

DEBBIE MILLER • EMILY CALLAHAN

# "I'm the Kind of Kid Who..."



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# Advancing Learner Identity and a Sense of Agency

*When you change the way you look at things,  
the things you look at change.*

—**Max Planck**, physicist

Remember these two questions from the introduction?

- What is within Jude that we want for all children?
- How can we ensure that every child in our care comes to understand more about who they are and how they learn?

We have some ideas about what is within Jude, and now we're set to tackle the second question in more depth: How do we make what we want for all children a reality? What concrete actions can we take to awaken, nurture, and develop learner identity and a sense of agency that lives within them? Because as much as we might want to, we can't just "give" these things to children—there are no magic programs or potions to call upon. (Thank goodness!)

The truth is, children don't need magic—what they really need are invitations from their teachers to discover themselves *for* themselves, invitations that encourage them to find out even more about who they are, how they learn, and what they need to thrive.

## What Is an Invitation?

Simply put, an invitation is a way to *invite* children to make their own choices in a variety of settings and learning situations in the classroom. We write the invitation's guiding question(s) on a note card and seal it in an envelope to open with children as an official way to dive in and build curiosity and excitement. Kids wonder, "Who will open it? What will it say?"

Similar to the provocations that are part of Reggio Emilia classrooms as well as the Story Workshop process described by Susan Harris MacKay (2021), invitations promote student choice, collaborative opportunities, and full access

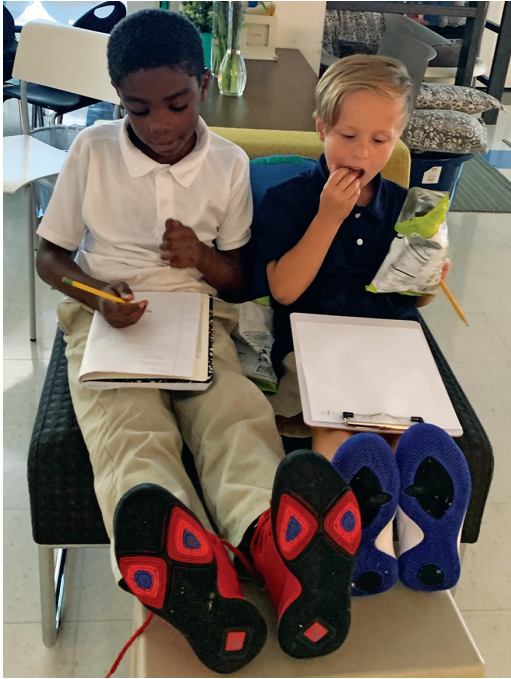


Figure 1-1

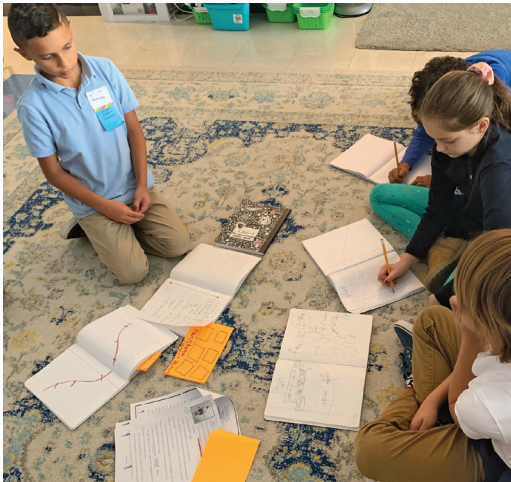


Figure 1-2

(For more info on this invitation, check out Chapter 4.)

to the learning environment. Both approaches center children and nurture experimentation, problem-solving, and discovery.

Centering children doesn't mean we're about hands-off teaching, that we're stepping down, handing over our responsibilities, leaving everything to chance. It's really the opposite—we're stepping up when we believe in children's capabilities, release control, and create conditions and structures that honor and support them in their efforts. Sometimes we hesitate to do this because we aren't sure that children will make good choices; we may think they're not quite ready. But they're ready whenever we are! Remember, it isn't as much about the choice as it is about the process: *What did I try? What happened? What did I learn?* It's the whole of the experience that allows children to grow into themselves and figure out what works for them. And what doesn't.

