“Wait...We Actually Have a Choice?”

A Look Into Student Choice

By: Chrissy Frantz and Amanda Miller
Sixth Grade
Park Forest Middle School
State College, Pennsylvania
# Table of Contents

**Background Information**

Description of the teaching context  
page 3

**Wonderings and Questions**

Main Wondering  
page 6

Sub - questions  
page 6

**Data Collection and Data Analysis**

Clear description of data collection  
page 7

Before  
page 7

During  
page 8

After  
page 9

**Explanations of Findings: Claims and Evidence**  
page 11

**Reflections and Implications for the Future**  
page 18
Background Information

Description of the teaching context

Throughout the 2010-2011 school year Chrissy and Amanda participated in the Professional Development School through the partnership between Pennsylvania State University and the State College Area School District. We are each in a self-contained sixth grade classroom at Park Forest Middle School. Chrissy’s classroom, room 217, is made up of fourteen girls and eleven boys, where there are three autistic students and two students with ADHD. Amanda’s classroom, room 216, is made up of ten girls and fourteen boys, where there are four learning support students. Majority of our students come from middle to upper class families. On the other hand, we have some students who come from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

In sixth grade, all students stay in a contained homeroom for reading, writing, social studies, and science. At the middle school level students are not pulled out for learning support. However, differentiation is incorporated into all lessons. In the end, each child will be taught the same lessons and each child will be exposed to the same experiences.

In room 217, the students have a wide range of abilities in all core subject areas. In the area of reading, most students are on grade level, with a few struggling readers. There are three or four students who would be considered above grade level in reading, as well as in writing. Even though most students are at grade level in writing, there are around five students who struggle with the mechanics of writing. When it comes to social studies and science, all students are given the same expectations. Differentiation
is used in these subject areas to accommodate the students who need extra support in completing the tasks in social studies and science.

The students of room 217 interact well with each other. The students in this class consistently socialize with the same students. There are a few pairs of students that always work together and choose the same type of projects. The students in this class are unique because they are more willing, than a typical group of students, to work with students outside their normal social group. Majority of the students are willing to stand up in front of each other and speak, however, there are several who are extremely uncomfortable doing so. The students who are timid when talking in front of the class are timid because they are perfectionists and are afraid to make mistakes.

Students in room 216 enjoy the company of each other. This classroom is supportive of one another and accepts the differences of each individual. The students in room 216 interact well, which encourages the learning atmosphere. There are twenty students who can fluently read and write in the class and four students who go to extra reading and writing help outside of their homeroom class. These classes provide the atmosphere and support of a lower student to teacher ratio, in order to serve the students better.

In terms of social studies and science, the students all have the same expectations. We keep all the students at the same level and hold high expectations for each individual child. Some students need differentiated instruction, where they may only be instructed to do half a page or on the contrary, they may be expected to write more about each topic in a paper.
For our inquiry, we each focused on five students from our homeroom in order to collect data. We each chose a student who is considered a high achiever in all academic areas, Joey and Tom. Lucy and Sarah are students who perform at an average academic level. Students who are on a lower achieving level are Norman and Sally. Then we chose two other types of students: one who prefers structure in academics, Penny and Jenna, and one that does not require structure, Bella and Joel. 

*(For full inquiry brief, see Appendix A)*
Wonderings and Questions

Main Wondering:
Our inquiry focuses on providing choices to foster the highest performance and engagement of our students. Our goal was to find how students accepted choices within the curriculum.

How does giving student choices through projects and discussions influence student performance?

Sub-Wonderings:

- How will the student knowing their learning style influence their choices when completing work?
- How does knowing students learning style influence instruction?
- How does giving students choice effect differentiation in the classroom?
- When students are given a choice to use technology or the paper pencil method to complete projects, which would they rather choose?
- How does giving student choice through various discussion formats influence student participation? (chat rooms, face to face)
Data Collection and Data Analysis

Clear Description of Data Collection

Throughout the course of our inquiry, we collected an assortment of data to assist us in planning, analyzing, and reflecting upon the advantages and disadvantages in implementing choices into the sixth grade curriculum. We collected data before, during, and after the implementation of providing choices for discussions/projects. Prior to collecting our data, we considered all of our options and then we carefully chose what methods of collection would benefit our inquiry the most. Through our inquiry, we anticipated two outcomes: (1) what happens when students are given a choice in how a project or a discussion is carried out; and (2) will students make better academic choices on projects/discussions when they are aware of their learning style.

