Chapter One

TEACHING THE SKILLS NEEDED FOR SUCCESS WITH ACADEMIC CHOICE

At first glance, implementing Academic Choice might seem like a fairly easy process. Plan the lesson, offer the choices, then watch as the children happily complete their chosen work. But as Mr. McManus's experience illustrates, there's preparation required for successful implementation of Academic Choice.

Teach students how to make and reflect on choices

A crucial element in ensuring successful Academic Choice lessons is teaching children how to make wise choices. To make good choices, children need to have experience with making decisions for themselves, acting on their own initiative, and reflecting on the outcomes of their decisions. But students come to us with a range of backgrounds and skills, and many have little experience with independent decision making. They may be overwhelmed when given choices and refuse to decide on anything, or they may make decisions based upon impulse or random selection rather than reasoning and self-knowledge.

Some children will choose an activity because they think it will be easy to complete and in the process choose something that isn't very interesting or challenging. Others will choose an activity because children they admire have chosen it, not because they feel a personal attraction to the activity itself. As a result, students may not be able to settle down and focus on their work. They may become overly frustrated because they chose tasks that do not match their current interests; they may become sloppy with tasks they chose for their ease and speed of completion. In the process, they lose the benefits of Academic Choice.

To help children experience the positive impact of making choices, teachers need to start small. I often begin by asking children to make decisions as a group, then I move to simple individual choices. I save paired decision making until everyone is ready to work on collaborative work skills.

Teaching Students How to Make Good Choices

1. **Offer the whole group a simple either-or choice**
2. **Model a strategy for making individual choices**

Teaching the Skills Needed for Success

Offer the whole group a simple either-or choice

Making choices as a group is a big focus during the first weeks of school, but I also find that children benefit from occasional practice with making choices throughout the year. When children participate in whole group planning, those who have the most difficulty with making choices can learn from the thoughts and actions of more savvy classmates.

In the first weeks of school, I offer the group a simple, straightforward choice. For example, I might ask children whether they would prefer to line up in alphabetical order or in a boy-girl pattern for the day. I ask some volunteers to state their preference and reasons for it, and then call for a vote (with heads down and eyes covered to encourage independent thinking).

At the end of the day or the session in which they put their choice into action, I take five minutes and ask them to reflect on how their choice worked for the group. At this point, I ask open-ended questions (see Chapter Two for more information about open-ended questions) to encourage reflective thought. In the example above, if children chose to line up in a boy-girl pattern, I might ask, "How did lining up in a boy-girl pattern work for the group?"

I often ask the children to share their thoughts with a partner first, so all have a chance to talk. This also helps students formulate their thoughts and opinions before attempting to speak before the entire group. Next, I ask a few volunteers to share their thoughts with the class. I might end by asking all the students to show thumbs up or thumbs down to indicate how well they thought the choice worked.

The following day students might choose between two new patterns for lining up and follow the same procedures for planning and reflecting. Alternatively, I might pose a different type of choice for the group. There are

many possibilities and the ideas will vary according to each class and teacher's situation. The following list provides a starting point:

- Seating arrangements (desks arranged in groups of four or groups of six, for example)
- Which of two read-aloud books the teacher will read
- Which of two or three ways to form small groups (by birthdays, clothing colors, or number of siblings, for example)
- Which greeting or activity to do in Morning Meeting or circle time
- Which of two homework assignments to do at school and which to do at home
- How much time to allot for cleanup at the end of a day or a lesson (three minutes, five minutes, or seven minutes, for example)

Model a strategy for making individual choices

I also help children learn to make good choices by offering them simple, fail-proof choices to make individually. For example, students might choose one of two math worksheets to complete. Since both worksheets meet my goal of practicing computation, students can't make a bad choice. Although some children will think carefully about this decision, not all children have the skills for reflective

decision making. So, when I first offer such choices, I use a think-aloud strategy to model the decision-making process for the whole class.

"Hmmm, which one should I pick?" I might say with a wrinkled brow. "These two worksheets are a little different. With one, you have to do twenty problems and when you get the answers, they give you clues so that you can decode the secret message. That's kind of fun. With this other worksheet, you only do eighteen problems and the answers tell you what color to put in each shape so that it makes a picture. The first sheet has more problems, but I really like secret codes. I think I'll do the first sheet." I might also ask one or two of the children to volunteer a reason that someone might choose to do the worksheet that involves coloring.

