Alfie Kohn

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Choices for Children

Why and How to Let Students Decide

By Alfie Kohn

> *The essence of the demand for freedom is the need of conditions which will enable an individual to make his own special contribution to a group interest, and to partake of its activities in such ways that social guidance shall be a matter of his own mental attitude, and not a mere authoritative dictation of his acts.*
>
> *– John Dewey*
> *Democracy and Education*

Educators are painfully well acquainted with the phenomenon known as "burnout." Some days it seems that the bulbs have gone out in most faculty lounges and administration buildings. But what if, hypothetically speaking, this syndrome also affected students? How would *they* talk and act? Teachers around the country to whom I have put this question immediately suggest such symptoms as disengagement and apathy – or, conversely, thoughtlessness and aggression. Either tuning out or acting out might signal that a student was burning out. In both cases, he or she would presumably just go through the motions of learning, handing in uninspired work and counting the minutes or days until freedom.

Of course, no sooner is this sketch of a hypothetical student begun than we recognize it as a depiction of real life. The fact is that students act this way every day. But now let us ask what we know from research and experience in the workplace about the cause of burnout. The best predictor, it turns out, is not too much work, too little time, or too little compensation. Rather, it is powerlessness – a lack of control over what one is doing.

Combine that fact with the premise that there is no minimum age for burnout, and the conclusion that emerges is this: much of what is disturbing about students' attitudes and behavior may be a function of the fact that they have little to say about what happens to them all day. They are compelled to follow someone else's rules, study someone else's curriculum, and submit continually to someone else's evaluation. The mystery, really, is not that so many students are indifferent about what they have to do in school but that any of them are not.

To be sure, there is nothing new about the idea that students should be able to participate, individually and collectively, in making decisions. This conviction has long played a role in schools designated as progressive, democratic, open, free, experimental, or alternative; in educational philosophies called developmental, constructivist, holistic, or learner-centered; in specific innovations such as whole-language learning, discovery-based science, or authentic assessment; and in the daily practice of teachers whose natural instinct is to treat children with respect.

But if the concept is not exactly novel, neither do we usually take the time to tease this element out of various traditions and examine it in its own right. Why is it so important that children have a chance to make decisions about their learning? How might this opportunity be provided with regard to academic matters as well as other aspects of school life? What limits on students' right to choose are necessary, and what restrictions compromise the idea too deeply? Finally, what barriers might account for the fact that students so rarely feel a sense of self-determination today? A close inspection of these issues will reveal that the question of choice is both more complex and more compelling than many educators seem to assume.

Several years ago, a group of teachers from Florida traveled to what was then the USSR to exchange information and ideas with their Russian-speaking counterparts. What the Soviet teachers most wanted from their guests was guidance on setting up and running democratic schools. Their questions on this topic were based on the assumption that a country like the United States, so committed to the idea of democracy, surely must involve children in decision-making processes from their earliest years.

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 *to* children, not working *with* them. An array of punishments and rewards is used to enforce compliance with an agenda that students rarely have any opportunity to influence.

Think about the rules posted on the wall of an elementary school classroom, or the “rights and responsibilities” pamphlet distributed in high schools, or the moral precepts that form the basis of a values or character education program. In each case, students are almost never involved in deliberating about such ideas; their job is basically to do as they are told.

Moreover, consider the conventional response when something goes wrong (as determined, of course, by the adults). Are two children creating a commotion instead of sitting quietly? Separate them. Have the desks become repositories for used chewing gum? Ban the stuff. Do students come to class without having done the reading? Hit them with a pop quiz. Again and again, the favorite motto of teachers and administrators seems to be “Reach for the coercion” rather than engaging children in a conversation about the underlying causes of what is happening and working together to negotiate a solution.

Earlier this year, the principal of a Brooklyn high school told a *New York Times* reporter that he lived by “a simple proposition: This is my house, I’m 46 years old. A 15-year-old is not going to dictate to me how this school is run.”(2) But even educators who recoil from such a frank endorsement of autocracy may end up acting in accordance with the same basic principle. I have met many elementary teachers, for example, who make a point of assuring students that “this is *our* classroom” – but proceed to decide unilaterally on almost everything that goes on in it, from grading policy to room decor.

As for the content of instruction, the educators who shape the curriculum rarely bother to consult those who are to be educated. There is plenty of enthusiasm about reforms such as outcome-based education but little concern about bringing students into the process of formulating the outcomes. There is spirited debate about “school choice” – an arrangement in which districts are compelled to compete for the business of parent-consumers – but much less talk about how much choice students have concerning what happens in their classrooms. Indeed, spontaneous, animated conversations about topics of interest to children, when they are allowed to occur at all, are soon snuffed out in order that the class can return to the prescribed lesson plan.

THE RATIONALE

To talk about the destructive effects of keeping students powerless is to describe the benefits of having a sense of self-determination.(3) Five such benefits seem particularly compelling.

1. Effects on general well-being. Many different fields of research have converged on the finding that it is desirable for people to experience a sense of control over their lives. These benefits reach into every corner of human existence, starting with our physical health and survival. One series of studies has shown that people who rarely become ill despite having to deal with considerable stress tend to be those who feel more control over what happens to them.(4) In another well-known experiment, nursing home residents who were able to make decisions about their environment not only became happier and more active but were also more likely to be alive a year and a half later than were other residents.(5)

The psychological benefits of control are, if anything, even more pronounced. All else being equal, emotional adjustment is better over time for people who experience a sense of self-determination; by contrast, few things lead more reliably to depression and other forms of psychological distress than a feeling of helplessness.(6) (One recent study showed this was true in an educational setting: distress was inversely related to how much influence and autonomy teachers said they had with respect to school policy.[7]) Whereas rewards and punishments are notably ineffective at maintaining behavior change,(8) people are likely to persist at doing constructive things, like exercising, quitting smoking, or fighting cavities, when they have some choice about the specifics of such programs.(9) Laboratory experiments have also shown that individuals are better able to tolerate unpleasant sensations like noise, cold, or electric shock when they know they have the power to end them. (10)

Children are no exception to these rules, the studies show. One-year-old infants had fun with a noisy mechanical toy if they could make it start; it was less interesting, and sometimes even frightening, if they had no control over its action.(11) Elementary students had higher self-esteem and a greater feeling of academic competence when their teachers bolstered their sense of self-determination in the classroom. (12)

