Choices for Children: Why and How to Let Students Decide (*)
about how to solve a problem, accommodate other people's preferences, or rethink their initial inclinations. Moreover, students who are not involved in the process of decision making may find that they are excluded from the final decision. If challenged, defenders of classroom autocracy may insist that a teacher must get control of the class in order to prevent chaos and disorder. However, well-meaning educators may offer very different prescriptions regarding the nature and scope of students' participation in the decision-making process.

Student resistance.  

In the case of parroting, it can be hard for students to resist the temptation to repeat the same answers. However, students who are not allowed to make choices in the classroom may find it difficult to think for themselves. For example, students who are not allowed to choose the reading assignment may find it difficult to determine what they want to read. The favorite motto of teachers and administrators seems to be, "If something goes wrong, hit them with a pop quiz." Again and again, this approach fails to address the root cause of the problem, which is not too much work, too little time, or too little compensation. Rather, it is powerlessness – a lack of control over their own learning.

To talk about the importance of choice is also to talk about democracy. At present, as Shelley Berman of Educators for Democracy has argued, "The great majority of every educator who claims to prize democratic principles also accepts the idea of the 'school as a nation' and the school as a 'little nation'." Anyone who truly values democracy ought to be thinking about how to involve students in the decision-making process. Teachers and administrators who are content to let students passively accept decisions made by others are not living up to their duties as educators. Instead, they are failing to fulfill their responsibilities to the students they serve.

Effects on teachers.  


Of course, no sooner is this sketch of a hypothetical student begun than we recognize it as a depiction of real life. The behavior of teachers is often influenced by the need to maintain order and control. However, this approach can lead to avoidable authoritarian practices. For example, teachers who are not trained in the art of working with children may find it difficult to maintain order without resorting to force. The behavior of politicians, but it is no less applicable to what goes on in schools. If we want students to learn how to live in a democracy, we must provide them with opportunities to participate in the decision-making process.

knew would please an adult and how different that feels from taking the risk of making a suggestion that someone might not like — and then emphasizing that the latter is what we are looking for here.

Student autonomy.  

I have heard teachers give it up after a single attempt, saying, "Children cannot behave responsibly," then remove all responsibilities from the student, saying, "Children cannot think for themselves," and proceed thereafter to do children's thinking for them. But these same teachers would not dream of doing the same thing for adults.

Of course, it is still true that there won't be time to hash out every matter; sometimes a teacher will need to request that students just do something. But a democratic approach doesn't demand that everything is actively chosen, only that it be done with the consent of students, and discontent will not be chased away by the exercise of power."(27) No wonder that expanding the realm in which the learner's consent is sought tends to enhance learning.

The teacher's role.  

If students are not allowed to make choices in the classroom, they are not likely to develop the skills necessary to live in a democracy. Teachers who are content to let students passively accept decisions made by others are not living up to their duties as educators. Instead, they are failing to fulfill their responsibilities to the students they serve.

Eric D. Johnsen, "Intrinsic value.  

In the case of parroting, it can be hard for students to resist the temptation to repeat the same answers. However, students who are not allowed to make choices in the classroom may find it difficult to think for themselves. For example, students who are not allowed to choose the reading assignment may find it difficult to determine what they want to read. The favorite motto of teachers and administrators seems to be, "If something goes wrong, hit them with a pop quiz." Again and again, this approach fails to address the root cause of the problem, which is not too much work, too little time, or too little compensation. Rather, it is powerlessness – a lack of control over their own learning.

To talk about the importance of choice is also to talk about democracy. At present, as Shelley Berman of Educators for Democracy has argued, "The great majority of every educator who claims to prize democratic principles also accepts the idea of the 'school as a nation' and the school as a 'little nation'." Anyone who truly values democracy ought to be thinking about how to involve students in the decision-making process. Teachers and administrators who are content to let students passively accept decisions made by others are not living up to their duties as educators. Instead, they are failing to fulfill their responsibilities to the students they serve.

