

Motivation – is having a strong reason to act or accomplish something.

Secondary Education – refers to the last four years of formal education (grades nine through twelve).

Self-determined – refers to the freedom to act or choose without consulting an outside influence.

Self-efficacy – refers to one's belief in one's ability to succeed in specific situations or accomplish a task.

Student Engagement - refers to the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show when they are learning.

Student Ownership – refers to the level of investment a learner has in learning, teaching and leadership anywhere throughout the education system.

Summary

In every school, teachers and administrators search for what is the best for students. This study examined if generating a higher level of student ownership corresponds to higher levels of student engagement in learning. The study examined if allowing more opportunities for students to own their learning lead to higher engagement in all aspects of the learning process.

Literature Review

Whether or not students are motivated to learn is the essential question facing all educators today. Be it at the elementary level, the middle school classroom, the high school science lab, or the graduate level, disengaged, unmotivated students await every teacher. Berger, Rugen and Woodfin (2014) stated, "Thoughtful teaching is done *by* and *with* students, and not just to them, and students become powerful advocates for their own improvement" (p. 72). Education has always stressed the importance of the student, but today, it seems, this partnership between the teacher and the student is so important in order to be successful in fostering not only learning, but also a love of learning. Students may be unmotivated for a number of reasons including but not limited to the following: poor curriculum, poor teachers, general dislike of a subject, lack of ownership in their own education.

Student disengagement at school, particularly the classroom, emerged as a problem in the mid-1980's when researchers presented a troubling picture of the internal organization and culture of comprehensive high schools. These studies portrayed dispirited teachers and disengaged students 'putting in their time' while negotiating a sprawling and fragmented curriculum. In most of the classrooms,

instruction followed the transmission model and induced passivity and bored

among students. (Marks, 2000, p. 162)

A key motivational factor is the connection between student ownership and

student engagement. Richmond (2014) highlighted a school that gave students an active

role in their education. The school adopted a student-centered learning approach. "What

is student-centered learning? In its broadest sense, it describes an approach where

teachers function more as coaches than lecturers. Personalized instruction that allows

students to advance at their own rate. Students must also have input in determining how

they will learn" (Richmond, 2014, p. 2). There is a connection between student-centered

learning and student-owned learning.

This love of learning should be shared with students by letting them be involved

both the planning and the learning process. Platz (1994) noted, "The Student Directed

Planning model trains students to take ownership for their learning by becoming involved

in the planning, learning process. The premise of the model is that children are more

motivated and learn more when they have input and make contributions to their learning

activities" (p. 420).

One of the best ways to show students this love of learning is to invite them into

as much of the learning as possible. Platz (1994) stated, "Classroom teachers enhance

student learning by promoting self-ownership for learning. This is not designed to

replace teacher instruction. It is designed to support and reinforce student learning" (p.

420). Students who have genuine, authentic ownership in all the levels of the learning

process are more engaged and motivated because they have a stake in it. Students who

have ownership are not passive recipients; they are active participants. Student ownership

is the beginning of the process of learning to love learning.

Student ownership is one of the key components to a student's education. Chan,

Graham-Day, and Ressa (2014) stated, "With many states adopting new standards and

evaluation systems, teachers must adopt effective instructional strategies and assessment

methods aligned to the rigor of new standards and assessments. One way to improve

student achievement is through supporting student ownership of learning, a core

component of formative instructional practices" (p. 107). Promoting ownership benefits

student learning and plays a role in formative instructional practices. Chan et al. (2014)

noted that, "As students become meaningfully engaged in their learning, they gain a

better understanding of learning targets, how to collect and document evidence of their

learning, and how to evaluate and clarify additional learning needs, leading to the

ultimate goal of improving student achievement" (p. 110).