2. Effects on behavior and values. One is repeatedly struck by the absurd spectacle of adults insisting that children need to become self-disciplined, or lamenting that “kids just don’t take responsibility for their own behavior” – while spending their days ordering children around. The truth is that, if we want children to take responsibility for their own behavior, we must first *give* them responsibility, and plenty of it. *The way a child learns how to make decisions is by making decisions, not by following directions.*As Constance Kamii has written,

> We cannot expect children to accept ready-made values and truths all the way through school, and then suddenly make choices in adulthood. Likewise, we cannot expect them to be manipulated with reward and punishment in school, and to have the courage of a Martin Luther King in adulthood.(13)

In fact, an emphasis on following instructions, respecting authority (regardless of whether that respect has been earned), and obeying the rules (regardless of whether they are reasonable) teaches a disturbing lesson. Stanley Milgram's famous experiment, in which ordinary people gave what they thought were terribly painful shocks to hapless strangers merely because they were told to do so, is not just a comment about "society" or "human nature." It is a cautionary tale about certain ways of teaching children. Indeed, an emphasis on obedience, with all the trappings of control that must be used for enforcing it, typically fails even on its own terms: children are less likely to comply with a rule when they have had no role in inventing or even discussing it. And if our goals are more ambitious – if we want children to make good values their own over the long haul – then there is no substitute for giving them the chance to become actively involved in deciding what kind of people they want to be and what kind of classroom or school they want to have.

To talk about the importance of choice is also to talk about democracy. At present, as Shelley Berman of Educators for Social Responsibility has drily noted, "We teach reading, writing, and math by [having students do] them, but we teach democracy by lecture."(14) I believe it is time to call the bluff of every educator who claims to prize democratic principles. Anyone who truly values democracy ought to be thinking about preparing students to participate in a democratic culture or to transform a culture into a democracy, as the case may be. The only way this can happen, the only way children can acquire both the skills of decision making and the inclination to use them, is if we maximize their experiences with choice and negotiation.(15)

Ultimately, even virtues that appear to be quite different from an orientation toward participation or a capacity to make intelligent decisions turn out to depend on these things. For example, like many others, I am concerned about how we can help children to become generous, caring people who see themselves as part of a community.(16) But these values simply cannot be successfully promoted in the absence of choice. A jarring reminder of that fact was provided by a man who recalled being "taught that my highest duty was to help those in need" but added that he learned this lesson in the context of how important it was to "obey promptly the wishes and commands of my parents, teachers, and priests, and indeed of all adults.... Whatever they said was always right." The man who said that was Rudolf Höss, the commandant of

Auschwitz.(17) A commitment to helping is important, but if the environment in which such values are taught emphasizes obedience rather than autonomy, all may be lost.

3. Effects on academic achievement. Every teacher who is told what material to cover, when to cover it, and how to evaluate children's performance is a teacher who knows that enthusiasm for one's work quickly evaporates in the face of being controlled. Not every teacher, however, realizes that exactly the same thing holds true for students: deprive them of self-determination and you have likely deprived them of motivation. If learning is a matter of following orders, students simply will not take to it in the way they would if they had some say about what they were doing. Not long ago, in a 10th-grade geometry class whose teacher collaborates with students to decide about curriculum and grades, a student explained to me that being able to make such choices "leads to learning rather than just remembering."

The evidence to support that view is so compelling that it is frankly difficult to understand how anyone can talk about school reform without immediately addressing the question of how students can be given more say about what goes on in their classes. The classic Eight-Year Study, which should be required reading for everyone with an interest in education, provided data on this point more than half a century ago. After 30 high schools were encouraged to develop innovative programs whose "essential value was democracy,"(18) researchers found that the graduates of those schools did better in college than a matched comparison group from traditional schools. In fact, the students who were most successful tended to come from the schools that had departed most significantly from the conventional college-prep approach — the approach currently lauded by those calling for higher standards, more accountability, and getting back to basics.

Subsequent research has confirmed the conclusion:

- 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 opportunity to decide for themselves how to find solutions – they "consistently produced better write-ups of experiments" and remembered the material better than those who had been told exactly what to do. They put in more time than they had to, spending "extra laboratory periods checking results that could have been accepted without extra work." Some of the students initially resisted having to make decisions about how to proceed, but these grumblers later "took great pride in being able to carry through an experiment on their

own."(20)

- When preschoolers in Massachusetts were allowed to select the materials they used for making a collage, their work was judged more creative than the work of children who used exactly the same materials but did not get to choose them.(21)
- When college students in New York State had the chance to decide which of several puzzles they wanted to work on and how to allot their time to each of them, they were a lot more interested in working on such puzzles later than were students who were told what to do.(22)
- When teachers of inner-city black children were trained in a program designed to promote a sense of self-determination, the students in these classes missed less school and scored better on a national test of basic skills than those in conventional classrooms.(23)
- When second-graders spent the year in a math classroom where textbooks and rewards were discarded in favor of an emphasis on "intellectual autonomy" – that is, where children, working in groups, took an active role in figuring out their own solutions to problems and were free to move around the classroom on their own initiative to get the materials they needed – they developed more sophisticated reasoning skills without falling behind on basic conceptual tasks.(24)

The evidence goes on and on. At least one recent study has found that children given more "opportunity to participate in decisions about schoolwork" score higher on standardized tests;(25) other research shows that they are more likely than those deprived of autonomy to continue working even on relatively uninteresting tasks.(26) There is no question about it: even if our only criterion is academic performance, choice works.

In a way, this conclusion shouldn't be surprising. Putting aside the value of particular programs that give students more discretion about what they are doing, the irrefutable fact is that students always have a choice about whether they will learn. We may be able to force them to complete an assignment, but we can't compel them to learn effectively or to care about what they are doing. The bottom line is that "teaching requires 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.

