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ABSTRACT

A basic quality of the open classroom is that children are encouraged to make choices. Psychological rationales for allowing children to make choices are taken from psychological theory: (1) the objective of education, stated by Piaget and others, is to develop creative and independent thinkers; (2) children are intrinsically motivated to learn: (3) children can learn on their own, as demonstrated by language acquisition; (4) children learn best what interests them; (5) teachers become more effective if children help program and pace their learning; and (6) control over one's environment has beneficial affective results, including the reduction of anxiety. Evidence supporting the rationales is based on: (1) studies of classroom climate, in which emotional atmosphere of a classroom has been shown to affect learning and social behavior in the students; (2) the Coleman Report of 1966, which concluded that self-concept and locus of control factors influenced achievement much more than school resources; (3) childrearing studies; and (4) comparisons of achievements and attitudes of students from different kinds of schools. (DP)

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CHOICE[1]

by

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Should children be allowed to make choices in school?

Arguments about open education come down to that question. How well open educators can answer it, for themselves and others, is likely to play a large part in determining whether open education fails or flourishes in American Schools.

Are those on the side of choices for children acting largely on the basis of unsupported hunches, as critics of open schools have suggested? Or can a sound case be made from psychological theory and research for what open educators intuitively feel is good for kids?

All of the prime movers in the Americanization of the British Infant School -- Joseph Featherstone, Lilian Weber, Charles Silberman -- have consistently sounded the same warning: go slow, and know what you are about. Woe to the school whose principal says, "As of Monday, we start the open classroom." Woe to the teacher who rushes in where one should tread only in the company of new wisdom and understanding.

My own position as a developmental psychologist is that a solid scientific case can be made for choice in the schools. There is argument and evidence that ought to soften the hardest-nosed critic and provide teachers with the rationale they need for undertaking a major experiment in the education of children.

But, first, some preliminary considerations.

Behind the question of whether children should be allowed to make choices in school is the issue, "Can children, especially young ones, make choices?" That question is best answered by another question: "What do you mean by 'choice'?" If choice is defined simply as choosing to do one thing as opposed to something else, then the

answer is, "Yes, children can and do make choices all the time." Everybody does. Even young infants exhibit clear choice behavior. In Jerome Bruner's recent experiments at Harvard, infants quickly change their sucking patterns to keep a film in focus. They obviously choose clarity over blur. The exploratory play of infants, even during the first year of life, is directed, selective, and persistent.

The question "Can children make choices?" is actually a shorthand form of a deeper question, "Can children make good choices?" Can they really compare and evaluate the alternatives that are open to them? Can they predict the consequences of their choices and assume responsibility for those consequences? Can they choose activities that will be in their long-range interest as well as for their short-term enjoyment? These questions can be reduced to one basic concern of teachers and parents: can children choose what we want them to choose -- what we think is best for their over-all learning and development?

That is a fair question, and deserves a candid answer. Once you allow anyone freedom, you reduce your ability to predict precisely what the person will do. If the power of final decision rests with the child, you can't be sure he will choose to do what you want him to do, to learn all the things you want him to learn. You can't predict specific behavior patterns. But there are some more general kinds of behavior and developmental trends that you can predict if a child is given the opportunity to make choices in a supportive environment that provides many opportunities to learn. You can predict important aspects of the kind of a person he will become. There is research to support this assertion, but more on this later.

An over-all perspective on the world of the child is also a prerequisite for entering the debate about whether children should have some control over what they learn. There's a very natural tendency to attend selectively to those instances in an open school in which the child has a choice and to forget about all those areas in which he has no options.

It's not hard to construct a long list of no-option areas. Children, in the first place, do not decide where they will go to school; their parents do that. Children can't choose whether or not to go to school. They can't decide when to come or when to leave.

They don't decide what kind of interest areas are available for them; teachers and administrators do that. They don't decide what materials and learning opportunities are available in those interest areas that are provided. In most informal schools, children are not free to ignore basic skill areas such as math, reading, and writing. And so on.

One could add to this another list of all the ways in which the normal home structures the child's environment and limits his choices. I'm not saying that this is bad -- in fact you can make a very good case that adults, as well as children, need some external structure within which to make decisions. What needs to be recognized is that schools which give children some opportunities for choice are not throwing structure to the winds and cutting the child loose to manage his own life. The decisions that a child makes in an informal school are made within a predetermined context filled with forces that influence his behavior.