Allowing students this opportunity to own their education can be done in unique

and creative ways touching on all aspects of the learning process. Stefanou, Perencevich,

DiCintio, and Turner (2004) presented autonomy support in at least three ways:

organizational, procedural, and cognitive--allowing and encouraging students to take

ownership in these areas of their education. Stefanou et al. (2004) stated, "The goal for

educators is to create and foster classrooms that support students in becoming truly

autonomous or self-determined as learners" (p. 104). Self-determined learners are what

teachers should strive for in their classrooms. Student ownership in the learning process

is the fuel that feeds this student engagement or self-determined learner. Stefanou et al.

(2004) concluded, "Clearly, providing no opportunities for students to exercise a level of

control over their environment or their thinking will not lead easily to motivated and independent thinking" (p. 109).

Another way that student ownership may be evident is by fostering a genuine and meaningful connection within the classroom. In their research study, Cleary and Kitsantas (2017) examined the roles of both self-regulated learning (SRL) behaviors and self-efficacy behaviors noting, "Students who feel connected to school have higher grades and achievement, exhibit more positive emotions and exhibit higher levels of engagement" (p. 92). Currently, there is a problem with low levels of engagement, particularly in the classroom; however, students who are engaged with school are more likely to learn, to find the experience rewarding, and are in turn likely to graduate and to pursue higher education (Marks, 2000, p. 163). Cleary and Kitsantas (2017) promoted higher levels of student engagement by offering challenging and compelling instructional work, providing an environment supportive to learning, and involving parents in the educational process by promoting higher levels of student ownership.

Owens (2007) asked: "Can a classroom critique, a problem-based, active learning pedagogy, promote critical thinking, analytical rigor, and creative problem solving, better preparing students for colleges and universities?" (p. 348). Active learning pedagogy is a student-centered approach that thrives because it gives students ownership in the learning process. In doing so, better and more authentic education and learning will be the result. The author concluded, "Because this method favors open-ended, student-centered inquiry it promotes self-expression and independent thought and discovery" (p. 349). There is a need for student ownership to be central in the learning process.

Furthermore, Brookhart, Moss, and Long (2009) outlined how student ownership is central to providing formative assessment stating, "Clearly communicating the learning goal to the student; provide information via both teacher feedback and student self-assessment, about the location of current student work in relation to the goal; provide strategies for moving closer to the goal and supporting the student in actually taking those steps" (p. 55). Student ownership in the learning process may look slightly different from grade to grade, class to class, but all ownership models seem to share a very similar set of characteristics.

Berger et al (2014) outlined several areas that are key to fostering student engagement including: regular celebrations of learning, posting clear learning targets, providing choices regarding assessments, and conducting daily checks (formative assessment) for understanding (p. 132). Each of these four areas not only encourage teachers to give up some control, but also invite students into a partnership alongside the teacher. By being invitational and by empowering students to own their own learning, students should be more motivated to not only care for, but also learn about what they are studying.

Celebrating learning is a highlight for any teacher. This is often done at the end of units or on tests or papers. Regularly celebrating learning at multiple points throughout the learning process has been shown to be highly effective in increasing student motivation. Berger et al (2014) stated, "Celebrations of learning are more than a display of student work and more than a party at the end of the year. The events compel students to tell the story of their learning by reflecting on and articulating what they have learned, how they learned, questions they answered, research they conducted, and areas

of strength and struggles" (p. 156).   Farr (2003) gave evidence of how important regular

celebrations in a classroom are:

> Celebrations within the context of the classroom learning community were seen
>
> by teachers interviewed as a means to create excitement about learning, increase
>
> motivation for learning, and enhance students' abilities to take responsibility for
>
> their own learning while contributing to the learning of their fellow classmates.
>
> Increased ability in the area of setting goals, improved retention, and recall of
>
> learned material were also seen as benefits that students derived from classroom
>
> celebrations. (p. 64)

Students are more motivated when they are encouraged regularly and celebrated for the

work not only that they have completed, but also are still working on.

Posting and discussing learning targets gives clear direction for both student and

teacher. Moss and Brookhart (2012) stated, " The most effective teaching and the most

meaningful student learning happen when teachers design the right learning target for

today's lesson and use it along with their students to aim for and assess understanding.