4. *Effects on teachers.* Despite attitudinal barriers to creating democratic classrooms and schools, which I will discuss later, educators who are willing to share power may well find that they benefit directly from doing so. One's job becomes a good deal more interesting when it involves collaborating with students to decide what is going to happen. As one fifth-grade teacher in upstate New York explained,

> I've been teaching for more than 30 years, and I would have been burned

> out long ago but for the fact that I involve my students in designing the curriculum. I'll say to them, "What's the most exciting way we could study this next unit?" If we decide their first suggestion isn't feasible, I'll say, "Okay, what's the next most exciting way we could study this?" They always come up with good proposals, they're motivated because I'm using their ideas, and I never do the unit in the same way twice.(28)

Teachers also benefit in other ways from allowing students to be active participants in their learning. In such a classroom, according to the researchers involved in the second-grade math project described above, the teacher is "freed from the chore of constantly monitoring and supervising the children's activity and [is] able to give her full attention to . . . interacting with the children" as they work.(29)

5. Intrinsic value. Finally, it needs to be said that allowing people to make decisions about what happens to them is inherently preferable to controlling them. It is more respectful and consistent with basic values to which most of us claim to subscribe. Apart from the skills that will be useful for students to have in the future, they ought to have a chance to choose in the present. Children, after all, are not just adults-in-the-making. They are people whose current needs and rights and experiences must be taken seriously. Put it this way: students should not only be trained to live in a democracy when they grow up; they should have the chance to live in one today.(30)

CHOOSING IN PRACTICE

Because quite a few programs and practices in which children can make meaningful choices have been described elsewhere, I will offer only a sampling of the ways this basic idea can be implemented. These suggestions can be grouped according to whether they are primarily concerned with academic decisions or with social and behavioral ones.

Academic issues

The four key realms in which students can make academic decisions are what, how, how well, and why they learn. *What* they learn is the most straightforward of these. Student participation here can range from choosing where in an assigned text to start reading to deciding what course to take. In between these examples is the question of what is to be read, not only by individual students but by the class as a whole. "Here are five books that the supply store has in stock," a fourth-grade teacher may say to the class. "Why don't you flip through them during your free time this week, and we'll decide together on Friday which one to read next." (Of course, if students are not reading stories at all but making their way through worksheets and workbooks, basals and primers and dittos, then their capacity to participate in their education has been significantly curtailed from the start.)

Teachers may not always have the discretion to let students participate in deciding what topic to study. But even when compelled to teach a certain lesson, a teacher might open up a discussion in which members of the class try to figure out together why someone apparently thought the subject was important enough to be required. The next step would be to connect that topic to students' real-world concerns and interests. When teachers have themselves decided for one reason or another to exclude students from the selection of the subject matter, there is still room to give them choices about the specific questions within a general topic to be explored. A teacher might begin any unit, for example, by inviting children to discuss what they already know about the subject and what they would like to know.

The question of *how* students learn embraces a great many issues – beginning with whether to work alone, in small groups, or as a class – and including such incidental matters as where students will sit (or lie) while they work. (One teacher swears that achievement in her class improved markedly as soon as she gave students the right to find a favorite reading place and position.) And there are other choices as well: if a student has written a story, she ought to be able to decide whether or not to read it aloud and, if so, whether to answer her classmates' questions about it afterward and, if so, whom to call on.

Every day ought to include at least one block of time in which children can decide individually what to do: get a head start on homework, write in one's journal, work on an art project, or read a library book. Creative writing assignments offer plenty of opportunity for decisions to be made by the writers themselves. In expressing an idea or responding to a lesson, children sometimes can be allowed to decide what medium or genre they will use – whether they want to write a poem, an essay, or a play or do a collage, painting, or sculpture. Mathematics lessons can be guided by quantitative issues of interest to students.

The entire constructivist tradition is predicated on the idea of student autonomy, which is to say, the chance for students to view learning as something "under their control rather than as disembodied, objectified, subject matter."(31) The same can be said about some (but not all) models of cooperative learning. One version, devised by Shlomo Sharan and his colleagues and known as Group Investigation, is based on the idea of active participation throughout the process. Students break a subject into specific questions, sort themselves into groups to explore these questions, plan and conduct an investigation, and figure out how to share what they have learned with the rest of the class.(32)

To talk about *how well* a student is doing is to raise the complicated issues of assessment and evaluation, the improvement of which has lately been of increasing concern to educators. But a key consideration in changing these systems, beyond whether judgments are based on sufficiently rich measures of student achievement, is the extent to which students themselves are involved in the process. Obviously, the chance to pick one of three possible essay questions for one's final paper does not begin to get at what is important here. Students ought to help determine the criteria by which their work will be judged and then play a role in weighing their work against those criteria. This achieves several things at once: it gives students more control over their education, it makes evaluation feel less punitive, and it provides an important learning experience in itself. Students can derive enormous intellectual benefits from thinking about what makes a story interesting, a mathematical proof elegant, or an argument convincing. More traditional approaches to testing can also be improved if students are consulted about what the test ought to cover and when it ought to be given; there is no need for teachers to decide these things on their own.

Last, and most frequently overlooked, is the need to involve students in talking about *why* they are learning. Few aspects of education are more important than the "participation of the learner in the formation of the purposes which direct his activities in the learning process," as Dewey put it.(33) Children should be given a voice not only about the means of learning but also the ends, the why as well as the what. Even very young 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)

Social and behavioral issues

School is about more than intellectual development; it is about learning to become a responsible, caring person who can make good choices and solve problems effectively. Thus educators must think about ways of helping students to take an active part in decisions that are only indirectly related to academics.

Is it necessary to raise one's hand before talking or to line up before walking through the school? How much noise is too much? How should the furniture be arranged in our room? Where might we take a field trip? These are the sorts of questions that children should be encouraged to ponder and argue about. In considering what kind of classroom or school each person wants to have, the point is to reach consensus on general guidelines or principles, not to formulate a list of rules. (Specific admonitions tend to invite legalistic thinking about their application and a preoccupation with enforcement that emphasizes punishment over problem solving.) Moreover, this process goes well beyond, and may even exclude, the practice of voting. What we want to promote are talking and listening, looking for alternatives and trying to reach agreement, solving problems together and making meaningful choices. Voting, which is an exercise in adversarial majoritarianism, often involves none of these acts. It may be the least objectionable method when a quarter of a billion people must govern themselves, but classroom teachers can do better.(35)

A structured opportunity for members of a class or school to meet and make decisions provides several advantages: it helps children feel respected by making it clear that their opinions matter; it builds a sense of belongingness and community; and it contributes to the development of social and cognitive skills such as perspective taking (imagining how the world looks to someone else), conflict resolution, and rational analysis.(36) Few contrasts in education are as striking as that between students participating in such meetings, taking responsibility for deciding how they want their classroom to be, and students sitting in rows, having been bribed or threatened into complying with an adult's rules.

Thus, when problems develop, the adage for teachers to keep in mind is "Bring the kids in on it." This approach may call for a class meeting in the case of a conflict involving a number of students, or, when only one or two are directly concerned, it could mean a conversation just with them. If a child is daydreaming and failing to complete assignments, or if two children cannot seem to be anywhere near each other without becoming nasty, the most successful (and respectful)(37) solutions are those that emerge after the teacher asks, "What do you think we can do about this?"

