

# Introduction

## ACADEMIC CHOICE: A POWERFUL TOOL



strategy for structuring many kinds of lessons and activities, Academic Choice is a powerful tool for increasing students' motivation and academic skills as well as for building community in the classroom. Over the past twenty years, I have observed hundreds of Academic Choice lessons in classrooms around the country. Some of these Academic Choice lessons were simple and brief (e.g., choose one of three teacher-defined ways to practice your spelling words); others were more complex and extended over several days (e.g., choose an insect to study, learn ten facts about it, and choose how to show what you've learned to the rest of the class). But time after time, in both simple lessons and complex, I've seen students working independently, with excitement and curiosity, eager to learn and to share their learning with others.

Here are a couple of quick glimpses of Academic Choice in action:

### **A first grade class studies oil slicks**

First grade teacher Lisa Pion used Academic Choice to structure a study of oil slicks. Children had dipped feathers, fur, and tiles (to simulate a turtle's shell) in cups of cooking oil to find out how greasy the animals would get in an oil slick. Lisa then posed a challenge: How can you get the oil off the "animals"? The children could choose ways to solve this problem. "Some tried to wash the feathers and things with soap; some tried to wipe it off with napkins. Some even tried to blow or suck it off with straws!" Lisa said.

After the children completed these experiments, Lisa offered them several ways that they could report on their results to the group. The children chose from

a list that included telling about what they did, writing a narrative, drawing, creating plays, writing songs, making up games, and writing poems.

Throughout the afternoon, the children stayed focused and did high-quality work. And they helped each other. “A couple of children who have a hard time with reading and writing asked other kids ‘Will you help me write?’ They were so invested in their work that they chose to take risks to do things that were hard for them,” Lisa said.

### **A fourth grade class finishes a unit on rocks and minerals**

At the end of a unit on rocks and minerals, fourth grade teacher Sue Majka asked students to choose six major concepts they had learned and then choose among several different ways of demonstrating their understanding of these concepts. Students were excited about the possibilities. In fact, they were so engaged in the project that many of them asked if it was OK to show concepts that they had learned outside of school. “I was thrilled!” Sue said. “They’d been going home at night and finding out more information about rocks and minerals simply because they were interested, not because I made an assignment.”

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The positive impact of providing choices

These two teachers, like many teachers I’ve talked with, recognize the value of offering choices to students. To help understand why choice provision has such a positive impact on learning, I turned to research. I found thirty-two studies that looked at the outcome of choice provision in grades K-12 (see Appendix E for more detailed information about these studies). Most of this research demonstrated that when students have choices in their learning, they become highly engaged and productive. They are excited about learning and sharing their knowledge. They are likely to think more deeply and creatively, work with more persistence, and willingly use a range of academic skills and strategies. In addition, educational researchers—and many teachers—report that students get along better with each other, resolve conflicts more independently, and actually reduce the number of problem behaviors in the classroom when they have regular opportunities to make choices in their learning.

Academic Choice in the *Responsive Classroom*® approach

Teachers have always incorporated many kinds of choices into daily lessons: Choose six of the following ten questions to answer. Choose a mammal to study

in depth. Choose a partner to work with or a place to work. Decide whether to work on an assignment during quiet time at school or later at home.

These are all valuable choices but they are not all Academic Choice as we define it. Choices about whether to work alone or with a partner, where to work, and when to work can enhance learning and help children practice making good choices, but they are not Academic Choice.

Academic Choice in the *Responsive Classroom* approach is limited to two kinds of choices that students can make—what to learn (content) and/or how to learn (process). In addition, every Academic Choice lesson always has three phases: planning, working, and reflecting. During planning, children decide what they are going to do and sometimes plan how they'll do it. During the working phase, they complete their chosen task. And during the reflecting phase, they reflect on the work they've done and the learning that has occurred.

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Why is Academic Choice so powerful?

When teachers use Academic Choice to structure lessons, children become purposeful, competent learners who connect to each other in positive ways. Thinking back to her first experiences with Academic Choice, Sue Majka said, "I loved looking out and seeing all these clusters of kids so busy and focused on their work, so happy with what they were doing."

Reasons why Academic Choice has these results include:

- Academic Choice supports children's intrinsic motivation to learn.
- Academic Choice gives students opportunities to see each other's good ideas and learn from each other.
- Academic Choice addresses a range of skill levels, strengths, and interests.
- The three phases of Academic Choice maximize children's learning.

### **Academic Choice supports children's intrinsic motivation to learn**

Students in Sue Majka's fourth grade class were studying long division. To help them practice, Sue gave them choices of different kinds of games to create. One student got really engaged in making a board game, similar to Chutes and Ladders. "But he had never learned how to divide," Sue says, "and it had lots of division problems on it that players needed to solve in order to move ahead. When I asked him how he would know if someone got the right answer to a



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problem, he realized he needed to learn how to divide. He was able to focus and learn how to divide in one day!”

Sue and the long-division wary student learned firsthand about a positive impact of Academic Choice. When children have choices about how and/or what they learn, their intrinsic desire to learn increases.

To understand this, I turned to self-determination theory. According to self-determination theory, we all have an innate need to feel competent, to belong, and to have some degree of freedom or autonomy, and meeting these needs motivates much of our behavior. When these needs are met, we are free to pursue constructive learning experiences. By contrast, when we feel that we don't have any control or input into our experiences and environments, when we feel incompetent or isolated, we tend to become disengaged, cynical, and alienated. An overemphasis on external direction and on motivators such as rewards and punishments can encourage these negative feelings. (Deci and Ryan 1985)

In the example above, Academic Choice allowed the reluctant student to meet his innate need for competence, freedom, and belonging. Because he

could choose how to practice the math skill, he had a sense of control over his learning. His desire to create a useful game motivated him to learn a difficult skill. And designing a game that other students could enjoy promoted a sense of belonging and allowed other students to value his contributions.

