Fostering Autonomy at School: Practical Suggestions

By David Streight

Autonomy is the perception that we have certain amount of control over our lives. We feel autonomous when we are willingly engaging in the actions we perform. Feeling autonomous affects the quality of the work we do and our motivation for doing the work. The human need to develop to one's full potential is dependent on autonomy, because we can only develop to that point if we value what we are becoming and if we are not forced to do it. Of course autonomy is limited by the needs and wants of others, but when educators fail to nurture the autonomous development of young people, they undermine students' commitment to the academic and social goals of the school. Here are the seven teacher strategies that seem best to foster a sense of autonomy:

Respect Student Voice

(Reeve et al., 2004; Reeve, 2006; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009)
• Invite students to share opinions during class discussions; show respect for their opinions and work to create a classroom where students are respectful of the opinions of others.
• Accept expressions of frustration or displeasure when students are having trouble; let students know you are trying to see the difficulty from their perspective (accepting such negative expressions is considered one of the most powerful strategies available).
• Allow students to disagree with your opinions; teach them how to disagree respectfully.
• Elementary school students in one teacher's class do a series of polls late in the year to decide which of their chapter books gets to be crowned Book of the Year. Students present their cases, first in small groups and then before the larger group. Since the class will decide, students know there is no single right answer, and each student's opinion has equal value (presenting a formal case before small and larger groups also helps foster competence).
• Have students decide as a group what the rules for classroom discussions should be.
• If "consequences" are necessary, invite student input into what kind of disciplinary consequence might be most appropriate for their misbehavior.

Offer Explanatory Rationales to help students understand value

(Assor et al., 2002; Reeve et al., 1999, 2002, 2004; Reeve, 2006; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Reeve & Halusic, 2009)
In life, there are things we have to do, even if we don't always want to. We feel more autonomous when we are doing something we see as worthwhile; it is easier for us to "choose" to perform the worthwhile task. An explanatory rationale explains why something might be worthwhile, why it might be valuable or helpful, why one is being asked to do it. An explanatory rationale might be introduced by phrases like:
• Here's why I want you to take the time to write down your thoughts...
• This concept might look hard, but once you understand it, it's going to make the whole next lesson flow more easily.

• Later in the spring we're going to be faced with a problem like this, so I really want you to think carefully as you do this assignment.
• It's hard to make amends after an argument, but that's one way to deepen friendships and create trust.

Offer Meaningful Roles to play in the classroom & at school

• Kindergarten and first-grade students in many schools assist teachers in deciding on classroom community rules for the year.
• Students in upper grades of an elementary school act as emcees for many assemblies.
• Have students help make the rules for the playground or lunchroom; use explanatory rationale for those rules that are non-negotiable (e.g., legal restrictions, health concerns)
• Students in one elementary school know that when they're in the 5th grade they will be looked up to as the "leaders" for the younger students, setting examples and helping younger students on the playground understand and appreciate the school's culture. When students behave inappropriately, the 5th-grade leaders remind them "that's not the way we Cougars treat one another."
• In one elementary school, even children whose behaviors prompt the creation of a "Behavior Support Plan" play a role in the plan's components, by having input into which interventions seem fairest or might work best.
• Give students of all ages as many leadership roles as possible; support them in their leadership in such a way that they grow in leadership skills.
• Students in one California school are in charge of which community service projects the school will work on: they approve projects and even evaluate each project after it is completed.
• Students in some high schools hold a majority of seats on the school's disciplinary council.
• High school teachers using Harkness pedagogy expect their students to lead the discussions in the classroom; students are not assigned the role, but learn to accept that they are expected to generate questions about the reading and to solicit (plus to respect, and synthesize) the opinions of their classmates.

Use Informational, Non-controlling Language

(Ryan & Powelson, 1991; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Reeve et al., 2004; Reeve, 2006; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Bear, 2010)
Controlling language is language that students perceive as an adult trying to coerce certain behaviors ("You should do it this way," "It has to be done like I said.") or impose certain beliefs. Controlling teachers exert pressure on the child to think, feel, and behave in specified ways, especially through threats or the promise of rewards as motivational tools.

Informational language, on the other hand, provides details that students perceive as helpful and as coming from a mentor who cares about their success and who explains why doing things a certain way will probably be more successful, but who allows students to choose their own route thereafter (except in cases involving danger or other grave circumstances, of course).

Offer Choice to the extent possible

(Deci et al., 1991; Assor et al., 2002; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009)
Some things at school are not optional, but even within all the needed structure, a number of choices still remain. With choice, we feel like what we are doing is more "ours."
• When it's time for a young child to pick up her room—sometimes a daunting task, and occasionally the request/command is refused—ask the child if she wants to pick up the toys first or the clothes first.
• When possible, offer students choices regarding which assignment to do, or how it is done, or when the assignment's due date is.
• Instead of specifying which 10 problems on page 127 are for homework, explain to students that you want them to get some practice with this new concept, but they can pick: do the first ten, or the last 10, or the evens or the odds; those that are the bravest can try to hardest 10, if they feel up to it.
• A history teacher in one high school occasionally offers students the chance to pick another way—besides the test—to show mastery of the past chapter. The student and the teacher discuss, and the proposed method is accepted, rejected (with reasons, of course), or reasons are offered for why the proposal should be modified.

Nurture Students' Inner Motivational Resources

(Reeve et al., 2004; Reeve 2006)
Nurturing inner resources refers to teachers getting to know their students, and seeking to understand their interests, preferences, values, goals, aspirations, and personal strivings, in hopes of connecting them to learning activities. Doing so makes it easier for students both to find value in the activity and to engage in it willingly, thus increasing motivation. Examples:
• Knowing that a number of the students in the class are basketball players and the team this year is doing well, a teacher bases many sample math problems around the team's basketball statistics.
• Aware that two students who are struggling in her course are dancers, a teacher looks for a short story with a dancer as the protagonist.
• Letting students know that learning these vocabulary words may help them grow to become the kind of writers they want to be.
• A particularly gifted student might be handed an "advanced" article on something the class is studying, with the invitation to look at it if she is interested, though it might be hard because it's for older students (appropriately challenging material like this also fosters competence).

Avoid tangible contingent rewards

(Ryan & Deci, 2000; Deci, Kostner, & Ryan, 2001)
Similar to controlling language, stars, stickers, and tokens that might be traded in for food, prizes, or privileges almost always undermine feelings of autonomy. They tend to be effective in getting kids to behave in certain ways while adults are present, but too often help students believe that the reason for behaving nicely or doing school work is to get rewarded. If there is

no adult around to witness good behavior or no reward for learning, many students see less reason to engage in it.

The antidote to contingent rewards: stressing the value of mastering important academic material or skills, and helping students understand that what we all want—what we are all are working for here—is a community that helps one another learn and work together. (Awards and rewards can be good when judiciously given. Their detrimental effects for autonomy come primarily when they are set up as tit-for-tat: "if you do something that we want you to do, then we will reward you by giving you this.") Sincere praise for behaviors does not fit in the category of tangible rewards. Praising is generally a positive strategy, though it is most helpful when it praises a specific behavior, or when it praises effort or strategy (rather than innate talent).

The benefits of a sense of autonomy are many; the drawbacks are few.
"The relative autonomy of extrinsic goals has strong predictive relations for human performance, persistence, and well-being outcomes."

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