There is another preliminary point that's important to keep in mind. All children, even in the most rigid, authoritarian schools, have always had one freedom that the school cannot take away. They can choose not to learn. And many children have done just that in reaction to adults' attempts to coerce them to learn. They turn off and tune out, and teachers, as studies have shown, end up spending most of their time striving simply to maintain attention.

Finally, a few prefatory comments on what "choice in the schools" does not mean. It does not mean random chaotic activity instead of organized learning. It does not mean a lack of teacher involvement in the child's learning. It does not mean the absence of adult effort to guide the child's choices, which can be done in non-coercive ways. An active child does not mean a passive environment -- a point forgotten by many of the old "progressive" educators.

Nor does choice in the school mean a laissez-faire attitude toward learning instead of an atmosphere which prizes learning and quality of achievement. And choice in the school does not mean the absence of control over children's conduct with regard to the rights and needs of others. Observations by Silberman and others of informal schools in England bear out all these statements. Of course, the concept of freedom for children in the hands of some educators can produce some or all of the negative school characteristics just mentioned. There is the story of the child who is reported to have said to his totally non-directive, permissive teacher, "Do we have to do just what we want to do today?"

So much for preliminary points. Now to the psychological rationales for allowing children to make choices in school.

(1) The first rationale assumes that a goal of education is to produce creative, independent thinkers. Jean Piaget, whose life-time scrutiny of child development helped spark the open school movement, puts it this way: "The principal goal of education is to create men who are capable of doing new things, not simply of repeating what other generations have done -- men who are creative, inventive, and discoverers." John Holt is famous for his statement that "the true test of intelligence is not how much we know how to do, but how we behave when we don't know what to do." Psychologist Thomas Banta points out that the world now presents many more situations for which conventional solutions don't work and creative thinking is demanded. Banta, incidentally, has broken new ground in the area of evaluation by developing a series of tests (the Cincinnati Autonomy Test Battery) that measure young children's capacities for independent problem-solving.

In a recent national opinion poll, parents ranked independent thinking as the most important characteristic that schools could develop in their children. The same parents thought the schools needed "more discipline," and would no doubt support more of what isn't working now. The task of open educators is to convince the public that the goal of producing independent thinkers won't be achieved unless the schools provide children with the kind of experience in making decisions that they need to become self-regulating, creative problem-solvers.

One can raise the objection, of course, that many good students have emerged from "schools without choice." True enough. But how many? James Conant has estimated that only about 15% of the children can thrive in the conventional school, and these are children who are

"making it" by conventional standards -- how much they can remember, how verbal they are, etc. They are not necessarily inventive, independent thinkers.

This line of argument is simply summarized: If the ability to make good choices and to be independent are important capacities, then isn't it foolish for a major social institution like the school not to attempt to systematically stimulate the development of those capacities? Why leave it to chance? If some children have difficulty making choices -- and there will be individual differences in this ability as in all others -- then the school's job is to help these children develop choice-making competence.

(2) A second basis for allowing choice in learning is children's intrinsic motivation to learn. There is a strong consensus among psychologists that development begins with a desire to master the environment, to acquire competencies. Children don't have to be threatened or pushed by external forces, although external influences can certainly play a facilitating role. Beginning in infancy, the child seeks opportunities to use his eyes, ears, mouth and hands to investigate his surroundings and will go to no little trouble to find such opportunities. Psychologist Robert White speculates that the motive behind this exploration is the desire to feel effective in one's dealings with the environment, to have a sense of control over events. There's a wealth of research evidence that suggests that an intrinsic drive to explore and master is strong in both men and animals. Monkeys, for example, will take apart mechanical puzzles for hours on end with no external reward whatsoever, and are still going strong when the experimenter is ready to quit.

There is also plenty of evidence that the child's environment in the early years can either foster or impair the development of the desire to learn. If a child comes to school with little interest in learning, then the school's task is to revive the interest that was once there.

(3) Granted that most children may be inwardly motivated to learn. One can still ask, "Can they learn on their own, without external direction?" Many students of child development would answer this question by citing Holt's point that before the child comes to school and without any formal instruction, he has done a task far more difficult, more complicated, and more abstract than anything he will be asked to do in school. He has cracked the code of language. He has discovered language, found out how it works, and learned to use it. He has done it by listening, by developing his own model or idea of the grammar of language, by testing it out, and by gradually refining it until it matches adult speech. A remarkable feat -- achieved by virtually all children everywhere.

(4) The intrinsic motivation argument leads to perhaps the most common-sense rationale for allowing children to select learning experiences. A child will, like anyone else, learn best what he is interested in learning. If you allow him to choose, he will select what interests him. If he is interested in something, he will be an active agent in developing his understanding rather than a passive consumer of knowledge. Piaget's voluminous research on children has led him to postulate that a child's active involvement in learning is at the heart of the developmental process.