Our theory grew from our continuing research with educators focused on raising student

engagement" (p. 9). Teachers who use clear, well-constructed learning targets provide

students with a clear purpose and clear expectations. Berger et al (2014) outlined how

ownership is given to the students using learning targets saying, "Learning targets

provide students with tangible goals that they can understand and work toward. Rather

than the teacher taking on all of the responsibility for meeting a lesson's objective,

learning targets, written in student-friendly language and frequently reflected on, transfer

ownership for meeting objectives from the teacher to the student" (p. 8). Working

towards a challenging goal positively affects student engagement and creates student buy-in (Moss & Brookhart, 2012, p. 24).

Providing students with choices on assessments is one of the principles of best practice. Not all students learn in the same way and not all students display learning in the same way. Goodwin (2010) stated, "A 2008 meta-analysis of 41 studies done by Patall, Cooper, & Robinson found a strong link between giving students choices and their intrinsic motivation for doing a task, their overall performance of the task, and their willingness to accept challenging tasks" (p. 80). Allowing students choices in how they will demonstrate their knowledge, understanding, and mastery of the learning targets not only allows them to own their learning, but also promotes a culture of student engagement.

Giving students daily opportunities to reflect on their learning builds a culture of trust and collaboration. By regularly checking for understanding, teachers provide ownership opportunities for students to monitor their own progress and mastery, to identify any gaps in learning, and to address misunderstandings and answer questions. Students who have the consistency of sharing their voice are more engaged in their own learning.   Often these regular checking of understanding (formative assessment) are quick but helpful ways for the teacher and the student to have a good idea of where each are at in the learning process. Finley (2014) stated, "According to 250 empirical studies the answer is formative assessment: the frequent, interactive checking of student progress and understanding in order to identify learning needs. Formative assessment monitors student understanding so that kids are always aware of their strengths and learning gaps" (p. 1). Students are more engaged and are more successful when they are taught how to

learn as well as what to learn, and students learn more deeply when they are given regular

feedback and are part of a active learning environment (Barron & Darling-Hammond,

2008, p. 1).

Methods

Participants

The participants in this current study consisted of 105 high school seniors from a

private, Christian high school in western Michigan. The high school in the study has a

current 9-12 enrollment of 645 students. Over 90 percent of the students are Caucasian.

There are over 108 different church affiliations represented by the students and their

families.

The study was conducted with students in five English 4 classes. Fifty percent of

the participants were male and fifty percent were female (52 boys and 53 girls). Of the

105 students, four of them were international students; all of these students were from

China and were present during the previous semester. Of the 105 students that were

involved in the study, 12 students were tech center students that attended regular classes

at the high school for half of the school day, completing required classes only, and then

headed to the local ISD to pursue classes in a chosen trade.

The course chosen for this study is a World Masterpieces course focusing on

literature and including writing assignments such as a literary analysis paper, a college

essay and episodic non-fiction writing. As a prerequisite to this course, all students had

taken English 3 or the Chinese equivalent.

Materials

  A Google form survey created by the researcher was used to measure how students felt about their current level of motivation, their level of ownership in class, and their level of engagement in the learning process. The survey, using a four-point Likert scale and including 17 questions, was used both as a pre-post survey (see Appendix A).

Procedures

  The systematic process for this study followed a relatively simple format. Out of the five English 4 classes, three were chosen at random to be the experimental group and two were chosen to be the control group. In each of the five classes, a survey (see Appendix A) was given. This survey sought to identify a baseline of students' level of ownership in the class. Then the instructor taught each class the same unit but used intentional efforts of increasing student ownership opportunities in the three experimental classes. At the end of the unit, the instructor once again administered the survey to all participants in each of the five classes.

  In three of the classes (the experimental group), intentional efforts of increasing student ownership were offered and implemented. These included student choice on selecting learning targets, variety and choices regarding assessments, daily checks for understanding, and regular celebrations of learning. In two classes (the control group), traditional methods of instruction were offered and implemented. These included teacher-directed instruction with no student input or choice.