REASONABLE LIMITS

A number of writers and teachers who resist giving children the chance to make decisions have justified their opposition by erecting an enormous straw man called "absolute freedom" and counterposing it to the status quo. Since most of us do not relish the idea of children spending their time at school doing anything they please, deprived of structure or adult guidance, we are encouraged to settle for the controlling practices that now exist.

Not only is this a classic false dichotomy, but virtually every influential proponent of choice for students – as well as the programs that have put the idea into effect – proceeds from the assumption that there are indeed limits on the capacity and right of children to decide. The scary specter of laissez-faire liberty that shows up in the rhetoric of traditionalists is not easy to locate in the real world. Nearly every essay on education by John Dewey, the father of progressive schooling, stresses the importance of adult guidance and derides the idea of “leaving a child to his own unguided fancies.”(38) Even A. S. Neill, whose Summerhill school and philosophy lie at the outer edges of serious discussion about the issue, distinguished sharply between freedom and license, emphasizing repeatedly that “a child should not be permitted to violate the personal rights of others.”(39) All reasonable adults, meanwhile, acknowledge that safety concerns will necessitate placing constraints on certain kinds of actions.

While agreement exists at a general level about the need to restrict students’ choice, however, there is far less consensus about when and how to do so. The issues most frequently raised in support of such restrictions are not as simple as they first appear. Take the question of *age.* It goes without saying that a 16-year-old can approach a decision in a more sophisticated way than a 6-year-old and therefore can usually be entrusted with more responsibility. But this fact is sometimes used to justify preventing younger children from making choices that are well within their capabilities. Moreover, the idea that we must wait until children are mature enough to handle responsibilities may set up a vicious circle: after all, it is experience with decisions that helps children become capable of handling them.(40)

A second rationale for restricting choice is *time:* if students were entitled to make decisions about, and had to agree on, everything they did, there would be no time to do anything else. True enough, and yet the heuristic value of such discussions is often overlooked in the rush to get on with the “real” lesson. In class meetings, for example, teachers would do well to remember that, at least to some extent, *the process is the point.* The idea isn’t just to make a choice, reach a decision, and move on.

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 *can* be. As Deborah Meier has said, what matters is not whether a given issue is discussed but that it is discussable. Unavoidable time constraints should not be used to rationalize avoidable authoritarian practices.

Third, the importance of choice is often weighed against the fact that children need some *structure or limits* for their behavior, if not for their learning. Once again, this point may be accurate but does not justify much of what educators actually do. “The critical question,” as Thomas Gordon has put it, “is not *whether* limits and rules are needed . . . but rather who sets them: the adults alone or the adults and kids – together.”(41) Before depriving children of choice, then, an educator is obliged to demonstrate not that they need some structure but that there is some reason to exclude them from helping to shape that structure. The crucial difference between structures and limits, on the one hand, and control and coercion, on the other, has generally gone unrecognized.(42)

Fourth, and possibly most compelling, is the caution that the right to choose must give way to the needs and preferences of *other people*. Even the minimalist sort of liberalism articulated by Neill (in which one's connection to others is limited to not violating their rights) implies that people cannot do whatever they want. A more ambitious commitment to the value of community would seem to restrict choice even more severely. While each child ought to have more opportunity to make decisions than is typically allowed in American classrooms, such decisions must take into account their impact on the other people in the room. This may not feel like a burdensome restriction once a child has internalized a concern about others' well-being – but, strictly speaking, one person's freedom to choose is always compromised by a set of obligations to others. At a recent town meeting of the long-standing experimental school-within-a-school program at Brookline (Massachusetts) High School, one student remarked that someone's choice to show up in class without having done the reading assignment adversely affects the quality of discussion for everyone. "It's not just 'You get out what you put into it,'" another girl added. "It's 'You get out what the class puts into it' " – and vice versa.

On closer examination, however, it seems clear that what must occasionally be restricted is not choice but *individual* choice. (It is an interesting reflection on our culture that we tend to see these as interchangeable.) To affirm the importance of community does not at all compromise the right to make decisions, per se, or the importance of involving everyone in a class or school in such a process. In fact, we might say that it is the integration of these two values, community and choice, that defines democracy.

I think we can conclude that, while some legitimate limits to the right to choose can be identified, the most commonly cited reasons for those limits may not automatically justify restrictions. But this discussion also raises questions about a conventional response to the matter of appropriate limits. Many people, understandably impatient with an either/or choice in which the possibilities are limited to freedom and its absence, assert that we need to find a happy medium between these two poles. This seems facile. For one thing, such a pronouncement offers no guidance about where on that continuum we should set up camp. For another, it overlooks the fact that the sensible alternative to two extremes may not be an intermediate point but a different way of thinking about the issue altogether. The interesting question here, for example, is not how *much* adults should limit the power of children to make decisions, but *how* they should get involved.

In a broad sense, that involvement may consist of suggesting the tasks, teaching the skills, supplying the resources – in short, providing the conditions under which students can choose productively and learn effectively. The teacher's role is to be a facilitator, but, as Carolyn Edwards points out, this doesn't mean to "'mak[e] smooth or easy,' but rather to 'stimulate' [learning] by making problems more complex, involving, and arousing."(43) Notice the implication here: a democratic classroom is not one where the teacher has less work to do. There is no zero-sum game in which more responsibility for the children means less for the adults. Helping students to participate effectively takes talent and patience and hard work. "I'm in control of putting students in control," one teacher told me — a responsibility that demands more of an educator than simply telling students what to do.

Notice also that this role for the teacher does not always amount to being a voice for moderation or mainstream values – a conservative counterweight to students' reckless impulses. If, for example, children have been raised to assume that anyone who does something wrong must be forced to suffer a punitive consequence, they will be likely, left to their own devices, to spend their time deciding what should be done to a rule breaker. Here, the teacher might intervene to guide the discussion away from "Which punishment?" and toward the more radical question of whether an entirely different response – "Something has gone wrong; how can we solve this problem?" – might be more productive.

On a range of issues, adults can participate and circumscribe children's choices in fundamentally different ways. To wit:

*The teacher and the students may take turns at deciding something, each choosing on alternate weeks, for example, which book to read next. Or the responsibility can rotate between individual students, cooperative learning groups, the whole class, and the teacher.

*The teacher may offer suggestions and guidance, questions and criticism, but leave the final choice to students. Thus I have heard a third-grade teacher advise her students that it might not be a good idea to go outside for recess on a day when there is slush on the ground but then make it clear that it is up to each child to make the final decision for him- or herself. A high school teacher, meanwhile, suggests that it might make sense for the whole class to talk about the homework together but offers them the option of discussing it in small groups if they prefer.