(5) The point that choice lets the child define his own interests suggests another good reason for giving the child this kind of control. It makes the teacher's work both easier (at least in some ways) and more effective. When teachers decide what the child is to learn, they must know first of all what facts and concepts the learner already has. They must also keep a constant check on how these skills are changing.

When the child decides what to learn, he is free to gather information in whatever sequence is most meaningful to him. He is free to repeat learning experiences when he feels the need for it, and to skip over areas where he is satisfied with his level of understanding. He can program his own learning, in terms of his own intellectual needs. The teacher, of course, still plays a very important role in responding to and stimulating the child's interests, and in helping him to acquire knowledge and understandings.

Under free-choice conditions, the child also controls the pace of his learning. This is a safeguard against teaching too fast, which is a real danger. Piaget cautions that "Children have real understanding only of what they invent themselves; each time we try to teach them something too quickly, we keep them from re-inventing it themselves." Studies have found, for example, that many children who have been taught to count, or even to add and subtract, do not understand the basic properties of number.

(6) There are also compelling humanistic reasons for giving children some measure of control over what happens to them in school. Control reduces anxiety. A lack of control heightens it. There

is good psychological reason to suppose that allowing children to govern their own activities reduces or eliminates the anxiety that makes school for many children an unhappy place to be. The extensive Gardner study in England found that children in open schools, compared to those in traditional schools, were more relaxed in test situations and related more readily to the adult examiner, more often volunteering to help arrange the materials and clean up afterwards.

From a pragmatic educational standpoint, anxiety is undesirable because it acts as a block to learning. A host of carefully controlled experimental studies demonstrate the disruptive effects of anxiety on human performance, even on simple motor tasks.

Thus, run some of the theoretical arguments and related research in favor of educational options for children. Skeptics could still reasonably object, however, "That all sounds good, but does it really work? What is the concrete evidence that allowing children to choose has positive educational effects?" Most of the current articles on informal education say it's an open question -- there is no real evidence one way or the other. This assessment ignores a substantive body of existing data rich in implications for the issue of choice in the schools.

(1) One set of findings deals with "classroom climate?" How does the teacher's style of interacting with children affect the climate or social atmosphere of a classroom? H.H. Anderson classified teachers into two categories: dominative, forcing children to conform to their wishes, or integrative, attempting to accommodate to

children's interests and needs and offering them with alternatives.

In his observation of preschool and primary teachers over several years, Anderson came up with a very consistent finding. The teacher's behavior, more than any other factor, set the pattern for the classroom. Dominating teachers had dominating students. Integrative teachers had integrative children who respected each other's rights and interests. The pattern which the teacher set was evident even when the teacher was not present in the room.

Anderson found that teacher style had wide-ranging effects on other aspects of children's behavior, intellectual as well as social. When a teacher had a high proportion of integrative contacts with children, pupils showed more spontaneity and initiative, and more problem-solving behavior. By contrast, children with a dominative teacher were found to be more easily distracted from their schoolwork and more resentful of their teacher.

A later study by Flanders showed that very dominative teacher behavior was consistently disliked by pupils, reduced their ability to recall material, and produced disruptive anxiety as indicated by increases in sweating and heart rate. In a study of nearly a thousand eighth-graders, Cogan found that students did more required schoolwork when they perceived the teacher as being integrative rather than dominative.

The work of these researchers points to the conclusion that a positive school climate, sensitive to children's interests and desires, results in greater learning as well as in more mature social behavior.

(2) Another very important set of data which relates to the question of choice in learning comes from a massive, government-sponsored, highly controversial study named the Coleman Report, after its chief author, James Coleman, a sociologist. This $1.5 million study published in 1966, surveyed 600,000 children -- white, black, Puerto Rican, Mexican-American, and American Indian -- and about 64,000 teachers and principals in 4,000 schools across the country. The objective was to determine the relationship between student achievement and school resources -- things like age of school buildings, number of textbooks, library facilities, laboratory equipment, and type of curricula.

The major finding of the Coleman report was an educational shocker: there was virtually no relationship between school resources and academic achievement. All over the country, students from schools with low per-pupil expenditures, outdated plants and curricula, and generally meager facilities had about the same achievement scores as students from schools with high per-pupil expenditures, updated plants and curricula, and generally good facilities. This finding was hard to believe, but two other educational surveys -- the Plowden Report in England and a Syracuse University study of American high schools -- produced precisely the same conclusion.