Teaching the Skills Needed for Success

When I present the options another day, I might simply ask a few students for their thoughts about the advantages of each option. At the end of the session, children reflect on whether they are satisfied with the decision they made and why they feel that way. This gives them experience in critical thinking; over time more and more students will be able to think independently and critically about the choices they make.

Here are some more ideas for simple choices that students can make as individuals:

- Which one of two mathematics problems will you solve? (Later, the choice could be more complex—which five of eight mathematics problems will you solve?)
- Choose a pencil, pen, or marker to copy your spelling words.
- Work at an assigned desk, on the meeting rug, or at the group table in the classroom.
- Choose among three characters in a story about which to answer questions.
- Choose whether to practice vocabulary words by copying them along with definitions or by completing a ready-made worksheet.

When students are ready, I slowly increase the complexity and number of options. For example, I might begin with a choice between two worksheets to practice addition or multiplication facts and then expand to a choice between using a worksheet, using flashcards, or reciting to a partner.

You can offer simple choices whenever you want to introduce a little variation in what children are doing or how they are doing it. When you regularly offer simple choices, you help children build a bank of experiences and

develop their choice-making skills. With practice, students become better and better able to make good decisions about more complex options.

Teach basic routines to support independent work

In addition to making good choices, students need to know how to work independently. For students to do this, they need certain routines in place.

Routines that support Academic Choice include making the transition from meetings to independent work, gathering and returning supplies, getting help when needed, cleaning up at the end of a session, and moving chairs or tables to create work and meeting spaces.

Following is a discussion of how I might teach children routines for transitioning from the meeting area to working on independent tasks—you can use the same process to teach other routines.

Teaching a Routine

1. **Choose a "real-life" work activity but not an Academic Choice activity.**
2. **Model the routine.**
3. **Ask children what they observed.**
4. **Have several children model the routine followed by a discussion of observations.**
5. **Have everyone practice the routine while you observe and coach.**
6. **If needed, interrupt the work and review the procedures again.**
7. **Continue to pay attention to the routine during the next few independent work sessions.**

Choose a "real-life" work activity but not an Academic Choice activity

It is often helpful to put modeling in a "real-life" context. To do this, I use teacher assigned independent work, which I keep simple and brief. I make sure

Teaching the Skills Needed for Success

that the tasks are things that children can begin without my help because I am going to be busy observing and coaching their behavior. I do not use Academic Choice work because students need to know these routines before they engage in Academic Choice.

In this example, I've chosen a time when children will be working on an independent writing assignment where they will use the word wall or their student spelling dictionaries to help them with spelling.

Model the routine

Before they begin writing, I gather the children in a group on the meeting rug. I give them instructions for their writing task and then say, "We're going to talk about how to leave this space and get started with writing. Let's pretend I'm a student. I'm going to move from meeting time to writing time in a way that will help me do my best work. Watch me and see what you notice."

I first put my hand to my head to demonstrate thinking and look around the room. I carefully pick up a few pieces of writing paper from the storage bin and then walk over to the students' individual storage cubbies to get a spelling dictionary. (I have asked permission from a student to take a dictionary from her cubby.) I put the paper and student dictionary down at my desk, then pick up a pencil and take it to the pencil sharpener. After sharpening the pencil (pencil sharpening has been modeled and practiced earlier), I return to my desk and begin to write.

Ask children what they observed

"What did I do to get started on my writing?" I ask the group.

They respond with observations such as, "You sharpened your pencil before you sat down." "You thought about it before you got started." "You remembered to get the spelling dictionary."

"And how did I move about the room?" I ask.

"You were calm. You didn't run or anything," they respond. "You didn't stop and talk to anybody. You just got your things and sat down and started to work."

Have several children model the routine followed by a discussion of observations

I then ask for volunteers who want to demonstrate how to go from the meeting time to writing time. "Show us a helpful way to get started," I tell the first volunteer. We all watch silently as the child performs the same actions I did. He makes a point of pulling his chair out from the desk very quietly. We applaud when he is done, then I ask the children to name what he did that would help him do his best work.

Next, I ask three children to demonstrate the procedure at the same time. When the class has named what they did well, I issue a challenge. "Now you will *all* practice going from meeting time to writing time. What might be more challenging about all of us doing it at the same time?"

"It's harder not to bump into people."

"There might be a line at the pencil sharpener."