What does “grow into themselves” mean? Here's an example: In one third-grade classroom, kids were digging into this invitation: *What if you could choose where you want to learn and work?* They tried out different workspaces over a couple of weeks during reading time, thinking through their purpose each day (Figures 1-1 and 1-2): *What am I going to do today? What kind of space do I think I need to do that?* Each day after reading time, children reflected on what they'd tried, what happened, and what they'd learned about themselves. In just couple of weeks kids were able to make decisions like these:

- “I'm starting a new book today, so I need a quiet spot.”
- “Our group needs a place to spread out all our stuff today, so we're going to work in the meeting area.”
- “I'm feeling kind of grumpy today. I need an out-of-the-way spot where I can work through it on my own or maybe with a friend.”
- “My partner and I need a place where we can do some research and talk today, so we're going to go over to the little table by the door, so we won't bother anybody.”
- “Our book club is meeting today, so we've booked a table in the library.”

## Real-World Invitations

The choices invitations offer mirror the kinds of decisions people make in the world—from choosing what to read, to investigating something they truly care about, invitations invite children to assume more responsibility for their learning and teachers to let them.

The invitations in this book focus on four areas for choice making (Figure 1–3):

- space
- materials
- what readers do in the world
- what to learn about and how to share it.

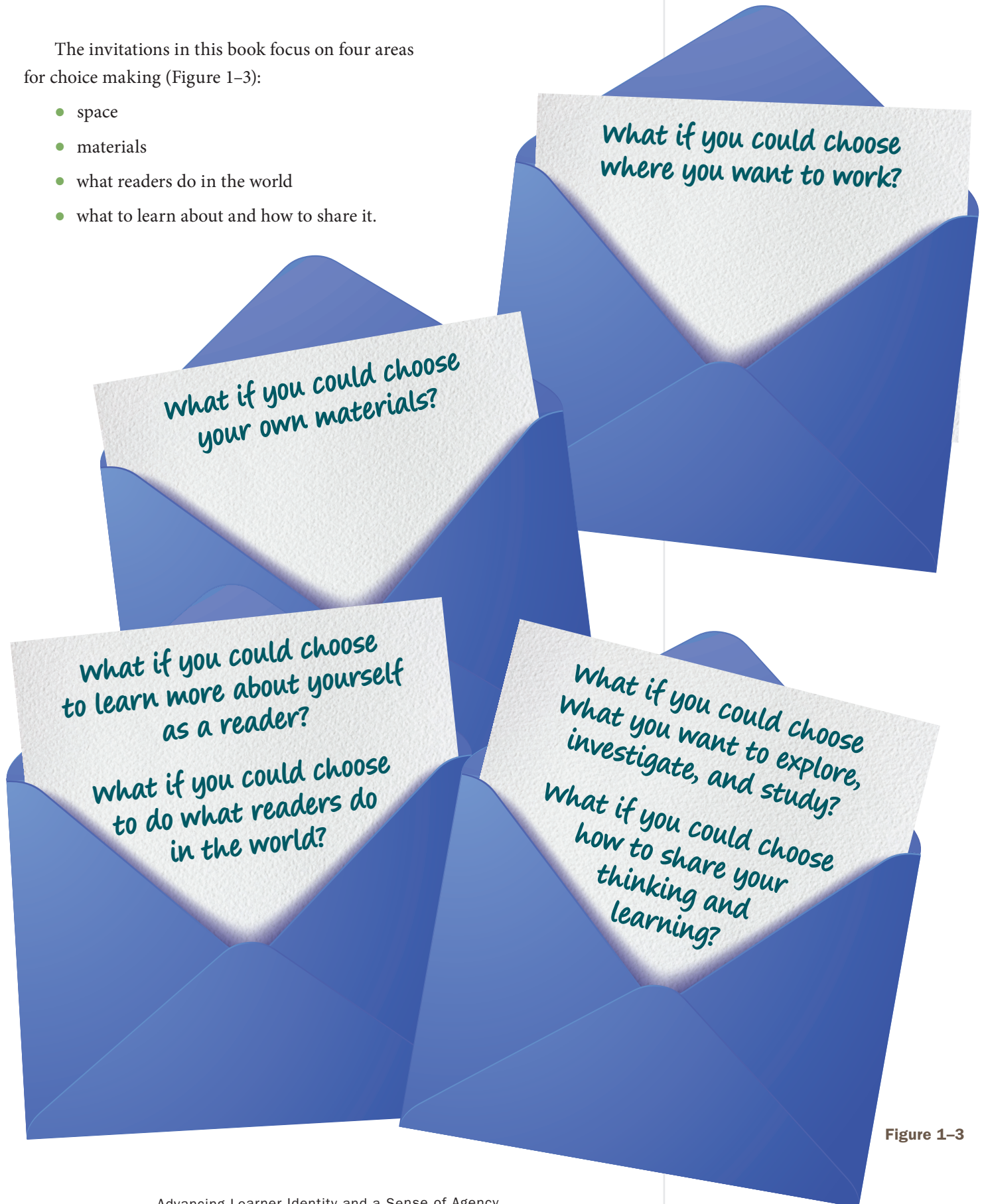


Figure 1–3



Invitations are loosely organized by levels of sophistication, though there's no set order. You can jump in anywhere! But depending on children's experiences, the invitations about materials and space are a good place to begin if children haven't had opportunities to make these choices yet. These early invitations support the others and offer opportunities for kids to experience making choices and reflecting on their decisions early in the year.

## When Do Invitations Fit Within the Day and Across the Year?

Invitations are meant to support purposeful, in-depth learning—they're not taught in isolation nor are they an end in themselves. That's why invitations are most often offered within the context of other learning: reading, writing, math, social studies, science, or a designated choice time. Invitations are a means to a deeper understanding of content (what students are learning) and identity and agency (who they are and how they learn). There aren't hard and fast timelines for invitations, though you can see in Figure 1–4 how once an invitation is

