Choices for Children: Why and How to Let Students Decide (*)
Sometimes elementary school students are asked to put their heads down when they raise their hands to register a vote. About the best that can be said for this exercise is that it didn't take very long. Children have learned precious little.

Moreover, consider the conventional response when something goes wrong (as determined, of course, by the adults). Are two studentsmouthing off to each other? Hit them with a pop quiz. Again and again, the favorite motto of teachers and administrators seems to be: "What didn't you learn from your grades?"

While each child ought to have more opportunity to make decisions than is typically allowed in American classrooms, such opportunities are often a matter of degree. The problem is that in many instances, freedom is confused with license. Freedom does not mean that the child is free to do anything he or she pleases, deprived of structure or adult guidance; it means that the child is free to do the right and appropriate thing in the context of the right and appropriate structure and guidance.

A number of writers and teachers who resist giving children the chance to make decisions have justified their opposition by saying that children are not ready for such an opportunity. Their reasoning is that children are not mature enough to exercise the kinds of choices that might be expected of adults. That is a false distinction. Children do not develop freedom in a vacuum. Freedom is not something that is bestowed on them from above, but rather is the result of their own internal development and growth in the proper environment.

In the first version of pseudochoice, a student is offered a choice that is obviously loaded. "You can finish your math homework early, but you'll have to stay in for three more recess periods," the teacher may say. Or, "You can take a test on Monday, but you'll have to stay in for lunch on Friday." The student has a clear choice, but the choice is one he or she has not participated in making. The teacher is really saying, "Do what I tell you or you'll be punished," but he is making it sound as though choices are being offered.

The teacher may offer suggestions and guidance, questions and criticism, but leave the final choice to students. Thus I am at the mercy of my teacher. He is in charge, but I pretend that I am in charge. A high school teacher, meanwhile, suggests that it might be better for students to have the chance to make more decisions than they typically have in American classrooms. She says, "If you listen and work at it, you can do anything in this course." What teachers and administrators often overlook is that students do not enter school as blank slates, but are already equipped with certain ways of thinking and acting. If we really want students to become more autonomous, we need to help them to take charge of their own learning before we deprive them of choices.

Notice also that this role for the teacher does not always amount to being a voice for moderation or mainstream values -- it can be a voice for the "other." The teacher may argue that students should be encouraged to question authority and challenge the status quo. Teachers who adopt this approach to pedagogy are called "progressives." They argue that traditional methods of teaching are harmful and that students should be encouraged to take an active role in their own education. They believe that students should be taught how to think for themselves and to question the values and beliefs of those in authority.

One of the most powerful arguments against restricting choice is that children should be given the opportunity to learn and grow at their own pace. Many people, moreover, believe that children should be given the opportunity to learn and grow at their own pace. If children are to learn and grow at their own pace, they must be given the opportunity to make decisions about their own education.

The problem with this argument is that it is based on an either/or choice. Either the child learns at his or her own pace, or the child is allowed to make decisions about his or her own education. There is no reason why the child cannot learn at his or her own pace and still be given the opportunity to make decisions about his or her own education. In fact, if the child is allowed to make decisions about his or her own education, he or she will learn at his or her own pace, because he or she will be more engaged and interested in the material.

More important, however, is the question of whether the child is given the opportunity to learn at his or her own pace. If the child is given the opportunity to learn at his or her own pace, he or she will learn more and learn better. The child will be more engaged and interested in the material, and will be more likely to learn.

A second rationale for restricting choice is the fear that students will not take advantage of the opportunities available to them. Teachers and administrators are concerned that students will not take advantage of the opportunities available to them, and will instead waste their time. They are concerned that students will not take advantage of the opportunities available to them, and will instead waste their time. They are concerned that students will not take advantage of the opportunities available to them, and will instead waste their time.

The parents may think that this is true, but they are wrong. Children do take advantage of the opportunities available to them, and they do not waste their time. They do not waste their time. They do not waste their time. They do not waste their time. They do not waste their time. They do not waste their time. They do not waste their time. They do not waste their time. They do not waste their time. They do not waste their time. They do not waste their time. They do not waste their time. They do not waste their time. They do not waste their time. They do not waste their time. They do not waste their time. They do not waste their time. They do not waste their time. They do not waste their time. They do not waste their time. They do not waste their time. They do not waste their time. They do not waste their time.
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