

**AN EXAMINATION OF WHAT AFFECTS PARTICIPATION LEVELS  
WITHIN A FIFTH GRADE CLASSROOM**

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**Katie M. Winter  
Northwest University  
Masters in Teaching Program  
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## **Abstract**

### **An Examination of What Affects Participation Levels Within a Fifth Grade Classroom**

What makes a fifth grader want to participate in classroom discussion and activities? Previous research points to a variety of elements ranging from student characteristics, classroom environmental factors, and peer and teacher interactions. These reasons paint a broad picture and attempt to pinpoint the motivations behind why one chooses to participate in classroom discussions and activities.

This research broadens the perspective of these motivations to participate, and examines participation levels through a qualitative case study of a suburban fifth grade elementary class. Through surveys and interviews, both the instructor and a sample set of students participated in this study. The findings support past research findings, and also identify other factors such as technology and rewards that drive students to share out their thoughts in classroom discussions and activities. Results from this study point to a number of factors that should be considered by educators in fostering a classroom environment that encourages participation. Some suggestions for increasing participations levels based on the results from this study include holding multiple classroom discussions to encourage open communication, praising and recognizing a student for an area that he or she is gifted in, and varying classroom activities so that students view participation as “fun.”

## Table of Contents

List of Tables & Figures .....	iv
Introduction .....	1
Literature Review .....	2
Research Question .....	13
Methodology .....	13
Data .....	17
Analysis .....	29
Implications .....	34
Conclusion .....	36
References .....	37
Appendices .....	39

## List of Tables & Figures

Figure 1: Student Survey Section 1 Results .....	18
Table 1: Student Survey Section 2 Results .....	19
Table 2: Student Survey Section 3 Results .....	20
Table 3: Student Interview Responses .....	21
Table 4: Instructor Interview Responses .....	28



## Introduction

As I walked into the fifth grade classroom where I student taught for the first time, I noticed that the teacher's voice was louder than I expected. She didn't appear to be a person with a booming voice, but I could hear her crisp and clear. I examined the room, and my eyes fixed on the speakers that were streaming her voice so that all of the students can hear her plainly. The class was asked to open up about their assignment and participate in a class activity in which they shared what they recorded on a portion of a reading reflection. Hands readily shot up into the air and eagerness ensued. Not a millisecond after one student finished sharing, another waved his hand in the air anticipating his turn to speak into the microphone that was being passed around. I laughed a little as I realized that speaking into the microphone was like being on stage for these kids. They couldn't wait for their turn...they couldn't wait for their voices to be broadcasted over the speakers for all to absorb.

As I pondered this occurrence, I asked the teacher about the excitement that I saw surrounding that instance of classroom participation. Not surprisingly, she informed me that levels of classroom participation rose with the introduction of the microphone technology. She then shared with me that students, even those with meager voices that were not commanding, seemed excited about the opportunity to use the microphone.

Growing up, we all knew the different kinds of students who would participate in classroom discussions. There was the typical teacher's pet, the over-achiever, the

popular athlete that wanted to get a laugh, and the students who only participated when demanded to by the instructor. There were subject areas where certain students felt more or less comfortable discussing, and there were elements of the classroom that created or depleted the desire to speak up and share your mind with others. With so many contributing factors affecting participation levels within the learning environment, I was lead to ask, what affects levels of participation in *this* fifth grade classroom?

It is important for us as educators to understand the dynamics that serve to inspire students to, or frighten students out of sharing and participating within our classrooms. Each classroom's environmental variables range from the introduction of different technologies, to the way that we interact with our students, to differences in gender and race within the population of the class. Past research has documented many ways in which we can look into levels of classroom participation. It was my desire to utilize the knowledge base that has been built in this area of educational research, so that I could qualitatively draw inferences from the surveys and interviews that I conducted within this fifth grade classroom.

### **Literature Review**

As I sought to understand fifth grade students and their varying levels of participation in the classroom that I was in, there were many elements that needed to be examined. These elements included student beliefs and characteristics, classroom environmental factors, as well as peer and teacher interactions; the research that I discovered surrounding levels of participation is organized accordingly.

### *Student Characteristics and Beliefs*

In examining the research surrounding the topic of classroom participation, it is clear that students' characteristics and beliefs play a part in their decision to engage in classroom discussions. These characteristics include a student's gender, (Aukrust, 2009; Crombie, Pyke, Silverthorn, Jones, and Piccinin, 2003; She, 2001; Weaver and Jiang, 2005) levels of confidence, (Weaver and Jiang, 2005) and beliefs about whether or not participation is valuable to learning the material (Jahnke, 2010; Jansen, 2008; Rocca, 2008).

Many students may choose to participate based on whether or not they believe that participation is valuable to learn the material (Jahnke, 2010; Jansen, 2008). Contrastingly, students who do not link these participatory discussions to learning and material retention, and those who perceive whole class discussions on a subject to be threatening, may choose to refrain from contributing their thoughts and analyses. Although both students who perceive participation as imperative to learning, and those who view it as threatening may engage in *procedural* discussions, the former group is more likely to feel comfortable engaging in *conceptual* discussions, and thus deepen their knowledge on the subject in focus. "Students who believed mathematics discussions were threatening avoided talking about mathematics conceptually ...yet these students participated by talking about mathematics procedurally." (Jansen, 2008, p. 68). Jansen's findings represent the idea that levels of participation vary depending on the level of comfort/beliefs that students have about a subject in focus. These

findings may demonstrate the importance for instructors to stress to students that learning *is* deepened by participation (Jahnke, 2010; Rocca, 2008).

Additionally, differences in gender may affect levels of classroom participation (Aukrust, 2009; She, 2001; Weaver and Jiang, 2005). Aukrust's research indicates that boys are more likely to engage in classroom participation, and this is seen across all grade levels. The prevalence of male participation was found not only in the in the form of outright discussion, but also in the form of out of turn utterances (Aukrust, 2009, p. 240). Additionally, his research found that the gender variance in classroom participation was seen across grade levels, and became more prevalent as students grew older (Aukrust, 2009, p. 241). Differences in classroom engagement were slightly more pronounced in classrooms where the teacher was male versus classes where the instructor was female (Aukrust, 2009, p. 241). If these findings were true across all classrooms, the variance in participation levels could be problematic in that many males could achieve deeper connections with the material, as well as with the instructor, therefore creating a void in achievement levels between males and females.