  In the three experimental classes of increased student ownership, students were given clear learning targets each day. There was a posted goal (learning target) for each class period, discussed at the beginning of each class, and lesson plans centered on

meeting that goal for the day. Learning targets were aligned to the Common Core and were measurable and achievable. In the two control classes no learning targets were posted or discussed.

In the experimental group, students also had increased choice in the final assessment and grading of that final assessment. Students worked with the teacher to generate final assessment options such as a written paper, a film, a summative test, artistic/musical response, movie trailer, and student option as approved by and with the teacher. Students in the control classes were not given a choice and were required to do the written paper as the final assessment as it has been assigned in the previous two years.

The third area of increased student ownership for the experimental group, was receiving regular feedback throughout the unit. Students who received regular feedback were more involved throughout the learning process. They asked more questions than those students who were in the control group. Students also seem to display more confidence to proceed in their learning after having regular feedback conversations designed to help guide students in their learning. Regular and timely feedback was provided both during and at the end of the unit in these classes. In the control group, feedback was given at the end of the unit on the final assessment only.

Finally, in the experimental group, celebrations of learning were encouraged and utilized. Both mid-unit and at the end of the unit, these classes paused to celebrate the ongoing work that was taking place. Positive whole class celebrations and feedback were implemented. Students who were cheered on and celebrated wanted to succeed in their learning. Celebrating student work and progress only helped and encouraged students to dive deeper into the learning process. In the two classes where this change was not being

implemented, the teacher collected the final assessment and gave feedback to students at the end of the unit.

Design

To analyze the data, this researcher used a t-test to compare pre- and post-test surveys. The difference between students' pre- and post-test scores was calculated and compared across experimental and control groups. The students' numerical responses on the pre-and post-survey was added and the difference was calculated between their pre- and post-sums.
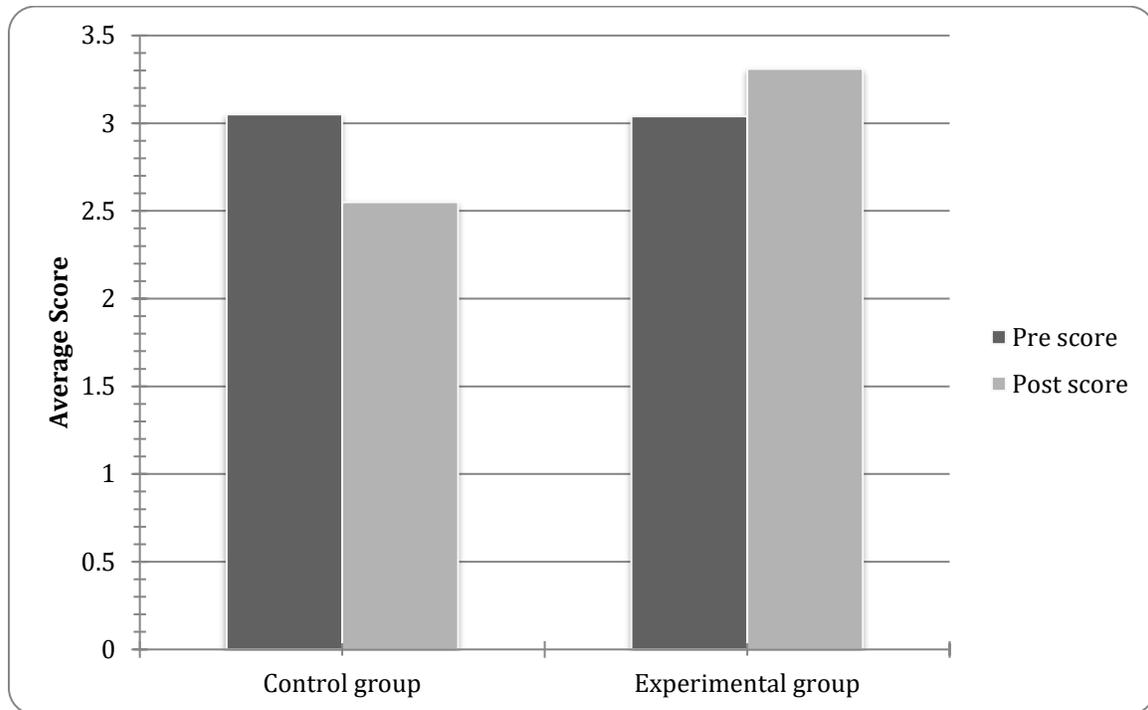
Results