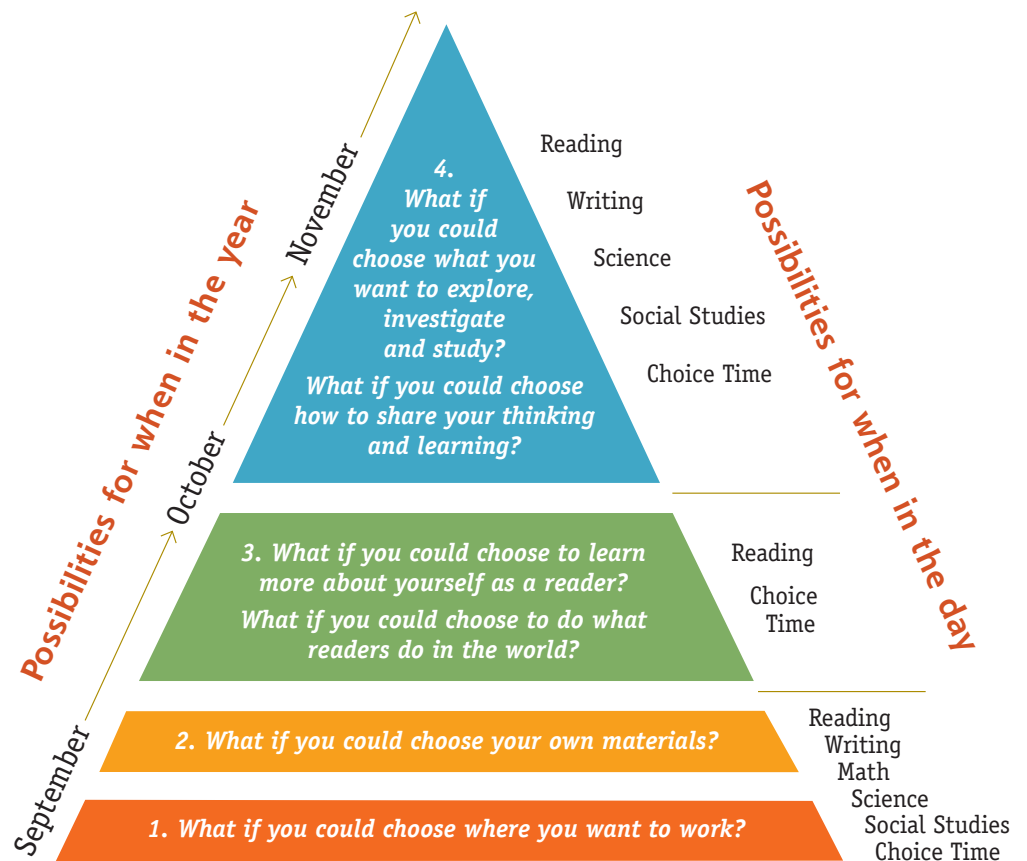


Figure 1–4

offered, it continues to evolve over time and across the year—one invitation layers into another.

In general, it makes sense to launch the invitations about space and materials in September, the invitations about book choice and making thinking visible in October, and the invitations to choose what to learn and how to share it around December. But it doesn't have to be that way. You might want to start with kids choosing books they want to read. It's up to you and what you think would most benefit the children in front of you.

If you have mandates or restrictions in one subject area, is there another that's less restrictive? We don't know any programs or mandates that prohibit inviting children to choose where they'll work, who they'll work with, or the materials they use. (And we hope you don't either!) Even within a mandated program, there are opportunities for student choice.

You may be wondering about the references to "choice time." Emily and I define it as at least a thirty-minute block of time where children are able to choose what they're working on. When possible, we offer invitations within subject areas, but sometimes teachers get caught in the middle—you want to try something new, but you aren't able to be as flexible as you'd like. No worries! You still have options! And designating at least thirty minutes a day for choice time is one of them.

But before we go on the lookout for those minutes, let's think about what choice time has to offer:

- If you're unable to launch invitations within subject areas, they can all be offered during choice time.
- Even if you're able to offer invitations within subject areas, choice time can be powerful for you and your kids too—during this time children can choose to continue the work they've started in subject areas, allowing more time for in-depth personal investigations, student-led book clubs, and more independent reading and writing with choice of text for readers and genre for writers.
- Choice time is unstructured, offering children time to explore and investigate anything they are interested in. Sometimes units "rule the learning," and this time gives children opportunities to make choices about topics they want to investigate and explore in addition to unit work.

Are you curious about choice time but not sure you can fit it into your day? We understand. Every minute is precious, and there are too few of them as it is.