"It will be harder not to get distracted and talk to your friends."

Have everyone practice the routine while you observe and coach

I take a few suggestions from the group about how they could handle the challenges, then say, "When I give the signal, everyone will practice going from meeting time to writing time. I will watch and see how you do. Okay, time to get started on writing."

While the children practice making this transition, I stand back and observe, attempting to see what is going on in every part of the room. I want to reinforce positive behavior, and I choose my language carefully (see box on the next page):

"I see lots of people walking really calmly."

"I notice that some of you caught yourselves forgetting to get spelling dictionaries or move your chairs gently, then you remembered and took care of it."

"That was helpful, Angelo, when you picked up the pencil off the floor."

When I see children start to go off course, I assume they know the right thing to do and so I offer reminders:

"What do you need to be doing right now, Mirasia?"

"Show me a safe way to walk around the room, Andrew."

When a gentle reminder isn't enough, I redirect children toward the correct behavior:

"Kevin, go to your seat now."

"Kayla, get your paper and sit."

Teaching the Skills Needed for Success

Using Teacher Language to Encourage and Empower Children

The words a teacher uses and the way a teacher speaks have a powerful effect on children's social and academic learning. Through careful use of language, a teacher can encourage and empower children to live by classroom rules, to treat each other kindly, and to do their best learning.

At its best, teacher language:

- Is clear, simple, and direct
- Is specific and descriptive rather than general and evaluative
- Gives a clear indication of what the teacher expects from the child
- Shows faith that children can live by the rules
- Is genuine and respectful

Many teachers find it useful to categorize teacher language according to three purposes:

1. Language that reinforces children's positive efforts *(Marisa, I noticed you put the caps back on the markers after you used them. That will help them last longer.)*
2. Language that reminds children of the classroom rules and expectations *(Show me how you sit in the meeting circle.)*
3. Language that redirects children who begin to go off track *(Stephan, sit at your own table.)*

If needed, interrupt the work and review the procedures again

If I find myself giving lots of reminders and redirections, I'll stop midstream, even though this is happening during a writing lesson. Establishing smooth routines for transitions needs to be our focus. I give a pre-established (and practiced) signal to get students' immediate attention and ask them to return to the meeting area.

I might ask for their observations and share mine. I will definitely review my expectations for their behavior and have them try again. If a calm transition seems beyond their capabilities for now, we will go back to a more familiar way of working and try the transition again another day, perhaps with an opportunity to practice in small groups first.

Continue to pay attention to the routine during the next few independent work sessions

Even if the class is successful at this first attempt at a whole group transition, I may want to have them practice it over the next few days while I coach. Whenever it's time for a transition, I remind the children that they are practicing, and I make a point of observing and coaching them. When transitions are going smoothly, I can teach a new routine, such as how to clean up, or how to get help on independent work. I also find it helpful to have the children reflect on how they are doing with transitions and what they could do to make them go even better.

Teach students how to do a variety of academic activities

Academic Choice can be one of the most peaceful and satisfying times of the day for both teachers and students. However, if Sara wants to make a crossword puzzle but isn't sure how to begin, Gerry and Ari need help thinking up ideas for their story, Kaysuan and Robert need advice on making a spelling dictionary, and their teacher is trying to be in three places at once, Academic Choice will be a lesson in frustration for everyone.

In addition to teaching routines, you'll want to be sure students have enough facility with each activity that you offer so that they can proceed with minimal supervision. Even though you may know that in past years students have made posters, written reports, made graphs, or engaged in any number of activities, you'll still want to allow time for review and practice.

Activities to teach or review will vary depending on the age of the students but might include:

- Making posters
- Writing reports
- Making graphs and diagrams
- Building dioramas
- Making mobiles
- Using graphic organizers to plan projects
- Writing poems and song lyrics
- Planning and acting out skits
- Drawing maps

Teaching the Skills Needed for Success

Following are a few ways you can help children learn how to do academic activities.

Teaching Students How to Do a Range of Academic Activities

- **Use already-established lessons**
- **Teach, model, and practice skills as needed**
- **Include activities that students do with special area teachers**

Use already-established lessons to teach activities

Teaching or reviewing academic activities doesn't need to be a time-consuming add-on. You can use non-Academic Choice lessons to teach students skills they will need later in Academic Choice. During the early weeks of the school year, a first grade teacher taught her students how to keep track of data using tally marks, Venn diagrams, and pictographs. They practiced using these three methods to organize data in math lessons. Later, when the children were completing a science unit on sinking and floating, the teacher was able to offer the group a choice among these methods to record what items sank, floated, or both. The children were able to make informed choices and complete the tasks with independence because they had experience with each method.