Findings

The purpose of this study was to determine whether increasing student ownership leads to higher levels of student engagement. After examining the survey, each student response was correlated to a number using a Likert scale. (See Appendix A). The student responses were then averaged to get a number that correlated to their level of current engagement in the class. The results from the pre-survey average score for each student were then compared with the results from the post-survey average score. Students given the treatment (higher levels of ownership) began the unit averaging 3.26 out of a maximum possible four points, while students who were in the control group began the unit averaging 3.24. After the three-week unit concluded, the three classes receiving the treatment averaged 3.38. The two classes in the control group averaged 2.84 as indicated below in Figure 1.
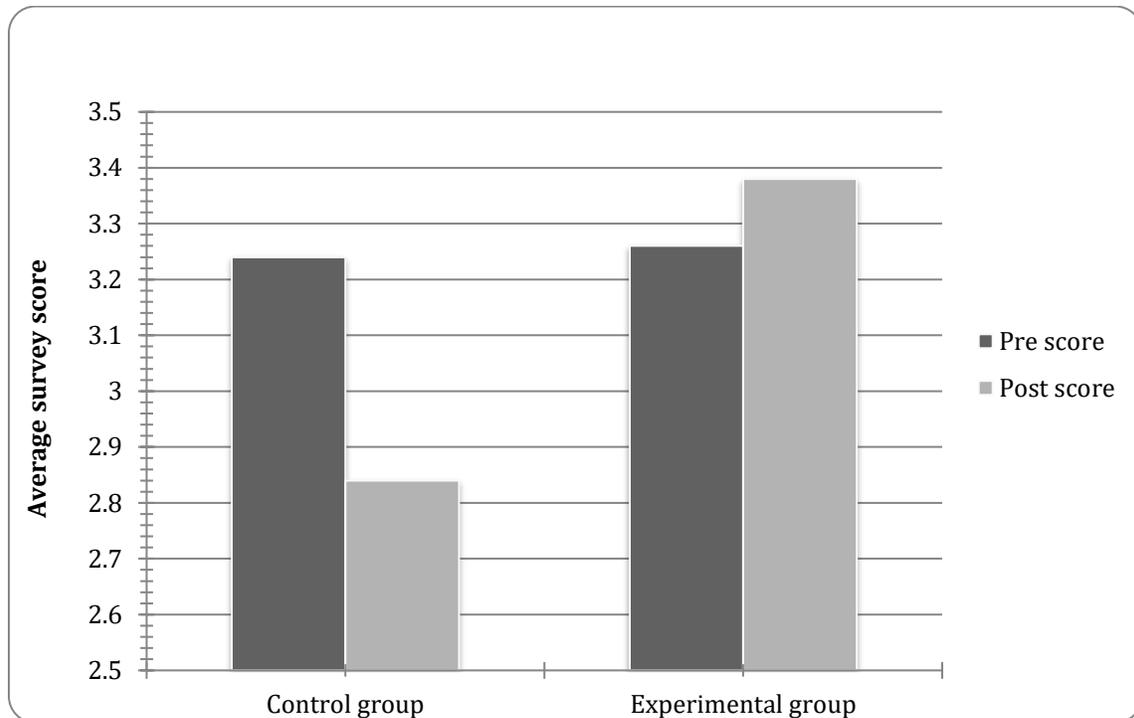
Figure 1. Survey results for all students in the study.

The students in the experimental group who received the treatment of increased student ownership showed a slight increase (four percent) in student engagement. The students in the control group who did not receive the treatment showed a decrease (twelve percent) in student engagement. Figure 1 shows the pre- and post-scores for the control and experimental groups.