Before

Prior to implementing choices into our classrooms, we conducted two surveys with our students: a pre-survey on their thoughts about technology and projects within the classroom and a learning style survey. In the pre-survey we asked for the students’ names in order to document the results. We then provided a list of all projects that were completed since the beginning of the school year and asked for them to pick which two they enjoyed the most. Our next question asked which type of discussion they preferred and why: face to face or electronic discussion. We asked how they learn best and gave them the following options: by seeing, by doing, or by hearing. On a scale from one to five, with five being the highest, the students rated their level of comfort with technology. Finally, our last question posed how does knowing your learning style influence choices when it comes to school work. Our purpose for conducting this survey was to gather
information on our students’ thoughts and preferences about choices and technology. 

(For pre-survey, See Appendix B)

After conducting the pre-survey, we gave our students another survey to determine their individual learning styles. The survey included a series of twelve unfinished statements regarding various scenarios where the students had to complete the statement with one of the three options provided. For example: I prefer teachers to...(a) use the whiteboard or the screen, (b) talk with a lot of expression, (c) assign an activity. After the students completed this survey, we were then able to determine if their learning style was visual, auditory, or kinesthetic. An email was sent out to each student that stated their learning style and explained some suggestions that could be helpful for various projects/activities. (For learning style survey, See Appendix C)

During

After taking a look at the results from the pre-survey and our students’ learning styles, we were able to determine important trends in their thinking. We found from the pre-survey results that students enjoyed projects that included some degree of choice for example: Peace and War paragraph and watercolor, and the Me Bags. From this survey, we noticed that majority of our students think that they learn by seeing or by doing. Finally, the students in our classrooms state that they are highly comfortable with the amount of technology used in the classroom. (For pre-survey results, See Appendix D)

We were able to continue building our inquiry based on the pre-survey results. We knew the students enjoyed being given choices so we began to incorporate more
choices into assignments/discussions. When a discussion was assigned, students had a choice to either carry out the discussion on a forum, a Google Doc chat, face to face, or using pencil and paper. All forms were proctored by a teacher.

Majority of the students in both room 217 and 216 are considered visual learners. Only a few students are either kinesthetic or auditory. A handful of our students have multiple learning styles. Combining both of our rooms a total of three students learn best through visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. We gave a presentation to our class explaining how they can use their learning style to help them choose a project format that best suits their individual work ethic. (For Learning Style Survey Results, See Appendix E)

While implementing new choices into the curriculum, we collected several different kinds of data. During our collection process, we took anecdotal notes on all data. Each choice the students chose was documented in order for us to later determine patterns. The purpose for collecting this data was to be able to compare their choices to other choices they made, as well as, the choice to their learning style. We wanted to see if the students were making similar choices and if they were making choices that fit their learning style.

After

After the completion of our data collection, we conducted a post-survey about their thoughts on choices. This survey was conducted through a Google Doc, which contained nine open-ended questions. (For the Post Survey, See Appendix F) Each student was to make a copy of the document in order to complete the answers. Our
purpose for using this survey was to find out students’ thoughts and opinions on how they view choices. Two of these questions were taken directly from the pre-survey. We wanted to see if the students’ responses changed in any way after choices were implemented. The remaining questions related to how the students’ felt on choices in general and choices for specific projects. When analyzing the post-survey, we looked for any data that would provide us with information that would lead us to claims. (For Post Survey Results, See Appendix G)
Explanation of Findings: Claims and Evidence

Upon analyzing our data, we found common patterns that allowed us to declare several concrete claims about choice in the classroom to foster the highest performance and engagement of our students.

**Claim #1: Students enjoy when they are provided the opportunity to have some degree of choice towards assignments.**

Throughout our implementation of choices for assignments, we were able to overhear students’ discussions of their acceptance of being given options. When students knew that there were choices involved in the lesson they seemed excited because they would “cheer” and make positive remarks about the choices. Whereas, when choices were not an option, the students were disengaged and sometimes made negative remarks. For example, in science, where there are no choices, students complain about the lack of choice.

For example, in room 217, when a list of six choices were provided for a response to instructional books, the students looked forward to making their decisions. Before Chrissy presented the six choices for the reading response, she would hear the students talking amongst themselves about what choice they would pick for that day. Chrissy overheard students ask one another what choice they would pick for that day or if they would try a different activity. The students were given choices for how they would respond for the first five sections of the book and the other five sections the students would not be given choices. When Chrissy told the students that they would no longer be given a choice for sections six through ten, they became upset and bewildered. They did not understand why she was taking the choices away from them. Some of the initial
reactions Chrissy received when she explained that she would be choosing the assignment were: this is not fair, what/why, and we liked the choices.