*The teacher can narrow the number of possibilities from which students are permitted to choose. He or she may want to do this to make sure that any material or text a student works with is likely to be of educational value and of approximately the right level of challenge. (On the other hand, neither of these goals always requires restricting children's choice.[44] And even when the teacher does decide to limit their options, she should explain her rationale for doing so and remain open to reasonable additions to her list. As a general rule, it is more important for children to have the chance to *generate* different possibilities than merely to select one possibility from among those that have been set before them.[45])

*The teacher may provide the parameters according to which decisions can be made, perhaps specifying the goal that has to be reached but inviting students to figure out how they want to get there. For example, "It's important to me that no one in here feels scared that other people will laugh at him for saying something stupid. How do you think we can prevent that from happening?" Or, "I need some way at the end of this unit to see how much you understand. Think of a way you might be able to demonstrate what you've learned."

*A decision does not have to be thought of as something that teachers either make or turn over to students. Instead, it can be negotiated together. The emphasis here is on shared responsibility for deciding what gets learned and how the learning takes place. This process can become a lesson in itself – an opportunity to make arguments, solve problems, anticipate consequences, and take other people's needs into account – as well as a powerful contribution to motivation.

While well-meaning educators may offer very different prescriptions regarding the nature and scope of students' participation in decision making, I believe that certain ways of limiting participation are basically deceptive and best described as "pseudochoice." It is disturbing to find these tactics recommended not only by proponents of blatantly controlling classroom management programs, such as Assertive Discipline, but also by critics of such programs who purport to offer an enlightened alternative.

In the first version of pseudochoice, a student is offered a choice that is obviously loaded. "You can finish your math problems now or you can stay in during recess. Which would you prefer?" The problem here is not just that the number of options has been reduced to two, but that the second one is obviously something no student would select. The teacher is really saying, "Do what I tell you or you'll be punished," but he is attempting to camouflage this conventional use of coercion by pretending to offer the student a choice.

In a variation of this gambit, the student is punished after disobeying the teacher's command, but the punishment is presented as something the student asked for: "I see you've chosen to miss recess today." The appeal of this tactic is no mystery: it appears to relieve the teacher of responsibility for what she is about to do to the child. But it is a fundamentally dishonest attribution. Children may choose not to complete a math assignment,(46) but they certainly do not choose to miss recess; teachers do that *to*them. To the injury of punishment is added the insult of a kind of mind game whereby reality is redefined and children are told, in effect, that they chose to be punished. This gimmick uses the word *choice* as a bludgeon rather than giving children what they need, which is the opportunity to participate in making real decisions about what happens to them.(47)

Another kind of pseudochoice purports to let a student or a class make a decision even though there is only one choice that will be accepted. I recently heard a well-known educator and advocate for children reminisce about her experiences as a teacher. Recalling a student of hers who frequently and articulately challenged her authority, she commented with a smile, "I had to be a better negotiator than she was." This remark suggests that what had taken place was not negotiation at all but thinly disguised manipulation. As Nel Noddings has written, "We cannot enter into dialogue with children when we know that our decision is already made."(48)

If students are informed that they have made the "wrong" decision and must try again, they will realize they were not truly free to choose in the first place. But the last, and most insidious, variety of pseudochoice tries to prevent students from figuring this out by encouraging them to think they had a say when the game was actually rigged. The "engineering of consent," as it has been called, seems to offer autonomy while providing "the assurance of order and conformity – a most seductive combination. Yet its appearance and its means should be understood for what they really are: a method of securing and solidifying the interests of those in power."(49) This description by educator James Beane might have been inspired by the behavior of politicians, but it is no less applicable to what goes on in schools. If we want students to learn how to choose, they must have the opportunity to make *real* choices.

BARRIERS

If we are to act on the arguments and evidence supporting the value of making students active participants in their education, we need to understand why more educators haven't already done so. I think the barriers to giving students more choice fall into three categories: structural impediments, resistance by teachers, and resistance by the students themselves.

Structural impediments. Classroom teachers frequently protest that they would love to open up the decision-making process but for the fact that a significant number of decisions are not theirs to give away or even to make themselves. Highly controlling schools and school districts may leave teachers very little discretion about either curricular or disciplinary issues. As Dewey noted, classrooms characterized by demands for "sheer obedience to the will of an adult" may sometimes imply a "situation [that] almost forced [that arrangement] upon the teacher," such as an absence of democracy or community among the educators themselves.(50) Even if controlling structures do not literally remove options from teachers, they may create a climate in which teachers do to children what is done to them. Often, teachers subject to rigid directives from above may find it easier not "to resist administrators but to increase controls on their students."(51)

Resistance by teachers. While structural constraints are sometimes very real, they can also be used as excuses to withhold power from students that teachers in any case are not inclined to share. The traditional instructional model sees the teacher as the king or queen of the classroom, and the fact is that monarchs do not always abdicate gracefully. On the basis of my own years as a teacher as well as my conversations with scores of others in the profession, I would argue that there is a certain reassurance and satisfaction to be taken from making unilateral decisions. No wonder many teachers who express relief at having "a good class this year" use the word *good* as parents of a newborn might talk about having "a good baby" — that is, one who is quiet, docile, and little trouble to manage.

Popular books about classroom life, as well as workshops and other forms of guidance offered to educators, typically take for granted that a teacher must secure control of the class. Hence the use of curricular materials, including basals and worksheets, that have the effect of keeping order.(52) And hence the popularity of manipulative measures such as punishments and rewards: their use can be traced back to the belief that there are exactly two possibilities: control or chaos. When students are allowed to make decisions, it is therefore only about matters that don't threaten the teacher's reign. More than once I have heard teachers pride themselves on letting students choose "when I don't really care what they end up with" — which is, of course, a far cry from a democratic process that helps students to become responsible decision makers.

If challenged, defenders of classroom autocracy may insist that a teacher must get control of the class *first* in order that students can be helped to become good learners and good people. Whether this is a sincerely held belief or just a rationalization for holding on to power, it is simply wrong. Control not only is unnecessary for fostering academic motivation; it undermines its development, substituting reluctant compliance for the excitement that comes from the experience of self-determination. Likewise for the nonacademic realm: as one group of social scientists put it, the emphasis on control “endanger[s] the long-term enterprise of socialization itself.”(53)

This is no mere academic speculation. Watch what happens when a teacher concerned about maintaining control of his classroom walks away for a few minutes or is absent for a day: the class is likely to erupt, just as a child raised by parents who emphasize strict discipline is apt to misbehave when he is away from home. It is in classrooms (and families) where participation is valued above adult control that students have the chance to learn self-control — and are more likely to keep working when the teacher or parent isn’t around.