In regards to the specific questions referring to student ownership (questions 4-7, and 13 from Appendix A), the survey results showed that the control group was impacted negatively, with a drop of 16 percent from their pre-post-survey results. The calculated t-test value of 0.001 is significant compared to the p value of 0.05. The treatment group saw an increase of 9 percent on their average score from the pre- to post-survey results. The t-test result of 0.01 is statistically significant compared to the p value of 0.05.

Figure 2. Survey results for specific student engagement questions.

The first research question investigated if giving students increased ownership resulted in increased student engagement. A t-test was conducted on the student averages of their survey results comparing overall pre- and post-engagement scores. The test found a result of 0.2, which is not statistically significant when compared to a p-value of .05 (see Table 1). A t-test was conducted on the student averages of their survey results comparing pre- and post-scores. The test found a result of 0.001, which is statistically significant when compared to a p-value of .05 (see Table 1).

Table 1

Overall t-test results compared to p value of .05

Control Group	Experimental Group
0.001	0.2

In regards to the specific questions referring to student ownership (questions 4-7,13 from Appendix A), the survey results showed that the control group was impacted negatively, with a drop of 16 percent from their pre- to post-survey results. The calculated t-test value of .001 is significant compared to the p value of .05. The experimental group saw an increase of 9 percent on their average score from the pre to post survey results. The t-test result of .01 is statistically significant compared to the p value of .05 (see Table 2).

Table 2

Specific t-test results compared to p value of .05

Control Group	Experimental Group
0.001	0.01

The second research question investigated whether relying on teacher-directed instruction as the primary method of teaching resulted in lower levels of student engagement. A t-test was conducted on the student averages of their survey results comparing pre- and post-scores. The test showed that both the experimental group and the control group experienced a significantly statistical decline. Both the control and the

experimental groups had a t-test value of 0.01, which is statistically significant compared

to a p-value of 0.05.
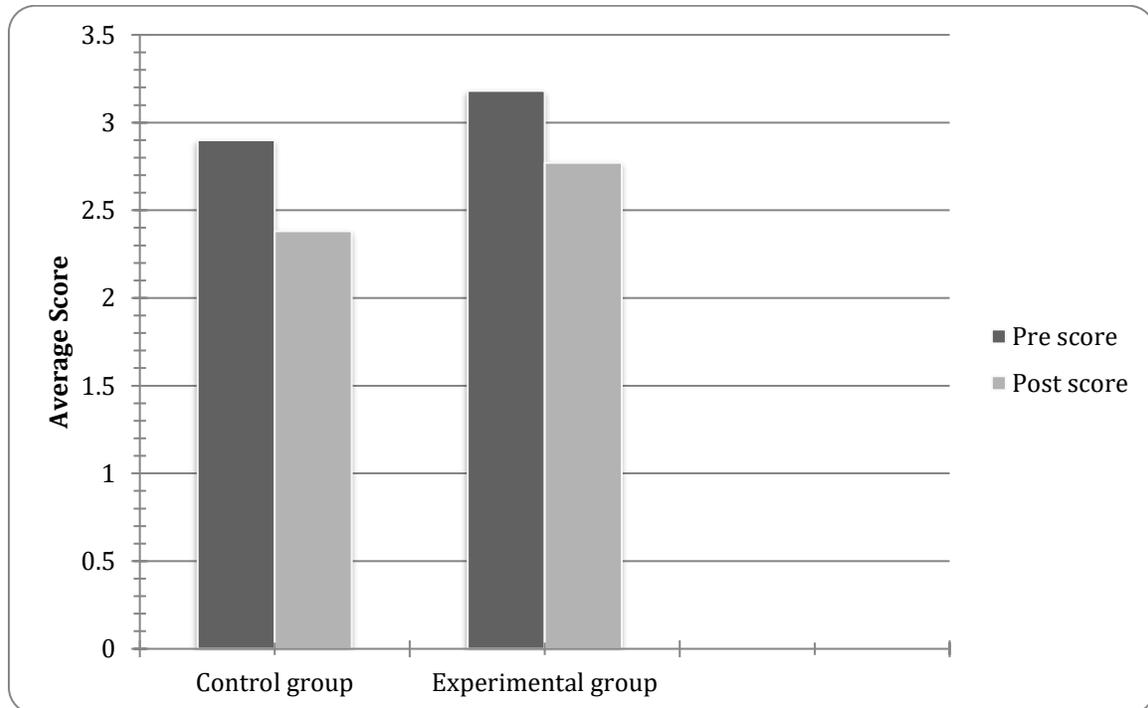
Figure 3. Survey results for specific teacher-directed learning questions.

