Choices for Children: Why and How to Let Students Decide (*)
If challenged, defenders of classroom autocracy may insist that a teacher must get control of the class – but this is a classic false dichotomy, because students are entitled to both discipline and freedom. Nearly every influential proponent of choice for students – as well as for adults – argues that democracy requires that people be given a real say in what happens to them. But the rhetoric of traditionalists is not easy to locate in the real world. Nearly every essay by a veteran teacher includes a discussion of the importance of freedom, and nearly every school manual contains a statement about the need for both structure and flexibility.

Moreover, consider the conventional response when something goes wrong (as determined, of course, by the adults). Are two students talking in class? They should be hit with a pop quiz. Are two students talking after school? They should be given a time out. Are two students talking on the phone in class? They should be suspended from school. Are two students talking in class while the teacher is giving a lecture? They should be asked to leave. Teachers and administrators seem to believe in the power of a teacher to forbid children to talk. Perhaps the reason is that nearly everyone has experienced innumerable examples of children talking when they should not have been talking. The solution is clear: Never let children talk when they should not have been talking.

3. Strictly speaking, as such thinkers as Jean-Paul Sartre and Viktor Frankl have pointed out, people are never entirely free, because freedom is always conditional on existing power. At any given time, each person operates in a given set of circumstances, and those circumstances are to a large extent beyond the person's control. People can act freely only within the limits of these circumstances, and those limits vary from time to time. Furthermore, people are never alone, because they are always surrounded by other people who are having effects on them. Hence, people are not free at all times. Therefore, if the process of exercising control over children is not going to lead children to realize that they can exercise control over themselves, then it will not lead them to realize that they can exercise control over others. The process must start with children as children and end with children as adults, and this is what the process of exercising control over children must do.

4. Of course, whether the last point is true – whether we really are looking for students who take risks and make decisions – is a debatable issue. But there is no question that students are more likely to learn self-control – and are more likely to keep working when the teacher or parent isn't around. And when students are given the opportunity to make choices, they tend to do so. The problem is to give students the opportunity to make choices. The solution is to give students the opportunity to make choices.

5. When second-graders in Pittsburgh were given some choice about their learning, including the chance to decide which tasks they would work on at any given moment, they tended to "complete more learning tasks in less time." (19) When high school seniors in Minneapolis worked on chemistry problems without clear-cut instructions – that is, with the chance to explore the materials and decide what to do. They put in more time than they had to, spending "extra laboratory periods checking results that could otherwise have been done in class," and spent more time on what they considered to be more difficult problems than they had to. The result was better performance on a standardized test than they had been getting on previous tests, and more confidence in themselves as learners.

6. Martin Seligman's research on helplessness is central to this field of study. For a review of the relevant studies by him and others, see Shelley E. Taylor, "Helplessness and Personal Control," in Theories and Research on Helplessness, ed. D. C. Ausubel, G. J. Stagner, and D. S. Fleishman (New York: Academic Press, 1978), pp. 191-217. Taylor's review shows that helplessness can be caused by a variety of factors, including lack of control over one's environment, lack of control over one's actions, and lack of control over one's thoughts. Helplessness can also be caused by a variety of factors, including lack of control over one's environment, lack of control over one's actions, and lack of control over one's thoughts. Helplessness can also be caused by a variety of factors, including lack of control over one's environment, lack of control over one's actions, and lack of control over one's thoughts. Helplessness can also be caused by a variety of factors, including lack of control over one's environment, lack of control over one's actions, and lack of control over one's thoughts. Helplessness can also be caused by a variety of factors, including lack of control over one's environment, lack of control over one's actions, and lack of control over one's thoughts.
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