When looking at gender differences between those who are placed in low-achieving classrooms versus those who are placed in high-achieving class environments, patterns emerge indicating instructor biases towards both male and female students depending on the achievement level and the *type* of interaction between the student and teacher (She, 2001). For example, patterns of praise and encouragement were presented more readily from the teacher towards the females in the lower achieving classes. In contrast however, boys in both high and low-achieving classrooms were

called upon by the instructor more frequently to answer *specific* questions (She, 2001, p. 155). These findings may indicate that instructors *expect* more from male students, which may in turn discourage females from sharing if they recognize that their gender isn't as readily called upon. This research also indicates that within the low-achieving classroom, there were equal amounts of participation among males and females. In contrast, within the high-achieving classroom males were perceived as more dominating in the realm of classroom involvement (She, 2001).

Other findings indicate that instructors are less likely to probe for answers from females, "In general, the higher the proportion of women in the class, the more positively the instructor was viewed, except for probing, on which the instructor was perceived to engage in less probing of students' responses" (Crombie, Pyke, Silverthorn, Jones, and Piccinin, 2003, p.71). So, there seems to be a void in the way in which instructors encourage deeper participation in male versus female students (She, 2001; Crombie, Pyke, Silverthorn, Jones, and Piccinin, 2003). As discussed earlier, if this difference in probing and encouraging participation between genders *does* occur across all classrooms, it can be problematic. These findings may indicate that males may feel more comfortable sharing and deepening knowledge through participation, whereas females may perceive the lack of instructor probing as an insult to their intelligence, and therefore they may withhold responses in classroom discussions.

Additional research found that gender had *little* effect on self-reported levels of participation, but suggested, rather, that participation is directly affected by students' confidence levels (Weaver and Jiang, 2005). This research proposed that students, who

were more confident in the subject matter and with their position in the classroom society, would readily share their opinions and knowledge with the class. In contrast, those who were fearful about participation due to potential peer or teacher rejection (despite their gender) chose not to participate. This aspect of fear in participation will be explored in more depth in the below section on peer and teacher interaction.

Another student characteristic that is less common, but certainly affects levels of participation, is an anxiety disorder called Communication Apprehension (CA). Research indicates that it is often difficult to pinpoint where CA originates (biological aspects, intimidation, etc.), but it is an aspect of some students' reality that cripples their ability to engage in classroom participation. Many of the students who suffer from this disorder have had experiences with family members who communicate aggressively. There is a spectrum from which CA students identify, ranging from low to high levels of CA. Research indicates that those living with high CA "...try to 'play the game' of participation, they do so with great anxiety and believe they do not measure up" (Matthews, 2009, p.3). Communication Apprehension is real, and it is a characteristic of students that is often overlooked. Teachers view these students as apathetic, when this research shows that they do indeed hold the same desire to learn as their non-CA counterparts. Moreover, CA may be a factor that paralyzes students from engaging in high levels of classroom participation (Matthews, 2009).

Thus far, research surrounding student characteristics and beliefs has shown that the belief that participation leads to learning, gender, confidence levels, and Communication Apprehension are some large defining factors in analyzing why students

chose to engage in classroom participation. These pieces help paint a picture of what I anticipate as I enter into the fifth grade classroom that I will be observing.

#### *Classroom Environmental Factors*

The classroom environment is another arena to consider when examining student participation. Studies have shown that classroom climates, rigor of questions posed by instructors, and self-modeling by the teacher have an effect on levels of participation. In terms of classroom climate, "Students participated in greater numbers in class discussions when rules for positive, prosocial behavior between peers were in place (and enforced)." (Matsumura & Slater, 2008, p. 310). These findings indicate the importance that lies in setting up boundaries of behavior and expectations of respect within the classroom. It is important for an environment of respect to be cultivated in order for students to shake the perceived threat of failure or judgment that may accompany classroom involvement. A positive environment that is promoted and modeled by the instructor cultivates learning, and teaches students to regard one another with respect.

Another aspect of the classroom environment that may serve to promote participation is the rigor of the questions that the teacher poses to students during classroom discussions. "The *quality* of student participation...was predicted only by the extent to which teachers urged students to explain and support their contributions and by the rigor of the questions they asked students" (Matsumura & Slater, 2008, p. 310). This study indicates the importance, on the part of the instructor, to drive students to step outside of their comfort zone and answer questions that are challenging, thus

promoting deeper levels of thinking. "This was illustrated in Ms. Jones's classroom where, in addition to expressing clear expectations for respectful behavior and modeling such behavior, she prompted students to support and explain their answers." (Matsumura and Slater, 2008, p. 310). This evidence from Matsumura and Slater's study shows clearly that modeling and creating an environment where respectful behavior is promoted combined with deep and challenging questions promotes higher levels of participation.

Further investigation into classroom environmental factors that may aid in student participation led me to examine research on self-modeling. Self-modeling is when a teacher prompts students to participate in the way that the teacher is posturing and, based on the findings represented in this study, encourages classroom management. One particular study examined whether or not a teacher who modeled hand-raising in response to prompts to her class changed their behavior and increased their likelihood to participate through the same hand raising technique. Results indicated that self-modeling was successful and promoted positive organized participation by students within the classroom environment (Hartley, Kehle, and Bray, 2002).

Important factors gleaned from the research in the arena of the classroom environment indicate that participation, and quality of participation, may be improved with a defined positive environment, rigorous questions, and self-modeling. The last area of research I focus on in this review involves peer and teacher interactions.



### *Peer and Teacher Interactions*

Interactions with peers and instructors may serve to limit or encourage a student to participate within the classroom. If a student feels threatened by his or her peers, or congruently, by his or her teacher, the student will be less likely to offer up his or her own conjectures within the classroom environment (Weaver and Jiang, 2005). “The emotion of fear suggests a withdrawal or contraction of energy and serves to depress sociability. The act of participation, thus, can be seen as signaling a student’s attachment to the class and to others within it” (Weaver and Jiang, 2005, p. 575).

Research suggests that if a student lacks attachment to the class/peers or the teacher, he or she is less likely to participate. This lack of participation due to fear can be extremely detrimental to a student’s retention of material, and may create an apathetic, intimidated, and withdrawn student who feels uncomfortable within the classroom.