Discussion

Overview of the Study

This study's purpose was to determine if increasing student ownership leads to

increased student engagement. The survey was used to gather information about each

student's views both before and after the unit. Three senior classes received increased

student ownership opportunities during the unit, while two senior classes received no

student ownership opportunities during the unit. The results showed that there was not a

significant increase in scores in the treatment group. Student survey scores on the survey

went up minimally after the unit and did not show a statistical significance. There was a

significant decrease in the scores of the control group. Overall, student scores did show a statistical significance in the control group.

The answer to research question number one which examined if increasing student ownership lead to higher levels of student engagement showed that overall scores did go up, indicating some increased student engagement. When targeting the specific questions on the survey that asked about student ownership the scored rose even higher. Allowing students more ownership did increase their engagement.

The answer to the second research question which examined if relying on teacher-directed instruction as the primary method of teaching resulted in lower levels of student engagement showed that scores went down not only in the control group but also in the experimental group, indicating that teacher directed instruction did lead to lower levels of student engagement. This action research matched what previous research showed: giving students more ownership opportunities does increase student engagement in learning.

Limitations of the Study

Even though the study did show that there was merit to the research conducted there were some limitations to the study. One of the biggest limitations was the scope of this study. The study took place in one school and only involved 105 grade 12 students. If the study had involved more students and more grade levels, the data may have been more definitive.

A second limitation was the timing of the study. Students had an average baseline score of 3.25/4.0.   Students came into this study with an entire semester with the researcher and had a bias regarding how that researcher taught his class. Because of this

bias, some of the results may have been influenced by previous units where students were taught with regular student ownership opportunities. As a result, the control group may have been more frustrated at the apparent lack of student ownership opportunities to which they had been accustomed. Had this study been conducted at the beginning of the year without prior knowledge, the data may have been more definitive.

A last limitation was how the study was carried out. Having three classes receive one type of class setting while two classes received a different type of class setting proved to be challenging for the students. Although all students were taught the same skills, standards, and content, allowing three classes more ownership while not allowing that choice for the other two classes proved to be difficult for high school students to understand. It may have been beneficial to have a second teacher teach one group so that students would not have had different experience in class from the same teacher.

Considerations for Future Study

This study focused on student ownership leading to student engagement. A recommendation for future study would be to look at both the pedagogy and the content and how that influences a student's motivation to take ownership of their learning.

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Appendix A

Student Ownership Survey

1. What Class hour are you currently in?
       * 1st
       * 2nd
       * 4th
       * 6th
       * 7th

For each of the following questions please use the following:
       1 = Never 2 = Some of the Time   3 = Most of the Time 4 = All of the Time

2. I learn in this class
       1   2   3   4

3. I try my best in this class
       1   2   3   4

4. My teacher spends time with individually conferring with me
       1   2   3   4

5. I have choice about what I am learning in this class
       1   2   3   4

6. I have choice about how I am learning in this class
       1   2   3   4

7. I am an active learner in this class
       1   2   3   4

8. I enjoy the learning process
       1   2   3   4

9. This class is engaging
       1   2   3   4

10. This class is meaningful
       1   2   3   4

11. This class is relevant

       1   2   3   4

12. I enjoy it when the teacher chooses what and how we learn

          1   2   3   4

13. We celebrate learning in this class
          1   2   3   4

14. I get helpful and timely feedback in this class
          1   2   3   4

15. I enjoy this Subject (English)
          1   2   3   4

16. I enjoy this class
          1   2   3   4