In room 216, the students are accepting of choice in the class. The students appear to enjoy making educational decisions for themselves. However, during science, the students are always asking for choices when choices are not offered in this class. Since the implementation of choice into the classroom, the students expect to have choice for every subject. When choice is not offered Amanda commonly hears suggestions for possible choices or groans due to the lack of choice. Amanda is commonly responsive of the students desires, but the science curriculum does not allow for much choice. Many students do not understand why choices are lacking in science because they are accustomed to their freedom of choice.

The results of Chrissy and Amanda’s post survey gave them insight into students’ opinions on choices. Their higher achieving students agreed that they enjoy choice in their projects and assignments. Both students commented that they believe there is more creativity and enjoyment when selecting an assignment to work on rather than being told what to do. When asked what they don’t like about being given choices, both students stated that at times choices became more of a hassle than a benefit. The students believe choice can be more of a hassle because they have to think outside of the box and plan what would work best for them as an individual.

Chrissy and Amanda’s students at the average academic level had opposing views. Lucy in room 217 felt that choices were great, but sometimes she had difficulty selecting an activity. However, Lucy sometimes resorted to the same choices her friends made and would be easier to complete. Whereas, Sarah, in room 216, enjoys
the freedom of choice very much. She feels that choice provides her with the nurturing environment that meets her academic needs. She is able to choose projects that she feels confident in and knows she can succeed in.

The lower achieving student in room 217, Norman, felt that choices allowed for him to choose the assignment he felt more capable in completing successfully. For example, Norman enjoyed using the Google Doc chat feature to carry out a discussion because he was able to quickly type his thoughts instead of speaking them, which he is uncomfortable doing. In room 216, Sally, enjoyed choice projects, because it gave her a chance to be creative with her work. The students who prefer structure in academics gave the response that they enjoy choices because they do not feel forced into completing an assignment. These students also agree that at times there are too many choices to select. Our students who do not require structure stated that they prefer choices because it allows them to choose assignments that work best for them.

Claim #2: When given a list of choices, students tend to choose the same or similar option, task, or assignment.

For every assignment where choices were implemented, we recorded each student’s selection. After looking through the data of our students’ list of choices we had recorded, we were able to see that the majority of the students selected the same or similar options. The students who would choose technology based options tended to continue to make the same choices rather than selecting something that required paper and pencil.
For the instructional book choices in room 217, the students would typically settle on the same choice or type of choice. The higher achieving student, Joey, continually picked between two selections throughout all five opportunities. Both of these options involved discussions, the only difference was that one type of discussion was carried out face to face, while the other type was done through a Google Doc chat. Another student, Lucy, made the same decision regarding choices for every reading response, with the exception of the last choice response. She continually chose face to face discussion for all her responses and chose to create a podcast for the other. Norman stayed with the choice of a Google Doc chat for all the book responses. Even though Norman is a lower performing student, he succeeded in his participation and replies throughout each discussion. Penny, like Norman, chose the same task for each instructional book response. She chose a face to face discussion in which she spoke with one other student about the selected reading. Bella had a similar pattern as Lucy. Bella continued to choose acting out a part of the story with the exception of choosing to participate in a Google Doc chat for one choice response. I believe the students became comfortable with the choices they were making each day. I also know that students continued to make choices for their responses they knew they would be successful at. The grades of these five students’ work reflected well on the choices they made.

Choices in room 216 varied depending on the lesson, sometimes students are offered only two options, whereas, sometimes students were told to think outside the box. Students always needed to conference with a teacher for project format approval before beginning their project. My higher achieving student, Tom, chose different
projects each time and presented each project clearly and very well. He appeared to be comfortable with multiple learning formats. On the other hand, my four other focus students continually chose the same format types. My average achieving student, Sarah, preferred to do projects paper and pencil base. She would choose projects like posters and boxes. Sarah appears competent on the laptop. When I asked Sarah why she has been choosing paper and pencil based assignments rather than using technology she answered promptly, “I am unsure if I will have enough time at home to work on the project on the computer.” Likewise, Joel, my student who does not need structure, has expressed the same concerns. He chooses paper and pencil based projects over technology not because he is not comfortable with technology, but because he is showing responsibility in his choices, thinking of his available work time outside of school. Furthermore, my student who prefers structure, Jenna, and my lower achieving student, Sally, both choose paper and pencil based projects because they have expressed concern with technology. Neither student is fully comfortable with technology. I believe that each individual student knows him or herself best and they understand how to make sensible choices. These five students from 216 made great choices for themselves and their work reflected their self-engagement in the project.