It is also important to look *specifically* at the relationship between the instructor and the student. The depth and quality of the relationship between students and the instructor has been indicated in past research as a factor that affects classroom participation. Findings indicate that “...student participation involves the risk of being rejected by the group and so may generate a certain fear. Such fear might be exacerbated by virtue of the instructor’s positional power and presumed expertise and learnedness—participation runs the risk of appearing “unintelligent.”” (Weaver and Jiang, 2005, p. 575). One can assume that the last thing a student desires is to feel rejection at the hands of his or her teacher, the mentor that is supposed to (as discussed above) create an environment of respect that coaxes students to come forward with

personal ideas and contributions. If this fear of rejection is prevalent within the student, and unless the student is forced to share, the likelihood that this type of disconnected and fearful student will share is minimal.

Moreover, the way in which a teacher speaks to students within the classroom environment may affect levels of participation. Rocca (2008) found that students who perceived the teacher as verbally aggressive were less likely to participate in classroom discussions. In contrast, the students in this study felt more comfortable participating when the teacher displayed a sense of non-verbal immediacy. In these instances where students chose to participate or withhold their contributions, participation is directly correlated with student interactions and perceptions of the instructor. Importantly, this points to the necessity for teachers to consider their behavior and communicative strategies when instructing their class. If educators have the ability (as indicated by this study) to reach out to encourage participation through behavioral changes, the knowledge gleaned here should be capitalized on in order to engage students and encourage participation.

Additionally, fear of *peer* judgment may contribute to a student's lack of engagement in classroom activities. "A major reason that students may not participate in class is because of their personal fears of feeling inadequate in front of others" (Rocca, 2008, p.23). Peers have the ability to make one another feel unintelligent through many different avenues (body language, looks of disdain, snide remarks), all of which can cause a student to lose the desire to contribute to classroom discussions. Some findings indicate that "...student's fears of disapproval affected their willingness to

risk participation or adhere to the prevailing norm of passive learning. Such fears might negatively affect students' confidence and in this way indirectly influence participation as well" (Weaver and Jiang, 2005, p.576).

Also, it is common for a few students to monopolize the given discussion time, and the lack of teacher guidance in ebbing the discussion towards those who have not participated can further exhaust that lack of classroom contribution in the fearful student. "Hence, a silent majority may resent students who are perceived as "monopolizing class discussions,"..." (Weaver and Jiang, 2005, p. 576). Bitterness may arise in the minds of those who have not had the opportunity to engage in the learning, which also may perpetuate the cycle of a handful of confident and engaged students sharing while others who feel rejection and disconnection remain silent.

Findings from additional research indicate that "...peer rejection creates constraints that inhibit children's classroom participation" (Ladd, Herald-Brown, and Reiser, 2008, p.1001). The destruction of confidence levels at the hands of constant rejection perpetuates a silence within the classroom that is crippling to student achievement. The silver lining is that the "...cessation of rejection enables children to become more active and cooperative participants in classroom activities" (Ladd, Herald-Brown, and Reiser, 2008, p.1001). This study found that if the rejection is eliminated, students will be able to connect with the levels of participation that are necessary for retention and achievement within the classroom. The study indicated that the longer that chronic rejection endures in a child's life, the less likely that child is to participate in the classroom. The data represented here drives home how imperative it is as

educators (as discussed above) to help promote a safe environment that encourages equality, inclusion, and respect, which may promote participation, and lead to more connected learning.

The literature reviewed here has illustrated a picture of what affects participation levels within the classroom. First, I examined how student characteristics may play a role in participation levels. Within the bounds of student characteristics, research pointed specifically to gender differences (Weaver and Jiang, 2005; Aukrust, 2008; and She, 2001), confidence levels (Weaver and Jiang, 2005), the belief that participation leads to learning (Jahnke 2010; Jansen, 2008; Crombie, Pyke, Silverthorn, Jones, and Piccinin, 2003), and Communication Apprehension (Matthews, 2009). Secondly, the literature uncovered classroom environmental factors that could affect levels of participation including whether or not the classroom is constructed as a positive place to be (Matsumura and Slater, 2008; Hartley, Kehle, and Bray, 2002), and the rigor of the questions asked by the instructor (Matsumura and Slater, 2008). Last, the literature examined how levels of participation were affected based on interactions with teachers and peers. More specifically within those interactions, the research uncovered how perceptions of the instructor and the instructor's behavior (Weaver and Jiang, 2005; Rocca, 2008), as well as perceptions of other students and peer judgments (Weaver and Jiang, 2005; Ladd, Herald-Brown, Reiser, 2008) affect students' desires to engage in classroom participation.

It is my desire to seek to understand how all of these elements mentioned in these research findings serve to affect the fifth graders that I will be studying. As vast as

the body of the research I gathered is, I had difficulty in locating articles that examine the relationship between levels of participation and the use of technology (microphones, the activeboard, and computers). That is one element of the classroom that I sought to explore more deeply as it relates to participation, as I was informed by the instructor on the first day that I set foot in the classroom that participation levels increased after the microphone was introduced to the students. I hoped to find evidence to support that assumption through the interviews and surveys that I conducted with the students and the teacher. It is extremely important to examine participation, because if students contribute to classroom discussions, it will deepen their connection to the material and increase the depth of their learning (Rocca, 2008).

## **Research Questions**

In the wake of reviewing the literature, I am left with a few questions which are the heart of my project. Primarily, what are the factors that affect participation levels in the fifth grade classroom that I observe? Secondly, do the patterns that emerge from the classroom I study fit within what past research has defined as factors that affect participation, or do new elements that affect participation emerge within this case study?

## **Methodology**

### *Methods and Rationale*

I conducted a qualitative research study that investigated participation levels within a fifth grade classroom. Qualitative research examines a distinct group of people, within their natural environment, for a set period of time. Additionally, this research method seeks to interpret patterns and draw inferences based on observations that are recorded and interviews and surveys that are conducted within that natural environment. The qualitative research method is appropriate for my study because it allows me to have the freedom to conduct interviews and surveys which will aid in the identification of patterns and the ability to draw conclusions based on natural patterns that emerge from the collected data.