But take a close look at your daily schedule—can you find some wiggle room? There are some things you can't change, but are there some you can? What about:

- Morning work? (What if you converted those minutes into choice time?)
- Whole-class trips to the bathroom and the long lineup for drinks? (What if you created a plan with kids about leaving the room when they need to? That's ten or so minutes twice a day—twenty minutes total.)
- Calendar time? (What if you placed it in math? Or shortened/eliminated it? There's fifteen or so found minutes right there!)
- Packing up to go home? (Streamline it and gain 10–15 minutes.)
- What else?

Put those minutes together somewhere/anywhere in the day. Now you're set to offer kids authentic opportunities to learn more about themselves and each other as learners! Every single day. (We're not saying that some of these activities aren't important. But are they more important than advancing children's learner identities and their sense of agency?)

## How Do Invitations Work?

Once you've offered an invitation, and children have made their choices and tried them out, don't just move on to something else. Having an experience doesn't mean children have learned from it! That's why reflection—asking children to think back to process what just happened—is essential to advancing learner identity and a sense of agency. You're asking children to be metacognitive, to develop an ongoing awareness of their thinking and learning and themselves as thinkers and learners.

Encouraging reflection across the school day normalizes it, making it something kids do naturally. "This is what learners do in school and in the world and this is what we do too." Naming what works for them helps the learning stick, making it more likely children will remember the strategy when a similar situation arises: "Oh! I remember when this happened before—I'm going to try that and see if it works for me again."

That's why these three questions are key—they place the child back into the experience and offer a straightforward structure that sparks a reflective stance:

- *What did I try?*
- *What happened?*
- *What did I learn?*

Asking children, “What will you try?” helps set just the right tone—it frees children to explore, experiment, and figure out what works for them and what doesn’t, sending the message, “There’s no pressure here, this is about learning about what works for you.”