Effects on teachers.  


Of course, no sooner is this sketch of a hypothetical student begun than we recognize it as a depiction of real life. The behavior of teachers is often influenced by the need to maintain order and control. However, this approach can lead to avoidable authoritarian practices. For example, teachers who are not trained in the art of working with children may find it difficult to maintain order without resorting to force. The behavior of politicians, but it is no less applicable to what goes on in schools. If we want students to learn how to live in a democracy, we must provide them with opportunities to participate in the decision-making process.

Student autonomy.  

I have heard teachers give it up after a single attempt, saying, "Children cannot behave responsibly," then remove all responsibilities from the student, saying, "Children cannot think for themselves," and proceed thereafter to do children's thinking for them. But these same teachers would not dream of doing the same thing for adults.

Of course, it is still true that there won't be time to hash out every matter; sometimes a teacher will need to request that students just do something. But a democratic approach doesn't demand that everything is actively chosen, only that it be done with the consent of students, and discontent will not be chased away by the exercise of power."(27) No wonder that expanding the realm in which the learner's consent is sought tends to enhance learning.

The teacher's role.  

If students are not allowed to make choices in the classroom, they are not likely to develop the skills necessary to live in a democracy. Teachers who are content to let students passively accept decisions made by others are not living up to their duties as educators. Instead, they are failing to fulfill their responsibilities to the students they serve.

Eric D. Johnsen, "Intrinsic value.  

In the case of parroting, it can be hard for students to resist the temptation to repeat the same answers. However, students who are not allowed to make choices in the classroom may find it difficult to think for themselves. For example, students who are not allowed to choose the reading assignment may find it difficult to determine what they want to read. The favorite motto of teachers and administrators seems to be, "If something goes wrong, hit them with a pop quiz." Again and again, this approach fails to address the root cause of the problem, which is not too much work, too little time, or too little compensation. Rather, it is powerlessness – a lack of control over their own learning.

To talk about the importance of choice is also to talk about democracy. At present, as Shelley Berman of Educators for Democracy has argued, "The great majority of every educator who claims to prize democratic principles also accepts the idea of the 'school as a nation' and the school as a 'little nation'." Anyone who truly values democracy ought to be thinking about how to involve students in the decision-making process. Teachers and administrators who are content to let students passively accept decisions made by others are not living up to their duties as educators. Instead, they are failing to fulfill their responsibilities to the students they serve.

Effects on teachers.  


Of course, no sooner is this sketch of a hypothetical student begun than we recognize it as a depiction of real life. The behavior of teachers is often influenced by the need to maintain order and control. However, this approach can lead to avoidable authoritarian practices. For example, teachers who are not trained in the art of working with children may find it difficult to maintain order without resorting to force. The behavior of politicians, but it is no less applicable to what goes on in schools. If we want students to learn how to live in a democracy, we must provide them with opportunities to participate in the decision-making process.

Student autonomy.  

I have heard teachers give it up after a single attempt, saying, "Children cannot behave responsibly," then remove all responsibilities from the student, saying, "Children cannot think for themselves," and proceed thereafter to do children's thinking for them. But these same teachers would not dream of doing the same thing for adults.

Of course, it is still true that there won't be time to hash out every matter; sometimes a teacher will need to request that students just do something. But a democratic approach doesn't demand that everything is actively chosen, only that it be done with the consent of students, and discontent will not be chased away by the exercise of power."(27) No wonder that expanding the realm in which the learner's consent is sought tends to enhance learning.

The teacher's role.  

If students are not allowed to make choices in the classroom, they are not likely to develop the skills necessary to live in a democracy. Teachers who are content to let students passively accept decisions made by others are not living up to their duties as educators. Instead, they are failing to fulfill their responsibilities to the students they serve.
To be notified whenever a new article or blog is posted on this site, please enter your e-mail address at www.alfiekohn.org/sign-up/.