### *Sample*

I worked with fifth grade students at Baybrooke Elementary School (pseudonyms have been used to protect the identities of those involved in the study), a school located in a suburban area of the Pacific Northwest. The classroom layout varied, and was organized into “pod-like” desk arrangements; groups of 3-5 students clustered together facing one another, and often working together on activities. When student desks were not organized into pods, they were in rows of 4-5 desks facing the front of the room. The teacher in the classroom was a female in her late twenties who had been teaching at Baybrooke Elementary for six years.

I was able gain entrée into the classroom through the Masters program that I was enrolled in, which placed me in this fifth grade class for student teaching. Because I grew up in the same school district that I studied, I could relate well with the sample

population of students. Additionally, I believe that because students were aware that I was raised in the same area, I was able to easily gain rapport with them, which may have helped them feel comfortable throughout the data collection process.

### *Instrumentation*

In order to examine what affected levels of participation within this fifth grade classroom, I examined student perceptions of their participation levels by conducting a survey. This process of inquiry helped me to gain insight as to what motivated these students to engage in classroom activities. It also allowed for a place where the students were able to give voice to their ideas behind why they chose to participate or refrain from classroom activities and discussions (see Appendix B). This survey allowed students to report their own motivations or lack thereof.

Conducting interviews was another inquiry method that I used with both students and the instructor. Interviews allowed me to further tap into student motivations in participation, and also allowed me to ask follow-up questions regarding students' individual answers on the initial survey. I asked questions that probed students to self-reflect on how and why they choose to participate in classroom discussions and activities (see Appendix A). Moreover, the interview with the instructor allowed me to gain insight as to what *she* believed affected students' desires to engage in classroom discussions and activities (see Appendix A). Each interview was tape-recorded, and lasted around five to ten minutes. The interviews were then transcribed

into a word processing document in order to better visualize patterns and to analyze the data.

### *Analysis and Validity*

In order to ensure that my findings in this paper are valid, I continued to re-evaluate the data that I collected. During the course of my analysis, I identified different “sensitizing concepts” (Blumer 1969) or patterns that surfaced among the data I collected. Glaser and Straus’ (1967) principles of grounded theory suggest that researchers continue to redefine concepts, and re-categorize data emerging from observations until the point of reaching this “theoretical saturation”. I continued this analysis until I nearly reach “theoretical saturation,” a point when no new concepts seemed to emerge, and new observations clearly fit into patterns already defined in my research. If my study included a larger sample, and if it were to progress over a longer period of time, I am confident I would have had an increased ability to reach entire “theoretical saturation.”

The data findings were triangulated through examining what affected motivation by conducting surveys and then conducting interviews with the teacher and the students. These varying methods of inquiry allowed me to cross examine the concepts that emerged from the data to insure that that the recognized patterns were true across all three arenas.

My biases were founded in the fact that I have read past research which identifies certain concepts that have been found to affect participation levels, and this



research may have limited my ability to recognize other potential factors that affect participation. Initially it was my fear was that my tendency to connect with outgoing students would divert my attention to them throughout the classroom discussions, and would therefore cause the less outgoing students to shut down in interviews or on surveys. Knowing this predisposition, it was my desire to connect to *all* students throughout my time in the classroom; even those who are were not categorized as the main attention grabbers. In this concerted effort, I was be able to gauge a better understanding for what affected participation in *all* student within this fifth grade class, rather than a select few who may have monopolized class discussions and participation opportunities.

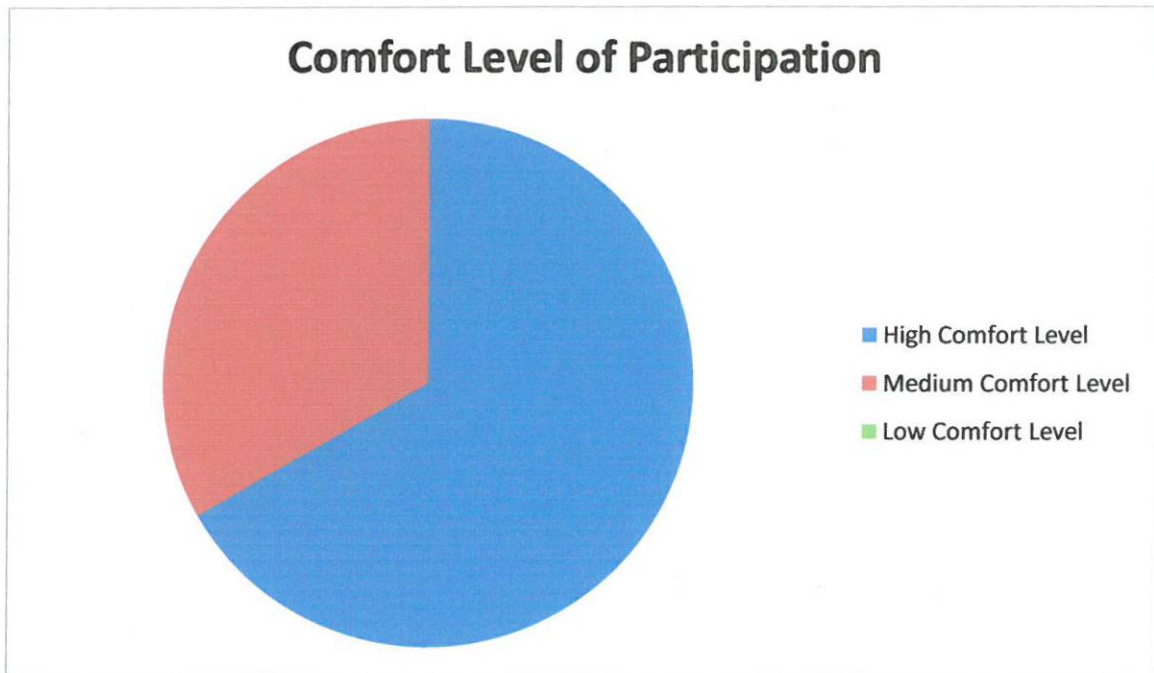
### **Data**

All of the surveys I conducted were given to students within class where they quietly responded to the questions that probed them to analyze why they do or do not choose to participate within classroom discussions and activities. Questions throughout the one page survey were analyzed based on coding that denoted student motivations and opinions on different classroom elements. Fifteen students (about half of the class) participated in the survey.

