Choices for Children: Why and How to Let Students Decide (*)
Moreover, consider the conventional response when something goes wrong (as determined, of course, by the adults). Are two students fighting? Hit them with a pop quiz. Again and again, the favorite motto of teachers and administrators seems to be, "If it isn't working, try something else." The evidence goes on and on. At least one recent study has found that children given more "opportunity to participate in how things will be done in school" have greater self-esteem and greater academic motivation than children who are "subjected to a rigid, authoritarian, no-flexibility process of doing things" (26). There is no question about it: even if our only criterion is academic performance, choice works.

1. Effects on general well-being.

Of course, no sooner is this sketch of a hypothetical student begun than we recognize it as a depiction of real life. The problem is that too many children are "curriculum theorists," according to John Nicholls, and there may be no better use of classroom time than a sustained conversation following someone's challenge: "Why do we gotta do this stuff?" (34)

In a way, this conclusion shouldn't be surprising. Putting aside the value of particular programs that give students more control, the studies show that social guidance shall be a matter of his own mental attitude, and not a mere authoritative dictation of his acts. One-year-old infants had fun with a noisy mechanical toy if the adults had suggested and permitted it. The benefits of having a sense of self-determination are particularly compelling.

2. Effects on academic motivation.

The essence of the demand for freedom is the need of conditions which will enable an individual to make his own special contributions to the life of his group. It is as a citizen of his group, not as an individual, that each one of us is significant. The individual who believes he is important to the group he belongs to has a stronger sense of self-worth than he who does not. That's why it matters that extrinsic motivation is a substitute for intrinsic motivation. The bottom line is that "teaching by itself is not enough." The process is more important than the end result. The students have to care about what they are doing.

If we are to act on the arguments and evidence supporting the value of making students active participants in their education, we need to tackle the resistance that comes from three sources: structural impediments, resistance by teachers, and resistance by the students themselves.

The first is the problem of the "silent teacher" who often dominates classroom discussion. The silence comes from a belief that the students are being "told what to think." When the teacher is talking as the "teacher," the student must listen. When the student is talking, the teacher must listen. Nothing in between, nothing to choose about. The problem is that these are the adults who control the agenda. They can demand that the students "listen to the teacher," but they can't compel them to learn effectively or to care about what they are doing. The bottom line is that "teaching by itself is not enough." The process is more important than the end result. The students have to care about what they are doing.

3. Effects on social and behavioral development.

The bottom line is that the adults who have themselves decided for one reason or another to exclude students from the selection of the subject matter, the content, the medium, the pace, the emphasis, the goals, the means of instruction, and the evaluation must now reconsider their basic beliefs about human nature and motivation. A new model is needed, one that recognizes the importance of the students' needs and the need to balance the interests of the students and the adults. That model is a model of self-determination.

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