A fourth grade teacher taught her students how to make acrostic poems during the first week of school as a language arts lesson and as a way to get to know each other better. They wrote their first name vertically and then wrote a phrase about themselves beginning with each of the letters. Later she taught other formats for writing poems such as diamantes and haiku. Once the children were familiar with these formats, she let them choose which format to use to write about the important traits of a book character. Before the children made their choices, she asked them what they remembered about each format and for a few examples of ways they might use each format to describe a character. Because they made their choices based on prior experiences with the different formats, most of the children were able to settle right into their work with a clear plan in mind. The teacher was able to have some wonderful conversations with students about using different forms of poetry to write about the characters.

Teach, model, and practice skills as needed

Teacher modeling followed by student practice while their teacher observes and coaches is a very effective strategy for teaching certain academic skills. For example, some Academic Choice lessons will ask children to do research and find out new information. In addition to using a dictionary, encyclopedia, and the Internet as research tools, children might want to conduct simple face-to-face or telephone interviews to gather information. Before sending children off to do interviews, I spend time teaching, modeling, and practicing interviewing techniques. For example, to teach students how to do phone interviews, we might spend time talking about how to formulate good questions, how to ask questions

politely, and how to take notes on the answers. They write a script and practice it with each other and with me before making the actual phone call.

Include activities that students do with special area teachers

Activity options might also include many activities that students learn to do with other teachers. A group that learned to sculpt with clay in art class was then able to do this activity as one of the options for creating a model animal habitat in science. Children who practiced making up new lyrics to simple and familiar songs in music class were able to use this strategy as an option for retelling a story from the days of the Pilgrims as part of an Academic Choice for a history lesson.

Teaching the Skills Needed for Success

Teach students how to work collaboratively

Finally, children will need to learn good collaborative work skills. I usually wait until children are comfortable with making group and individual choices and are able to enact those choices independently before I work on collaborative skills. When I'm ready to teach collaborative work skills, I use a two-step process. First, I teach children how to make decisions together with one other student. Then the partners work together to put their choice into action.

Teaching Collaborative Work Skills

- **Use paired decision making as a starting point**
- **Teach, model, and practice how to work together**

Use paired decision making as a starting point

To begin the process, I introduce a simple choice and assign each child to a partner. It is very important that children do not select their own partners while they are learning to work together, though there may well be times later in the year, when they are more experienced and Academic Choice lessons are running smoothly, when choosing partners or groups with whom to work could be an option.

Teacher and student model making a choice

To introduce the task and model the skills of collaboration, I enlist the help of one of the students and briefly plan what we might say before I begin the lesson.

Then, together we model making the choice as a pair in front of the class.

Here's how it might go:

The task is to choose among three topics (favorite colors, number of siblings, or favorite snacks of classmates) for gathering data and making bar graphs. I begin by stating my preference. "Favorite colors looks easiest," I say.

My accomplice models how to disagree. "Maybe," the student replies, "but I think it would be more interesting to see how many brothers and sisters people have. And that shouldn't be any harder than colors."

"No, I guess not," I reply, "but I had an idea about a way we could make the bar graph. We could use the colors to make the bars. The graph would look like a rainbow!"

"Oh, yeah, I like that idea. But maybe we could think of a good idea for a brothers' and sisters' graph, too."

"Hmmm." I furrow my brow. "Well, yeah, I guess the bars that show only brothers could be blue and only sisters could be pink and both brothers and sisters could be purple. Oooh! I like that! Blue, pink, and purple. Do you want to do that? Brothers and sisters and make the graph like that?" I ask.

"Okay. Then you get to have a graph you like and I get to do the topic I wanted."

Students discuss what they observed

When we finish this scene, I ask the class what they noticed. The students comment that we disagreed and that we both stated the reasons for our choices.

"Yes," I say, "we had to know what each other was thinking before we could decide together."

They also note that we didn't argue and that we were able to combine our ideas.