The first section of the survey asked students to define how comfortable they were with participating in classroom discussion and activities. Students answered on a scale of 1-10 (1 indicating that they weren't comfortable at all, and 10 a high level of comfort in participation). I disentangled the numbers to indicate a high comfort level in

participating (indicated by answering 7-10), a medium level of comfort in participating (indicated by answering 4-6), or a low level of comfort in participating (indicated by answering 1-3). *Figure 1* shows a pie graph of the student responses.

*Figure 1: Student Survey Section 1 Results*



The second section of the survey asked students to respond with short answers. Instead of rating or ranking their level of participation, they were asked to analyze why they participate and what makes them participate. Table 2 displays a summary of student responses to these questions. Some students chose to elaborate on the concrete (yes or no) questions, whereas others chose not to. Results in Table 2 show some yes or no responses with direct quotes elaborating on answers below the concrete responses.

Table 1: Student Survey Section 2 Responses

<p>Something that makes me most want to participate in class</p>	<p>Fun Activities- 7            Rewards- 2            When I know the material- 3            Perceived value in learning- 3            Because I can share my opinion- 1            Topic is interesting- 1            Knowing the material will help me get a job down the road- 1            I like presenting in front of the class- 1</p>
<p>What scares me about participating (if anything)</p>	<p>Not knowing the material- 5            Fear of getting made fun of or embarrassed- 6            Presenting in front of the class- 2            Rigor of questions too hard- 1</p>
<p>Do my peers encourage or discourage me from participating?</p>	<p>Encourage- 7            Discourage-3            Neutral-5</p>
<p>Does my instructor encourage or discourage me from participating?</p>	<p>Encourage- 11            Discourage- 1            Neutral- 3</p>
<p>Do I see a difference in who participates?</p>	<p>Yes-14            No-1</p> <p>“Yes, because some copy off of other peoples paper.”            “ Yes, because some people don’t even answer.”            “Sometimes. Sometimes people like me won’t want to speak up but others will burst out.”            “Yes, because other people are goofing off and some are on task.” – a couple responses            “Yes, because we’re all different.”            “Yes, smarter kids participate more because they know more than others like me.”            “Some people are more out-going and they’re not afraid they’ll get an answer wrong. Others are more shy and scared they’ll get it wrong.”</p>

Section three on the survey summed up students' responses to how much they feel that they participate and why. Students were asked to circle whether they believe they always participate, mostly participate, sometimes participate, or never participate and why they believe they participate at the level they selected. *Table 2* shows student responses to this third section of the survey and displays reasons that students gave as to why they chose to participate, and why they did not.

*Table 2: Student Survey Section 3 Responses*

I am someone who...	Always participates- 2 Mostly participates- 9 Sometimes participates- 3 Never participates-1
Why I choose to participate...	"Because I like to complete my work." "Because I don't want to let my parents down." "Because I do what the teacher asks of me." "To learn the material." "If it's a fun activity."
Why I choose to not participate...	"If the work is boring"—overwhelming response "Because I'm not paying attention"—a couple responses "Because I don't want to be made fun of or embarrassed."-a couple of responses

To look more closely at student motivations behind participation, fourteen out of the fifteen students were interviewed by the researcher. This process probed students to think more critically about what motivated them to participate, and helped to elaborate on the survey findings. Fourteen out of the fifteen students who participated in the survey were also interviewed; these students were selected because they were the students who returned the permission slip to participate in the study and interview.

Table 3: Student Interview Responses

Question	Student	Response
What makes you want to contribute to classroom discussions?	Student 1	If it's something that I know about or that I would like to learn or that I have like an opinion in or something
	Student 2	Um, if I know the answer. [I participate more in] I think math. I think that's the one I most understand.
	Student 3	Um, when I know something is right.
	Student 4	Well, some of them are really interesting...and like when they're about what we do on the weekends or what we do at home I like that.
	Student 5	Uh, I don't know...because I want to get good grades. I won't really share my answers if I don't get something or if I don't know the answers though.
	Student 6	I feel like if I know what I'm talking about then I will share it with people in class or with my teacher. If I don't know anything about the thing the teacher is talking about, or if I am confused, I will not really do it.
	Student 7	Uh, I don't know...because I want to get good grades. I won't really share my answers if I don't get something or if I don't know the answers though.
	Student 8	If I know what's going on...like I don't like it when the teacher draws my name if I'm not paying attention. But (pause) if I know what she's talking about and think that I will get the answer right, then I will most of the time answer. Yeah...
	Student 9	Nothing. The only thing I like is recess and art.
	Student 10	I think that I want to contribute mainly when I like what we're talking about or when I know something about it.
	Student 11	I think I keep to myself most of the time. I just don't really like speaking that much in front of others...it's sort of like scary sometimes.

	Student 12	Well, I like to contribute when I know what I'm talking about. It's hard for me sometime though because it seems like what I was going to say has already been said, or I feel like my answer is wrong so I don't say it.
	Student 13	I want to participate if I know what I'm talking about. Like in Social Studies when I kept reading ahead in the book, I get really excited when we talk about that because I know a lot about it from reading ahead.
	Student 14	Um, like if I like what we're talking about. If not, I won't. I like it when we are talking about something fun, or doing something fun. Like science when we got to do the stream tables, I like to contribute to discussions on that because we are getting to touch and do and play with dirt and stuff like that. It was pretty cool.
Do you feel like there are certain students who participate more than others? If so, why do you think they do?	Student 1	Yes, I do think that is because they maybe aren't as shy to talk, or they're more, you know...not shy and they like to talk and they're participating? But I guess some people like girls [are shy to talk]...I've seen not as many of them talk as guys, but they do still talk.
	Student 2	Yah, because they know more, so they feel comfortable answering the questions that the teacher asks. They can think faster. I mean I feel like it's more the smart kids participate more than the kids who don't know much. They seem to feel like they can raise their hand and they're most of the time right.
	Student 3	Sometimes, I don't know...because sometimes when they're scared that they're going to get it wrong they get embarrassed.