There is nothing surprising about the fact that teachers resist being told what they can teach and how they must manage their classrooms. The astonishing fact is that so many of these teachers treat their students in exactly the way they themselves find so offensive. Whatever the reason for this discrepancy, though, students must be permitted to make substantive decisions about learning and living together, and this will not happen until teachers and administrators understand that *control can’t be the goal* — oreven a technique. This recognition, in turn, may require reconsidering basic beliefs about human nature and motivation. A teacher convinced that children are egocentric little terrors who must be forced to attend to other people’s needs is likely to prefer a model of tight control.(54) And control, in turn, produces exactly the sort of antisocial behavior that such a teacher expects, confirming the view that such tactics are needed.

Sometimes, however, the main barrier to giving children choices is a simple lack of gumption. Parting with power is not easy, if only because the results are less predictable than in a situation where we have control. Asking students to decide about even the simplest issues can be scary. An elementary teacher once told me how difficult it was for her to leave the classroom walls bare when her students showed up on the first day of school. If she had already decorated them, she realized, it was really *her* room they were entering. But it took several years before she found the courage to bring them into the process, a decision that ultimately made an enormous difference in how the children felt about coming to school — and also occasioned natural and eagerly received lesson on fractions so that the students could measure and tack up the construction paper that they had chosen for *their* walls.

Student resistance. Finally, and most discouragingly, teachers sometimes find that their willingness to let students make decisions is met with an apparent reluctance on the part of the students. This is really not so surprising, given that most of them have been conditioned to accept a posture of passivity at school and sometimes at home. After a few years of being instructed to do what you're told, it is disconcerting to be invited – much less expected – to take responsibility for the way things are.(55)

This resistance takes three primary forms. The first is simply *refusing:* "That's your job to decide," students may protest. The second is *testing:* offering outrageous suggestions or responses to see if the teacher is really serious about the invitation to participate. The third is *parroting:* repeating what adults have said or guessing what this adult probably wants to hear. (Thus a fifth-grader asked to suggest a guideline for class conduct may recite, "We should keep our hands and feet to ourselves.")

The key question is how we respond to these maneuvers. It can be tempting to conclude that students are either unable to handle the responsibility of making decisions or unworthy of having it. But our challenge is to persevere. As Selma Wassermann has written,

> I have heard teachers give it up after a single attempt, saying, "Children cannot behave responsibly," then remove all further opportunity for students to practice and grow in their responsible behavior. I have also heard teachers say, "Children cannot think for themselves," and proceed thereafter to do children's thinking for them. But these same teachers would *never* say, "These children cannot read by themselves," and thereafter remove any opportunity for them to learn to read.(56)

Specifically, the comment "That's your job" provides a teachable moment, a chance to engage students in a conversation about their experiences with being controlled and about when they have found learning to be most exciting. Outlandish ideas can be met with a sense of humor but also taken seriously: a student who is asked how school could be improved and replies that all the books should be thrown away may be saying something about her experience of the curriculum that we ignore at our peril. Finally, in the case of parroting, it can be hard even to recognize this tactic as a form of resistance – or as something undesirable. Getting our ideas to come out of their mouths is a ventriloquist's trick, not a sign of successful participation and student autonomy. It represents an invitation to ask students about their experiences with saying what they 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.

Of course, whether the last point is true – whether we really are looking for students who take risks and make decisions – is the first question that each of us must answer. The structural and attitudinal barriers erected by educators often seem impregnable, with the result that students continue to feel powerless and, to that extent, burned out. For decades, prescriptions have been offered to enhance student motivation and achievement. But these ideas are unlikely to make much of a difference so long as students are controlled and silenced. It is not "utopian" or "naive" to think that learners can make responsible decisions about their own learning; those words best describe the belief that any group of people will do something effectively and enthusiastically when they are unable to make choices about what they are doing.

NOTES

1. For example, see Charles E. Silberman, *Crisis in the Classroom: The Remaking of American Education*(New York: Random House, 1970); John I. Goodlad, *A Place Called School: Prospects for the Future*(New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984); Linda McNeil, *Contradictions of Control: School Structure and School Knowledge* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986); and the observations of William Glasser in much of his work.

2. Felicia R. Lee, "Disrespect Rules," *New York Times Education Life*, 4 April 1993, p. 16.

3. Strictly speaking, as such thinkers as Jean-Paul Sartre and Viktor Frankl have pointed out, people are never entirely powerless. Deborah Meier applies this observation to an education context: "Even devalued and disrespected people remain powerful, but they are forced to exercise their powers in odd, distorted, and limited ways.... Children have been exercising their powers for years, without the formal right to do so. Ditto for teachers ... [who] sabotage reforms – the best and the worst – when they feel imposed upon and helpless." See "The Kindergarten Tradition in the High School," in Kathe Jervis and Carol Montag, eds., *Progressive Education for the 1990s: Transforming Practice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 199 1), pp. 140-41.

4. Suzanne C. Kobasa and her colleagues found that control, together with a deeply felt commitment to one's activities and the tendency to perceive change as a positive challenge, contributed to a profile of "hardiness" that provides significant protection against illness. See, for example, "Stressful Life Events, Personality, and Health: An Inquiry into Hardiness," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 37, 1979, pp. 1-10. See also Robert A. Karasek et al., "Job Characteristics in Relation to the Prevalence of Myocardial Infarction in the U.S. Health Examination

Survey (HES) and the Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (HANES)," *American Journal of Public Health*, vol. 78, 1988, pp. 910-16.

5. Judith Rodin and Ellen J. Langer, "Long-Term Effects of a Control-Relevant Intervention with the Institutionalized Aged," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 35, 1977, pp. 897-902. In another study, nursing home residents who were able to control (or at least predict) when a student would come visit them were not only happier and more hopeful but also physically healthier than those who received the same number of visits but on a random schedule. See Richard Schulz, "Effects of Control and Predictability on the Physical and Psychological Well-Being of the Institutionalized Aged," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 33, 1976, pp. 563-73.

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, *Positive Illusions: Creative Self-Deception and the Healthy Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1989).

