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 in the back of the room talking instead of listening to the lesson? Hit them with a pop quiz. Again and again, the favorite motto of teachers and administrators seems to be

To talk about learning. The entire constructivist tradition is predicated on the idea of student autonomy, which is to say, the chance for students to make decisions about what they are doing. It is an idea that is not only important in academic work but in all the social skills that are essential for life. But these ideas are unlikely to make much of a difference so long as students are controlled and silenced. Indeed, the need to involve students in talking about how they learn is the core of what constructivist ideas are about.

The irony is enough to make us wince. As one survey of American schools after another has confirmed, students are rarely invited to become active participants in their own education. (1) Schooling is typically about doing things. How do you keep 20 children in the back of a middle school classroom from whispering? "Put them in the hall" says the principal. And how do you help students overcome their fear of making long-term decisions about academic work? The answer from the superintendent typically is "Get them to focus on the basics." The kind of solution favored by such counselors is one that reduces the impact of classroom democracy by focusing on the discipline of doing things and then deciding on what is to be done. As an article 22 years ago in The New York Times suggested, there is a "climate in which decisions are often made for children, who are not only supposed to accept the decisions, but to be grateful for what they get." The decision-making process is made a matter of the authority of the adults; and the adults' control is increased rather than reduced. The irony is in the words: "The climate of the classroom is dominated by fear..." (2)

Think about the rules posted on the wall of an elementary school classroom, or the "rights and responsibilities" pamphlet handed to parents by the school district's headquarters. The first is a list of disconnected facts and skills is the means; keeping a tight grip on student behavior is the end. See McNeil, pp. 157-58.

"They are not going to do what we want them to do. They are going to do what we do," is the sentiment of a teacher talking about students. While this may be a painful statement for a teacher to make, it may be true. Students have been so long in the servile role of doing what they are told, that they are unable to make choices about what they do. They have lost the habit of making decisions and are not capable of exercising the freedom to make them. Thus, the problem of keeping students in line can only be solved by keeping a tight grip on them. The decision-making process is made a matter of the authority of the adults; and the adults' control is increased rather than reduced. The irony is in the words: "The climate of the classroom is dominated by fear..." (2)

The key question is how we respond to these maneuvers. It can be tempting to conclude that students are either unable to make decisions or unworthy of having it. But our challenge is to persevere. As Selma Wassermann has written, "In order to help children to make decisions, the instructor must believe that they can make them, even if it is against the advice of the adults." And it isn't enough to believe that children can make decisions; it is necessary to work to help them acquire the ability to do so. This requires not only a new awareness of the need for freedom but also the ability to recognize the need for freedom. The need for freedom is not only an idea about human nature; it is a practical necessity that is needed for student development.

The need for freedom is not only an idea about human nature; it is a practical necessity that is needed for student development. In many cases, students are almost never involved in deliberating about such ideas; their job is basically to do as they are told. This is not to say that control and guidance are not necessary. But these ideas are unlikely to make much of a difference so long as students are controlled and silenced. Indeed, the need to involve students in talking about how they learn is the core of what constructivist ideas are about.

What happens when students are allowed to take an active part in their own educational decision-making? It can be tempting to conclude that students are either unable to make decisions or unworthy of having it. But our challenge is to persevere. As Selma Wassermann has written, "In order to help children to make decisions, the instructor must believe that they can make them, even if it is against the advice of the adults." And it isn't enough to believe that children can make decisions; it is necessary to work to help them acquire the ability to do so. This requires not only a new awareness of the need for freedom but also the ability to recognize the need for freedom. The need for freedom is not only an idea about human nature; it is a practical necessity that is needed for student development.

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