Student 4	Yah, I think it's the ones that like aren't really interested in what's going on or just aren't paying attention that don't participate. Yah, people—it seems like they either really want to or really don't want to. There's like people who are really up there who participate a lot and then people who just don't. It's just cause I think they either like the subject, and just get really interested and like it better than others.
Student 5	Yah, because some people they just don't get it and they're embarrassed to say they don't get it. I think it's different for different things. Cause some people actually just don't answer <i>ever</i> , they just sit there.
Student 6	Sometimes I feel like there are some students who are really confident in their answers and talk a lot more. They can be rude and sort of know-it-alls, and they make it a little hard for others to share because they talk so much.
Student 7	Yeah, there are super mean people...like some of the boys in class make really rude remarks when any of us girls makes an answer. I never want to share anymore. They are so rude and I just really don't even like being in class with them. A lot of times nothing even happens to them because I get blamed for talking when they were really being rude to me first. The teacher doesn't always see what is happening.
Student 8	I guess. I mean, I don't really know. I mean, I don't think that there are that many people who don't participate...I mean, we kinda have to with the popsicle stick thingy. But I mean, I just don't think that people who don't know the answer want to say anything. At least that's what I feel like.
Student 9	Not really.
Student 10	Um, kind of. I think that pretty much everyone participates at some point or another, but I just feel like it's a lot of time the smart kids that say



		most of the answers... I would say that I can come up with stuff pretty much a lot. I just know a lot of stuff because I like to read lots.
	Student 11	I think that those who feel like they know a whole bunch about the thing we're talking about are the ones that answer. Sometimes it's the same kid over and over, and other times someone else answers.
	Student 12	Yes, definitely. There are the popular kids who think that everyone <i>wants</i> to hear their answer to <i>everything</i> . They sometimes take up all of the conversation, and like I said, I feel like I have nothing to add.
	Student 13	Yah, there are definitely students who don't want to ever say anything. I think they may be scared they'll be wrong. I remember talking to someone who said that they were made fun of after they got the wrong answer by their teacher. I think it was a joke, but they never want to share anymore because of it.
	Student 14	No, not really. I mean some kids don't ever say anything, and there are people who do. I think maybe some just are bored or are bad at school.
How often would you say that you're excited to engage in classroom activities where you need to participate with the whole class?	Student 1	I'm usually pretty excited about doing that...not all of the time, but most of the time, almost always I'm excited about doing that. [I do participate when] ...I like the material.
	Student 2	I would say I'm pretty excited to engage in those activities. Yah...
	Student 3	Like eight out of ten times.
	Student 4	Most of the time I think...some of the things I just really don't like and sometimes I just kind of sit back. But I like contributing too.
	Student 5	I would say about 50% of the time. If it's boring. Like [I don't want to participate] if you have to read something and just write stuff down.
	Student 6	I would say maybe 4 out of 10 times I feel ok about sharing. But I just don't want to be wrong. I just don't want people to make fun of



		me. There are some kids in our class who are rude and who make fun of people who are wrong. The teacher doesn't always see it, but sometimes on the playground they will like taunt me for something I like said wrong in class.
	Student 7	Not often at <i>all</i> .
	Student 8	I like to...so I'd say maybe like 7 out of 10 times I will.
	Student 9	I never am excited. I just do the work because I have to.
	Student 10	Most of the time, like maybe 80%. Sometimes I am tired or I just don't like what we are talking about so I sort of space out. I feel like I am mostly a good talker and sharer though.
	Student 11	I'm not really excited about that. Like, I just want to chill a little and not say much, but when I know I'm going to <i>have</i> to say something, it makes me a little nervous.
	Student 12	I would say that sometimes I am excited...but sometimes I just want to disappear into my chair and I wish I could be at home or outside or something like that. (Laughs) I don't know, unless it's something I'm super interested in, I sometimes just want to keep my mouth shut.
	Student 13	Oh, I think that I am most of the time excited to do that. I mean, the popsicle sticks don't really bother me...although I know other people are bothered when the teacher gets them out.
	Student 14	Well, a lot of the time. I like to contribute.
Are there <i>things</i> in the classroom that make you want to participate more, or less?	Student 1	No, I just participate in all of them, not just certain ones. Like I like the microphone, and the white board and the activeboard, but it doesn't really matter if they're not being used.
	Student 2	Yah, I feel like when we use things like the white board, or the microphone I get excited about sharing if I know the answer. I know that everyone can hear me and will be able to hear what I have to say.

Student 3	Yah, something that I think is fun. Like if I'm interested in it, I'll want to do it more... or if I'm more hands on with something.
Student 4	Yah, like subjects...something I know about and I think they're easier than others. I like the activeboard and I like the microphone too. I like the microphone cause you can hear everywhere. Those things help me to want to participate.
Student 5	No.
Student 6	Yah, I would definitely say that games and things like the microphone make it more fun to participate. But, still...if I don't know what I'm talking about I won't share my thoughts.
Student 7	I would say that I don't want to participate, and nothing really makes that change.
Student 8	I think that I want to more when we get to see the things, like when we get to see up front what we need to do. Does that count?
Student 9	Nope, not really. I just only like to put my art up because that's the only thing I am good at. Well, I guess I want to use new materials if we get them. It's nice to have new brushes and pencils sometimes because I don't always have that.
Student 10	Technology like the active votes...those are super fun. I like to be able to vote and it's fun because you can see which way the majority of the class votes. Some people make really bad answers then though...(laughs)...but most of the time I get it right I'd say.
Student 11	It makes it a lot more fun with the hands-on type stuff. Less boring, and everyone seeming to want to participate makes it a little less scary for me.
Student 12	Yah, I think that it makes me want to participate when we use things like those mini-white boards that we write answers to and hold them up for everyone to see. I like it

		when we do that.
	Student 13	Sometimes when we use objects or games...those make me want to participate more. Like when we toss that squishy ball and spell words out...or when we played games like corn-hole.
	Student 14	Oh, I really like when we use things like the white board or the active board because I can get up and go in front of the class. I like doing that.
Are there <i>people</i> in the classroom that make you want to participate more, or less?	Student 1	Well, I guess when you see a couple people participating, you want to participate more, because you see that they're participating and it kind of makes you want to. But, it's not like a <i>big</i> influence. If she's [the instructor] kinda like not very enthusiastic or happy about it, it doesn't really make you want to participate, but if she is then it does.
	Student 2	Well, other kids sometimes make me want to participate because they are wrong and I have to say what is right...like in math. But other than that I also feel like my teacher um wants to encourage me to share my answers. She is pretty good with that.
	Student 3	Um, no, not really.
	Student 4	Yah, Ms. I. really makes it really sound exciting and everything.
	Student 5	No, not really.
	Student 6	Yah, like I said, there are sometimes people who just are mean and I don't want to participate because I don't want to deal with them making fun of me if I get it wrong.
	Student 7	Yah, the boys make me not want to.
	Student 8	I think that when my Mom comes in to volunteer I feel like I have to participate more...otherwise she will ask me later on why I