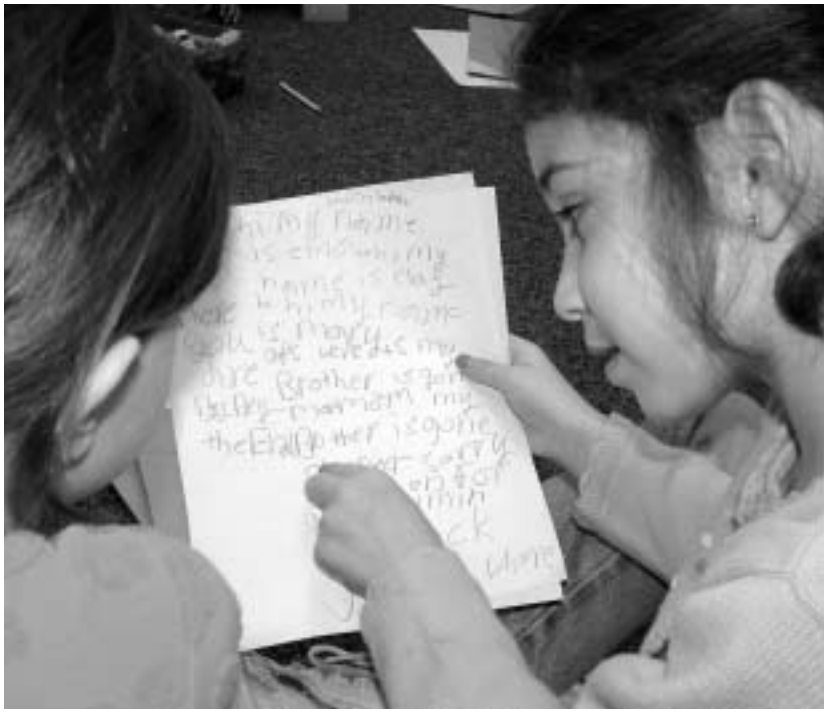
"I might have been tempted to just insist on doing the favorite colors because I really liked my idea," I say. "How might my partner feel if I did that?"

"Mad, because you didn't care what he wanted to do."

"Probably! But instead we found a way to do the part I liked and the part about brothers and sisters that my partner liked. We were able to decide on our own without anyone's help."

Students practice paired decision making

At this point, I announce the list of partners and send children off to discuss their ideas and come to a decision about which of the three topics they will use for the assignment. I stand back at first to see how the group is doing and then begin to circulate so I can observe and coach individual pairs.



Teaching the Skills Needed for Success

My goal with a modeling procedure such as this is to show students a way to reach agreement despite beginning with different choices. Sharing the reasons behind our choices and then finding compromise is one strategy for doing this. Another strategy could be agreeing to one person's choice with the stipulation that the other person will get his or her way another time.

Students are often able to propose other possibilities, especially after they have a little experience with working as partners. It is not necessary to model all the possibilities—students get the idea and generalize when they see one possibility modeled clearly.

Teach, model, and practice how to work together

Once students have made and reported their decisions, my accomplice and I take a few minutes to model a way to work together collaboratively. Here's what we might say in the data-gathering example:

"Let's see. There are twenty-six kids in the class including us. So we can each ask twelve kids," I propose to my partner.

"Do we ask each other how many brothers and sisters we have, or just write it down in our own notes?"

"Let's ask each other. That's more fun!" I say. "But how will I know who you've already asked? We have to be sure we get everybody once."

"Let's write down everyone's names. Then we'll divide the list in half. You ask your half and I'll ask my half."

"Good idea!" I say.

Students discuss their observations, share ideas, and reflect on the process

I ask the class what they noticed. After they report their observations, I might ask what other ideas they have for sharing the work fairly and getting it done with accuracy, or I might simply send them off to work, then observe and coach them.

Once they've completed the assignment, I'll hold a brief reflection meeting where I ask them to think about what went well and what they could do better.

Once children are able to work productively in pairs, I can use the same procedures to teach them to work collaboratively in small groups, if future lessons will call for that. Collaborating with several people at once is more difficult than collaborating with just one, as many of us know from experience! The skills gained from first working in pairs will carry over to group work, but children will also need some additional modeling and practice.

The next step

When children have learned these basic skills—making decisions, following basic routines, independently doing a variety of academic activities, and collaborating productively—they are well on their way to being able to engage in simple Academic Choice experiences. An important next step is learning how to use a variety of classroom materials independently and creatively. To help them do this, teachers can use a process called Guided Discovery, which I present in depth in the next chapter.