7. See Elizabeth Tuettemann and Keith F. Punch, "Teachers' Psychological Distress: The Ameliorating Effects of Control over the Work Environment," *Educational Review*, vol. 44, 1992, pp. 181-94.

8. See Alfie Kohn, *Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993).

9. Women who were told they could choose the particulars of an exercise program at a health club were more likely to continue attending over six weeks (and to declare their willingness to keep coming after that) than were women who were told their program was simply assigned to them – even though they, too, were actually assigned activities on the basis of the preferences they had expressed. See Carol E. Thompson and Leonard M. Wankel, "The Effects of Perceived Activity Choice upon Frequency of Exercise Behavior," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, vol. 10, 1980, pp. 436-43. A smoking cessation program that "focused attention on the individual's own efforts in smoking cessation" was more successful than one in which people followed a set of guidelines. See Judith M. Harackiewicz et al., "Attributional Processes in Behavior Change and Maintenance: Smoking Cessation and Continued Abstinence," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, vol. 55, 1987, pp. 372-78. Adolescent girls (but not boys) were more likely to continue using an anticavity fluoride rinse for nearly half a year when they were invited to make decisions about how the program was designed and monitored. See

Joseph A. Burleson et al., “Effects of Decisional Control and Work Orientation on Persistence in Preventive Health Behavior,” *Health Psychology*, vol. 9, 1990, pp. 1-17.

10. This research has been reviewed and evaluated by Suzanne C. Thompson, “Will It Hurt Less If I Can Control It? A Complex Answer to a Simple Question,” *Psychological Bulletin*, vol. 90, 1981, pp. 89-101.

11. Megan R. Gunnar-Vongnechten, “Changing a Frightening Toy into a Pleasant Toy by Allowing the Infant to Control Its Actions,” *Developmental Psychology*, vol. 14, 1978, pp. 157-62.

12. Richard M. Ryan and Wendy S. Grolnick, “Origins and Pawns in the Classroom: Self-Report and Projective Assessment of Individual Differences in Children’s Perceptions,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 50, 1986, pp. 550-58.

13. Constance Kamii, “Toward Autonomy: The Importance of Critical Thinking and Choice Making,” *School Psychology Review*, vol. 20, 199 1, p. 387. In fact, the lessons of conformity that Kamii finds troubling are those that concern academic activities (such as having to “learn mathematics through blind obedience”), not just behavior.

14. Shelley Berman, “The Real Ropes Course: The Development of Social Consciousness,” *ESR Journal*, 1990, p. 2. The authors of a classic text on high school teaching comment wryly that the American motto could be: “Let’s have education for democracy, but let’s be careful about democracy in education!” See Jean Dresden Grambs and John C. Carr, *Modern Methods in Secondary Education*, 4th ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1979), p. 71.

15. Citing several sources, Joseph D’Amico concludes that “children who have experiences in a school where they participate in making decisions are more likely to be … motivated to make decisions both in and out of school.” See “Reviving Student Participation,” *Educational Leadership*, October 1980, pp. 44-46.

16. See Alfie Kohn, “Caring Kids: The Role of the Schools,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, March 1991, pp. 496-506.

17. Höss is quoted in Alice Miller, *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-Rearing and the Roots of Violence* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1984), pp. 67-68.

18. Kathy Irwin, “The Eight Year Study,” in Jervis and Montag, eds., p. 59.

For a more comprehensive description of the study, see Wilford M. Aiken, *The Story of the Eight-Year Study* (New York: Harper, 1942); and Dean Chamberlin et al., *Did They Succeed in College?* (New York: Harper, 1942).

19. Margaret C. Wang and Billie Stiles, "An Investigation of Children's Concept of Self-Responsibility for Their School Learning," *American Educational Research Journal*, vol. 13, 1976, pp. 159-79. Unfortunately, task completion was the only outcome measured in this study.

20. Robert G. Rainey, "The Effects of Directed Versus Non-Directed Laboratory Work on High School Chemistry Achievement," *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, vol. 3, 1965, pp. 286-92.

21. Teresa M. Amabile and Judith Gitomer, "Children's Artistic Creativity: Effects of Choice in Task Materials," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, vol. 10, 1984, pp. 209-15.

22. Miron Zuckerman et al., "On the Importance of Self-Determination for Intrinsically-Motivated Behavior," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, vol. 4, 1978, pp. 443-46. On the relation between choice and task involvement, see also John G. Nicholls, *The Competitive Ethos and Democratic Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 169.

23. Richard de Charms, "Personal Causation Training in the Schools," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, vol. 2, 1972, pp. 95-113.

24. For a description of the classroom structure in this yearlong experiment, see Erna Yackel et al., "Small-Group Interactions as a Source of Learning Opportunities in Second-Grade Mathematics," *Journal for Research in Mathematics Education*, vol. 22, 1991, pp. 390-408. For a discussion of the results, see Paul Cobb et al., "Assessment of a Problem-Centered Second-Grade Mathematics Project," *Journal for Research in Mathematics Education*, vol. 22, 1991, pp. 3-29.

25. Ann K. Boggiano et al., "Helplessness Deficits in Students: The Role of Motivational Orientation," *Motivation and Emotion*, vol. 16, 1992, pp. 278-80. Informal reports from other researchers suggest that a more typical result from an intervention of this sort is an enhancement of conceptual thinking skills (along with intrinsic motivation and other psychological and social benefits) but no change on standardized test scores, which probably is a reflection on how little these scores really mean. It should be sufficient to be able to show people who care about these scores that

giving students more choice about their learning has no detrimental effect on their performance on machine-scored tests while bringing about a variety of other advantages.

26. Three studies to this effect are cited in John Condry, "Enemies of Exploration: Self-Initiated Versus Other-Initiated Learning," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 35, 1977, p. 466.

27. John Nicholls and Susan P. Hazzard, *Education as Adventure: Lessons from the Second Grade* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993), p. 76.

28. Richard Lauricella is quoted in Thomas Lickona, *Educating for Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility* (New York: Bantam, 1991), p. 148. Presumably he does not mean to suggest that every aspect of a unit must be taught differently from one year to the next, only that an element that is changed on the basis of students' suggestions within a predictable structure can be invigorating for a teacher.

29. Yackel et al., p. 401.

30. This point is made forcefully by David Charnoff, "Democratic Schooling: Means or End?," *High School Journal*, vol. 64, 1981, pp. 170-75.

31. Paul Cobb et al., "Young Children's Emotional Acts While Engaged in Mathematical Problem Solving," in D. B. McLeod and V. M. Adams, eds., *Affect and Mathematical Problem Solving: A New Perspective* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1989), p. 129.