		wasn't saying anything.
	Student 9	No.
	Student 10	Not really...I am just pretty ok with sharing. It doesn't matter if anyone says anything or anything like that.
	Student 11	Not really...well I guess that some people make it harder for me to share because I am scared of what they might think of me. Like one girl was talking a lot about me behind my back, and I just never want to say anything in class because I don't want her to talk about it to other people.
	Student 12	My teacher really encourages me to participate...one time she pulled me aside and asked about why I don't talk that much when she poses questions, and I told her that I feel like I don't always know the answer. She said that it's a safe environment, and I should feel free to share out, but the thing is...I just don't want to be made fun of if what I say is wrong.
	Student 13	Um, not really. I don't really get affected by that.
	Student 14	Yah, maybe my teacher. She is pretty cool and makes me want to share most of the time.

To help triangulate the data, the teacher was also interviewed. This process helped to gauge her perception on the reasons why students chose to participate. As a valuable leader of the class, her insights have been recorded in *Table 4*.

*Table 4: Instructor Interview Responses*

Question	Response
What do you feel affects levels of participation within your classroom?	I think that if [students] feel comfortable with the material, and comfortable with others around them they are more inclined to answer questions and participate. They're less likely to put themselves out there if they know you're going

	to tell them they're wrong.
Do you feel like there is a pattern of who participates based on differences defined by the culture or background?	Um, not that I've seen... it's the more reserved kids that tend to raise their hands and participate.
Do you think that there are certain things/instruments within the classroom that encourage participation in yours students?	Yah, like using the white boards for group work and that also helps kids who aren't confident to do it [participate] when they have a partner and they can check their work with their partner to see if they're wrong if they're not sure.
Do you believe that there are students within your classroom that intimidate and deter them from participating, or on the flipside, do you see any students who encourage others to participate?	I think that if there are kids that will make fun of others when they participate, they're less likely to share out, but that's not a huge problem.

## Analysis

### *Classroom Environment*

Initially, the data indicates that many students felt a high level of comfort in participating in the classroom. *Figure 1* shows that 100% of those surveyed either indicated that they generally felt a medium or high level of comfort in classroom participation. Additionally, when examining the interview responses, many students

indicated that they felt excited to participate in classroom discussion when they knew they would be called on (8 out of 14 felt positive/excited, whereas 2 out of 14 felt neutral, and 4 felt negatively toward that scenario). With the confidence these students indicated in this baseline measurement, I analyzed what makes students feel confident or scared of classroom participation.

### *Confidence in Participation*

Students indicated in the second section of the survey that the vast majority surveyed (at least 9 out of the fifteen) mentioned in some portion of their answer that they chose to participate based on whether or not they felt knowledgeable in the material, and whether they perceived the activity to be fun or “hands-on”. Some indicated a perceived value in learning stating, “I want to learn the material,” whereas others spoke about how they desire to learn based on rewards (grades, and teacher/parent approval). Past research has also shown that student motivation to participate may often stem from rewards, “The results of assessing student participation suggested the usefulness of the token economy for encouraging classroom participation” (Nelson, 2010, p. 53).

During interviews many students discussed their levels of confidence mentioning they enjoy participating “if it’s something I know about.” This seems that the desire to speak up is one that is often based on previous knowledge and confidence in that knowledge, rather than on the idea of exploratory learning and exploring subjects despite the fact that one may be wrong. One student confident in his knowledge even

discussed his desire to correct others in their mistakes indicating that “other kids sometimes make me want to participate because they are wrong and I have to say what is right.” This attitude, however confident, may perpetuate the fear that some students mentioned when it comes to participation.

Additionally, the teacher also gave voice to the importance of comfort in the classroom and confidence in the material. She stated, “I think that if [students] feel comfortable with the material, and comfortable with others around them they are more inclined to answer questions and participate. They’re less likely to put themselves out there if they know you’re going to tell them they’re wrong.”

#### *Fear of Participation*

Conversely, when students were asked to indicate what scares them about participation, the results from both the interviews and the survey gave a variety of answers. Some students indicated that they are fearful if they feel that they will be made fun of, if they don’t know the material, if they have slight apprehension about the rigor of the questions being asked, or if they’re asked to present in front of the class.

These responses indicate mainly the underlying fear of rejection from peers and/or the instructor, and these concerns were echoed in the teacher interview. “I think that if there are kids that will make fun of others when they participate, they’re less likely to share out...” Many students voiced in both their interviews and their surveys the fear of rejection at the hands of their peers. Students answered that they “don’t want to be made fun of.” This mentality is problematic in that many students

may withhold a question that others are also pondering but that no one wants to voice because of the ridicule they may or may not face. Students therefore lose opportunities to grow in their learning or to push others to think on a deeper level because they don't want to go down the road to rejection.

### *Perceived Differences in Participation Levels*

Overwhelmingly, students indicated on the survey that they perceived there to be differences in those who participate. When asked in the interview to elaborate on who participates versus who does not, many students indicated differences based on five main factors: gender, interest in the material, popularity/giftedness, and fear of embarrassment, academic ability /knowing the material (as discussed earlier). Contrastingly, when asked if she feels like there is a pattern of who participates, the teacher responded, "Um, not that I've seen... it's the more reserved kids that tend to raise their hands and participate."

In terms of participation based on gender differences, two students indicated in their interviews that girls are quieter and boys tend to speak out, "...like some of the boys in the class make really rude remarks when any of us girls make an answer." Another male student hesitantly resounded, "But I guess some people like the girls [are shy to talk]...I've seen not as many of them talk as guys, but they do still talk." These perceived differences were also supported in other research as discussed in the literature review in Aukrust's (2008) research uncovering that boys are more likely to participate across all grade levels.