There will be (and should be!) missteps along the way. This is how we all learn! But every misstep serves as a step forward for everyone, because now we know more about ourselves than we did before. Think about the power in that for a child—understanding that mistake making isn’t a bad thing, it’s an opportunity to learn and grow. And that when we do make mistakes, it means that we’re the kind of kids who challenge ourselves, take risks, and aren’t afraid to fail. For more on mistake making, check out *Risk, Fail, Rise: A Teacher’s Guide to Learning from Mistakes*, by M. Colleen Cruz (2020).

When you give children time to try things out, you’ll hear them reflect in ways that sound like this:

- “I tried writing my thinking on a sticky note, but I didn’t have enough room. I’m going to try one of those big sticky notes next time, or maybe a half-sheet of paper.”
- “I used to read hard books, like chapter books. But today I tried reading some Elephant and Piggie books. Reading was so fun and I learned I like funny books, and even if books are easy to read, they can be good for me. And I love speech bubbles! They make me think about what I would say if I was in the story. I’m going to read all of them!”
- “I keep losing my stuff. I’m going to try using one of those tubs and keep all my things I need in there. Like my stick notes and markers and pencils and books. It’ll be like my office so wherever I go, I can take my stuff with me.”
- “Poetry is hard for me. Like today I was reading a poem in the book, *Words with Wings*, and I didn’t get it at all. But then I remembered when this happened to me another time, I read the whole poem first, just to get the gist of it. Then I reread the stanzas and made notes about what I was thinking after each one. I tried it and it helped me again!”
- “You know how I like to talk all the time? I know I talk to help me figure things out but I can’t always talk to someone, like maybe it’s during a read-aloud. So I tried making a little notebook to use during read-alouds and write my thinking in it and I’m going to do it all the time now” (Figures 1-5 to 1-7).



Figure 1-5

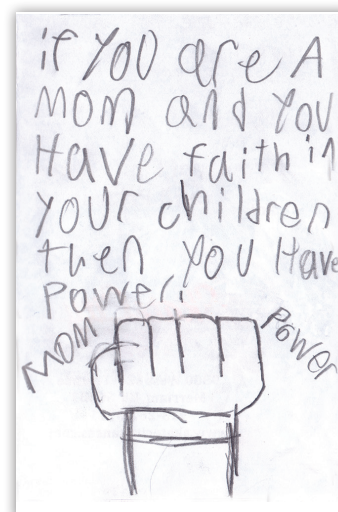


Figure 1-6

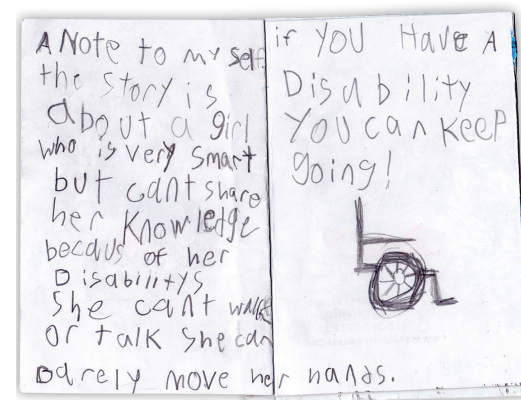


Figure 1-7

Through reflection, kids develop an “agentive stance.” They build a collection of strategies they can count on when similar situations arise or they get stuck. They develop an understanding of how they learn and what they need to do to figure things out. It takes time for children to view themselves as the kind of kids who make decisions, solve problems, and believe in themselves the way Jude does. But it’s not a long, drawn-out process! That’s because each day builds on those that have come before; every day a child has the chance to learn a little more about who they are and how they learn and how it feels to grow. And one of the best parts? They’re not alone! A whole community of kids (and a teacher) are learning and growing right alongside them (Figure 1–8).

Every day children and teachers have opportunities to learn a little bit more about who they are as learners and what they need. It’s a process, this ongoing awareness of self. We come to embrace the whole of who we are, acknowledging our strengths and struggles, and learning over time and experience how to manage both. Discovering who we are as learners is important, sometimes messy work, but it gives us the knowledge, the power, and the freedom to navigate the complexity of our lives, in and out of school.