32. See Yael Sharan and Shlomo Sharan, *Expanding Cooperative Learning Through Group Investigation*(New York: Teachers College Press, 1992). At its best, cooperative learning "gives students an active role in deciding about, planning, directing and controlling the content and pace of their learning activities. It changes the students' role from recipients of information to seekers, analyzers and synthesizers of information. It transforms pupils from listeners into talkers and doers, from powerless pawns into participant citizens empowered to influence decisions about what they must do in school." See Shlomo Sharan, "Cooperative Learning: Problems and Promise," the *International Association for the Study of Cooperation in Education Newsletter*, December 1986, p. 4.

33. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (1938; reprint, New York: Collier, 1963), p. 67.

34. See Nicholls and Hazzard, esp. pp. 182-84.

35. Sometimes elementary school students are asked to put their heads down when they raise their hands to register a preference. This strikes me as an apt metaphor for the whole enterprise of voting. "Who thinks we should take our field trip to the museum? Who prefers the zoo? Okay, the zoo wins, 15 to 12." About the best that can be said for this exercise is that it didn't take very long. Children have learned precious little about how to solve a problem, accommodate other people's preferences, or rethink their initial inclinations. Moreover, 12 children are now unlikely to feel very excited about the upcoming field trip. The same analysis applies on a schoolwide basis. The usual student council apparatus is deficient on three counts: most students are excluded from direct participation in decision making, some students are turned into losers since the representatives are chosen in a contest, and the council has little real power in any case. Educators interested in democratic values will discourage voting whenever possible; as the political philosopher Benjamin Barber has cogently argued, it is "the least significant act of citizenship in a democracy." See *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 187.

36. My own thinking on how class meetings might be structured has been influenced primarily by the work of the Child Development Project, whose writings on the topic have not been published. [Addendum: *Ways We Want Our Class to Be: Class Meetings that Build Commitment to Kindness and Learning* was published in 1996.] I would, however, recommend two other useful and very practical discussions of class meetings: William Glasser, *Schools Without Failure* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), chaps. 10-12; and Lickona, chap. 8.

37. "Democracy in the classroom . . . begins simply: with respect for the child as a person, someone who has a point of view and a right and a need to express it." See Thomas Lickona and Muffy Paradise, "Democracy in the Elementary School," in Ralph Mosher, ed., *Moral Education: A First Generation of Research and Development* (New York: Praeger, 1980), p. 325.

38. The quotation is from Dewey's *The School and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 130.

39. "In Summerhill, a child is not allowed to do as he pleases," Neill added. See *Summerhill* (New York: Hart, 1960), pp. 308, 348.

40. On this point, see Lickona and Paradise, p. 323.

41. Thomas Gordon, *Teaching Children Self-Discipline* (New York: Times Books, 1989), p. 9.

42. This distinction is offered frequently in the work of Edward Deci and Richard Ryan. It seemed to be lost on several teachers at an alternative school program I visited recently who maintained that, because today's students come from less structured home environments or are more conservative, it is appropriate to give them fewer choices about their learning.

43. Carolyn Edwards, "Partner, Nurturer, and Guide," in Carolyn Edwards et al., eds., *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education* (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1993), p. 157.

44. Indeed, children whose curiosity has not been killed by the use of rewards or other extrinsic controls typically select tasks of the right difficulty level for themselves. This finding "suggests that at least part of the teacher's difficult problem of matching tasks to children can be solved by providing children with more choices than they are typically offered." See Fred W. Danner and Edward Lonky, "A Cognitive-Developmental Approach to the Effects of Rewards on Intrinsic Motivation," *Child Development*, vol. 52, 1981, p. 1050.

45. A related restriction on choice that may be employed excessively is the practice of preventing students from altering an activity once they have selected it. They can choose, in other words only among tasks that must be performed in a rigidly prescribed manner. Some critics have argued that this is a weakness of the Montessori method.

46. Even this assumption needs to be questioned, since a young child may lack the capacity for rational decision making or impulse control that is implicit in the suggestion that he made a choice. If so, the child needs help in developing these faculties, not punishment accompanied by blame. I have heard some teachers reply to this point by insisting that, if students are permitted to make choices, they must "take responsibility" for making a bad one. This approach, however, assumes that "taking responsibility" for a poor decision means being made to suffer for it rather than being part of a nonpunitive problem-solving process.

47. A nice discussion of this misuse of the idea of choice can be found in Vincent Crockenberg, "Assertive Discipline: A Dissent," *California Journal of Teacher Education*, vol. 9, 1982, esp. pp. 65-70.

48. Nel Noddings, *The Challenge to Care in Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992), p. 23.

49. James A. Beane, *Affect in the Curriculum: Toward Democracy, Dignity,*

and Diversity (New York: Teachers College Press, 1990), p. 35.

50. Dewey, *Experience and Education*, p. 55.

51. McNeil, p. 9. This phenomenon is not limited to schools, of course. There is evidence from the corporate world that the middle managers most likely to act in an autocratic fashion toward those below them in the hierarchy are those who are restricted and controlled themselves. See Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Men and Women of the Corporation* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), pp. 189-90.

52. Despite the claim that discipline is "instrumental to mastering the content," the truth is often just the reverse: "many teachers ... maintain discipline by the ways they present course content." The reduction of teaching to the transfer of disconnected facts and skills is the means; keeping a tight grip on student behavior is the end. See McNeil, pp. 157-58.

53. Phyllis C. Blumenfeld et al., "Teacher Talk and Student Thought," in John M. Levine and Margaret C. Wang, eds., *Teacher and Student Perceptions* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum, 1983), p. 147.

54. A survey of more than 300 parents found that those who inclined toward a negative view of human nature were more likely to prefer an authoritarian approach to child rearing. See Lawrence O. Clayton, "The Impact upon Child-Rearing Attitudes of Parental Views of the Nature of Humankind," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, vol. 4, no. 3, 1985, pp. 49-55. For an argument that the data do not support this negative view of human nature, see Alfie Kohn, *The Brighter Side of Human Nature: Altruism and Empathy in Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

55. On this point, see Seth Kreisberg, "Educating for Democracy and Community," *ESR Journal*, 1992, p. 72; and Rheta DeVries, *Programs of Early Education: The Constructivist View* (New York: Longman, 1987), p. 379.

56. Selma Wassermann, "Children Working in Groups? It Doesn't Work!," *Childhood Education*, Summer 1989, p. 204.

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