Interest levels/boredom was another factor that students indicated contributes to their participation within the classroom. Students discussed their disdain for things that seemed to be everyday and lacked excitement “Like [I don’t want to participate] if you have to read something and just write stuff down.” Another student responded on his survey that that is makes him want to participate, “when we play games.” These results point the importance of teaching to different learning styles and making sure that the curriculum and classroom is adapted to engage all learning styles.

One student indicated that popularity may play a factor in participation in that the popular kids who have groups of friends rallied around them feel more confident in blurting out or sharing in class, “There are the popular kids who think that everyone *wants* to hear their answers to *everything*.” Popularity and academic giftedness can be a sticky thing within the classroom, and may seemingly create a barrier or invisible line that many kids don’t want to cross in participation. Students seem intimidated by the popular or smart kids. One survey from this study indicated “...smarter kids participate more because they know more than others like me I believe.” This is a sad fear that holds these students back from sharing their minds within the classroom during the formative years of their lives.

#### *Peer and Teacher Interactions*

Despite the few glaring answers indicating alienation among some peers, the classroom environment seemed to be generally cohesive and students indicated that they felt encouraged by the instructor and their peers. Over half (12 out of 15)

indicated that they either felt neutral or that their peers positively encouraged them to participate, and 11 out of the 15 student surveyed indicated that the instructor encouraged them to participate,

Many students also went on to discuss the ways in which the teacher would encourage them throughout the year, “Mrs. L really wants us to share our ideas and she encourages us to learn,” and, “I think she encourages us to participate because she wants to make sure we’re listening and hear our ideas.” This perception of instructor encouragement has been found in past research to promote an environment where students feel that they are free to share out and participate (Turner, 2003).

#### *Technology and Fun Activities*

Other elements contributing to the desire to participate were also uncovered throughout this case study. Namely, technology and the introduction of fun, hands-on activities were two that seemed to weave throughout student and teacher responses. The teacher indicated hands-on fun activities as promoting participation, when coupled with cooperative learning. She stated that “...using the white boards for group work...helps kids who aren’t confident to [participate] when they have a partner and they can check their work with their partner to see if they’re wrong if they’re not sure.” Students continually mentioned prior activities such as a game called “corn-hole,” the use of white boards (also mentioned by the instructor), the active board, and the microphone. Students indicated that using these technological materials and engaging in these “fun activities” promoted their desire to participate.

## Implications

The research reviewed in this qualitative case study points to many differing factors that affect student participation levels. From comfort within the classroom environment, to engaging activities, to peer rejection, it is evident that students have a myriad of different elements facing them in every chance to participate.

Based on this research, I believe it is crucial as educators to find out how to begin to reduce and eliminate the fears that students feel without the classroom. I urge teachers to examine their own classroom environments and to have students fill out self-reflections that will help indicate what would create an environment where each individual student would be free from the fear of ridicule and rejection; where individuals would be comfortable inquiring and sharing their thoughts in lieu of those thoughts being viewed as “right or wrong.” If participation deepens student connections to the material and increases the depth of their learning, as past research indicates, it would be most beneficial to student learning and confidence levels that students learn in an environment that serves to foster that participation (Rocca, 2008).

I would suggest that teachers have regular discussions with students that are open forums for them to share about how they’re feeling when participating. An open communication policy with students and a teacher mailbox where they can pose questions and concerns may be beneficial. These steps can help create a cohesive environment where students will feel that the instructor is for them and for their success and participation.

Additionally, each student is gifted in some way. If we, as educators, can help build a student's confidence in the subject matter or artistic avenue that they excel in, then I believe that students will feel comfortable participating and possibly being part of an "expert group" within the classroom on that particular subject. These expert groups would help students to glom on to something that they enjoy and would help them to see that they can be successful in a particular subject.

Also, I would suggest finding out what motivates your students to learn. As each class has a different group persona, some may be motivated by reward, whereas others are motivated by grades, or a mixture of factors. It is our job as educators to encourage students to participate and to find out the avenue that will help them to feel motivated to do so.

Future research may want to examine motivations of participation through the quantitative research methodology so as to see through statistical evidence what serves to motivate students to participate based on the factors mentioned in this research. Additionally it would be beneficial to see if the same factors affecting participation that arose from this study would be present in children of varying age groups, so multiple case studies would be appropriate in deciphering that type of research.

## **Conclusion**

It is imperative that we, as educators, identify what motivates or affects student participation. By understanding these factors, we can increase the depth of student connections within the classroom, as well as the depth of understanding and connection

to the material. From classroom environmental factors, to student characteristics, to interactions with teachers and peers, to technological advances, there are a great number of contributing factors that can serve to motivate or deter a child from participating. By looking more closely at this classroom at Baybrooke Elementary, I was able to examine what affects *these* students and their desire to be active participants within the classroom. It is our job to take this to the next level within each classroom and show our students that we care for their success and that we value their participation.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A

#### *Student Interview Questions*

1. What makes you want to contribute to classroom discussions?
2. Do you feel like there are certain students who participate more than others? If so, why do you think they do?
3. How often would you say that you're excited to engage in classroom activities where you need to participate with the whole class?
4. Are there *things* in the classroom that make you want to participate more, or less?

5. Are there *people* in the classroom that make you want to participate more, or less?

#### *Teacher Interview Questions*

1. What do you feel affects levels of participation within your classroom?
2. Do you feel like there is a pattern of who participates based on differences defined by the culture or background?
3. Do you think that there are certain *things/instruments* within the classroom that encourage participation in yours students?
4. Do you believe that there are *students* within your classroom that intimidate and deter them from participating, or on the flipside, do you see any students who encourage others to participate?

#### **Appendix B**

##### *Survey Questions*

1. On a scale of 1-10, how comfortable would you say that you are with participating in a classroom discussion or activity?
2. What is something that makes you most want to participate in class?
3. If there is something that scares you about participating in class, or something makes you *not* want to participate in classroom discussions/activities, what would that be?
4. Do you feel as though your peers encourage, or discourage you from participating in classroom activities and discussions?



5. Do you feel as though your instructor encourages, or discourages you from participating in classroom activities and discussions?
6. Do you think there are differences in who participates in your class, and how much they participate?
7. Would you say that you are someone who, always participates, mostly participates, sometimes participates, or never participates?
8. Please elaborate on your answer to the last question. For example, if you *always* participate, why do you think that is?