Claim #3: When given a choice, many students chose technology over paper-pencil based assignments.

Technology and paper and pencil based options are given with every choice assignment. When the assignments are given as class work, students will frequently choose technology over paper and pencil. On the other hand, when assignments are to
be completed for homework, many times students will choose paper and pencil over technology. Some students reason this because they are either unsure of the amount of computer time they will be allotted at home, don’t have Apple technology, or don’t even have a computer.”

In room 217, students were given a choice to complete a word web online or by drawing it on a poster. Majority of the students, including the five students of focus, selected to create the word web online. The students stated that they felt more comfortable using the computer to create a web and the finished project would be neater. In terms of the instructional reading books responses, the six choices provided included four technological activities and two paper and pencil based. Occasionally students selected a paper and pencil response, however, a greater number of the students used technology in their response. All five students of focus made technology choices for every response. Lucy’s opinion of choosing a paper and pencil response is: “I don’t like writing all of what’s in my head on paper. For two reasons: one, I have trouble wording it, and it’s much better just to say it; and two, my hand starts to hurt, plus my handwriting is bad and I don’t start at the margin.” Norman prefers using a Google Doc chat rather than speaking or writing information down. Here are Norman’s thoughts: “I like the online google doc chat most because then I can type a lot faster than I can write and I don’t talk very loud so it is useful to do the google doc chat.”

Technology is frequently used as classwork in room 216. When given a choice to use technology during class time, majority of the class will always use technology, including my five focus students. My highest achieving student, Tom, seldomly strays from technology. He has claimed that he can get his work done quicker on the laptop
compared to paper and pencil. Whereas, my average achieving student, Sarah, alternates between the two options. She consistently uses technology for class work, but will typically choose paper and pencil based projects for homework. Furthermore, my other three focus students follow the same pattern. Joel has tried to convince his classmates to choose paper and pencil for homework, because “you never know how much time you will have on the computer at home.” Even though he brought up an important point, not too many students followed his suggestion.
Reflections and Implications for the Future

After the completion of our inquiry, we have been able to reflect upon our overall experience in what we have learned about student choice. Even though some students felt choice was difficult at times, it was actually more beneficial to provide them with the opportunity to make a selection than to revoke that opportunity. Our instruction has changed due to the increase in student choice.

First, we learned that student choice is educationally beneficial in the long run. Giving choices made the students more accountable for their actions. They knew that if they were making the decision to work on a specific activity, that they would be expected to complete the activity thoroughly. Students are also able to look deep into themselves as a learner in order to recognize what types of activities/tasks challenges allow them to learn best. If students are selecting their own project format, they tend to be more engaged throughout the learning process, in turn students produce higher quality work. As a result of choices, students are able to experiment with various types of projects and assignments to broaden their academic horizons.

Second, we learned that student choice provides variation and differentiation in instruction. When providing choice, we always offered numerous options. These options would pertain to different learning styles. Some choices would better fit students who were auditory learners, like face to face discussion. However, some options better suit kinesthetic learners, like acting out a scene from a book. Differentiation is easily obtained through student choice because each child has his or her own individualized
approach to the project. Students know themselves best and make smart decisions that will demonstrate their best work.

Lastly, we learned that knowing a student's learning style in the beginning of the year would be beneficial throughout the entire school year. Since we conducted the learning styles inventory with each of our classes during the third marking period, we were unable to put their learning styles into practice as much as we would have liked to. Furthermore, it was still beneficial to know and understand the students’ individual learning style throughout our inquiry. Students did not always choose an activity that matched their learning style because other factors, like peers choosing the same activity, influenced their decisions. However, it would have been more worthwhile to know their learning styles at the beginning of the school year. If we were to conduct the learning style inventory at the start of the school year, we would then be able to make it a part of the daily routine. The students would be familiar with their individual learning style and be able to reference it on a daily basis. As teachers, we would then be able to have students choose projects/assignments that fit best with their learning style.

From the implementation of our inquiry, we have learned the importance of providing choice in the classroom. Choice promoted a higher level of student engagement, which resulted in higher work performance. One of our future goals is to conduct the learning style survey during the first few weeks of school in order to make good use of their individuality. We plan on using the learning style survey results as part of our instruction. We believe that through the inquiry process, one is able to take a more in depth look into various teaching methods and ways for students to achieve their highest academic potential.