**Academic Choice gives students opportunities to appreciate each other's good ideas and learn from each other**

*Joe, a student who has difficulty with reading, makes an insightful comment about a story that the teacher read to the class.*

*Marika's approach to learning the multiplication tables inspires other students to try a new strategy.*

*Shy Enrique delights his classmates with the song he wrote to depict the main character in the novel Bud, Not Buddy.*

Academic Choice gives children many opportunities to learn from one another, whether it's a new fact about electricity or a new strategy for solving a math problem. For example, during the working phase, students might consult

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with each other informally about their work, and during the reflecting phase, children often have an opportunity to display their work and talk about how they achieved their final result.

Academic Choice also provides ways for children to discover shared interests. In the process, they become more collaborative and develop friendly relationships with more classmates. And, although Academic Choice is not a magic bullet, it can help children whose behavior sometimes creates problems to become more cooperative and invested in school.

First grade teacher Lisa Pion sums up the positive impact of Academic Choice on social learning when she says, “During Academic Choice, the kids get to see each other in whole new ways. They discover each other’s hidden talents and gain new respect for each other.”

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### **Academic Choice addresses a range of skill levels, strengths, and interests**

During science period in a first grade classroom, students had been examining the differences between objects that float and objects that sink. To demonstrate what they had learned, they chose from a list of six options:

- Create a Venn diagram or pictograph.
- Give a written or oral summary.
- Make a picture book or comic strip.
- Write a song.
- Create a model.
- Perform an experiment.

Each of these choices draws on different strengths and abilities. When students can work from their areas of strength and personal interest, they are more likely to feel invested in their work and to draw personal meaning from it than when they are doing teacher assigned work. Teachers recognize this benefit of providing choices. A study I did in 2003 (Denton 2003) showed that many teachers value Academic Choice because it allows them to differentiate instruction to meet a wider range of their students’ needs.

In addition, educational thinkers are coming to believe that multiple intelligences and learning styles are dynamic rather than static traits. (Gutierrez and Rogoff 2003; Klein 2003) The approach that works best for any individual will

change depending on the content and the context of the learning. Recent research also indicates that people might use several learning styles in a given task. (Klein 2003) Academic Choice allows teachers to observe students' preferred learning styles and interests over time and to tailor lessons to fit shifts in interests and aptitudes and continue meeting a wide range of learning styles and needs.

### **The three phases of Academic Choice (planning, working, reflecting) maximize children's learning**

Much of the power of Academic Choice resides in this cycle of planning, working, and reflecting, which reflects a natural cycle of learning. Early twentieth century theorists Jean Piaget (Piaget 1923/1959) and John Dewey (Dewey 1938/1963) said that in order to learn most effectively, children must initiate activities based on self-generated goals, actively interact with concrete materials, explore, try out ideas, solve problems, and then make sense of their experiences through reflective thought. As children engage in this cycle of learning, their knowledge base gradually becomes broader and more sophisticated.

Lately, research on the human brain has added more evidence that the planning, working, and reflecting cycle provides an optimal sequence for learning. According to brain researchers, we learn most when we attach a sense of personal relevance to a learning task. To do this, we need to have "compelling goals" (Jensen 1998, 67), active interactions that allow for mistakes and self-corrections, and regular opportunities to disengage from activity and reflect upon what we have done.

To see how these theories apply to Academic Choice, let's take a look at a simple Academic Choice lesson designed to help children practice math computation skills (lesson inspired by first grade teacher Leah Carson). In a first grade class, the teacher wants children to practice subtracting from ten. She gives students a list of ten problems.

- **Planning:** They can choose which eight of the ten problems to solve, and they can choose one activity from a list of five to help them solve the problems. Although the teacher defines the overall goal, students can initiate a specific path to that goal based on their own sense of what's the right level of challenge.
- **Working:** The five options include an activity called Under the Cup in which students use plastic bears as counters; a game called Spinners in

which students spin a dial twice and subtract the smaller number spun from the larger number spun; a computer game called Number Maze; an activity called Stickers in which students solve the problems, then use stickers to illustrate the problem and the answer; and an activity called Bead Bars in which students use bead bars to calculate differences. In each choice, students need to figure out a strategy, test out the strategy, and then make adjustments based on the results.

- **Reflecting:** At the end of the working period, students will get a chance to think back on what they did and answer a focusing question such as “How did you solve the problems and why did you choose this approach?” This allows them to make sense out of their concrete experiences.

At the end of the lesson, children will not only have gained practice in subtracting, they will also have learned thinking skills and strategies that will help them get the most out of their learning.

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Learning to use Academic Choice

At this point, I can imagine teachers saying, “Academic Choice is an intriguing strategy but how can I find time to learn about it and implement it?” In this book, I guide teachers step-by-step through the process of introducing Academic Choice into their teaching. In Part One, teachers will learn about the steps they can take to build a strong foundation for Academic Choice. In Part Two, teachers will follow a teacher through each phase of an Academic Choice lesson. And in Part Three, teachers will learn the details of planning Academic Choice lessons. Throughout the book, I include examples of Academic Choice in action as well as specific lesson plan ideas and examples of both teacher and student planning and assessment formats.

I encourage you to start slowly. Read a section of the book, try out a new idea or two, then read some more. Gradually, build to the point where you offer one or two Academic Choice lessons a week. Soon you and the students will experience firsthand the many benefits of Academic Choice—and you might find you incorporate this strategy on a daily basis.

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