There were other findings in the Coleman report which got relatively little publicity, but which are highly significant from the standpoint of a discussion about choice in schools.

Two student attitudes, measured in grades nine and twelve, showed an extremely high relation to school achievement. They were self-

concept and a sense of control over the environment. A sense of control over the environment was measured by tests consisting of items such as: "Do you agree or disagree: Good luck is more important than hard work" and "Every time I try to get ahead someone or something stops me." Students who had a positive self-concept and a strong sense of control over the environment (signified by disagreement with items like the above) were the highest achievers. It was possible to predict very well from a student's standing on these two factors what his level of school achievement would be.

Another factor was significantly related to achievement. That was the student's family and social class background. Children from middle-income families, for example, achieved higher than children from lower-income families.

This raises an interesting question: why did families make a difference in a student's achievement, whereas school resources did not?

My guess is that this is because parents differ considerably in the extent to which they affect the two critical student attitudes: self-concept and sense of environmental control. Some parents foster the development of a positive self-concept in their children and a sense of control over the environment. Other parents do not foster these traits and may themselves, especially if they are poor, feel they have little influence over events, even the development of their own children. Schools, on the other hand, probably do not differ very much in their impact on the two crucial student attitudes, simply because schools generally do not differ very much in how

they are run. Children are typically allowed very little freedom to influence the course of their learning.

A good hypothesis, it seems to me, is this: a school which does provide opportunity for self-regulation and the experience of independence will heighten both the child's self-esteem and his feeling of control over environment. These attitudes in turn, as the Coleman data suggest, will result in increased school achievement. To permit a child to choose what to learn is to give him control over a very important phase of his interactions with his world.

The importance of whether the child sees success as internally controlled by himself or externally controlled by forces other than his behavior can hardly be exaggerated. The Coleman Study reported that "minority pupils, except for Orientals, have far less conviction that they can affect their own environments and futures. When they do, however, their achievement is higher than that of whites who lack that conviction."

Research has consistently linked the Internal-External attiudinal dimension to measured intelligence. Children high on internal control tend to have higher I. Q.'s. Stephens speculates that the I-E factor may mediate intellectual development by affecting how intensely the child strives to achieve and the way he seeks and uses information. In the external child, a cognitive sense of powerlessness can develop into a passive behavorial coping style which keeps the child from engaging the environment and from assuming any responsibility for what happens to him.

One study traced social class difference in I-E all the way down to four years of age, when a child's perception of control is measured by questions such as "What makes teachers unhappy?" and "What makes you feel good?" A recent research review by Kohlberg, however, suggests that a child's orientation does not stabilize until after he enters elementary school. Kohlberg points out that adult intelligence is largely predictable from first grade, whereas adolescent school achievement is predictable to the same extent only by the end of third grade.

Kohlberg's conclusion: the characteristics that determine long-range school achievement, such as a child's perception of control over the environment, are developed and "set" sometime during the first three grades.

The crucial point about I-E is that it is an attitudinal-motivational variable, not a cognitive skill to be developed by simple enrichment. The child must set goals for himself. He must, as Bruner says, "operate under his own volition rather than in reaction to what is happening to him." The critical question for teachers to ask is whether the child is learning that his accomplishments depend largely on his own actions rather than on those of others.

(3) Data from studies dealing directly with childrearing techniques lend further support to the argument for choice and independence. Parents who encourage early self-reliance in their children have children who are more highly motivated to achieve

than children whose parents do not encourage self-reliance. Achievement motivation is in turn positively related to measured intelligence, which predicts school achievement. In fact, children with high achievement motivation show increases in I. Q. scores as they grow older, whereas children with low achievement motivation show losses in I. Q. .

Parents who are restrictive in their childrearing techniques -- who hem the child in with many rules, strictly enforced -- tend to have children who are polite and obedient, but who are also shy, submissive, dependent, and lacking in imagination. By contrast, parents who are relatively permissive and flexible in setting rules tend to have children who are spontaneous, outgoing, creative, and independent. These children are also sometimes more rebellious -- more likely to challenge adult authority. When you give children more freedom, you gain a good deal, but you may lose some control. That's not such a bad thing, if your goal is to produce children who can think for themselves and stand on their own feet.

Burton White's Preschool Project at Harvard zeroes in on the mother's impact on her young child's development. White and his associates collected running observations on mothers and their 1-to-3-year-old children in their natural habitat, the home. They rated the children on over a dozen dimensions of linguistic, intellectual, and social competence.

Not surprisingly, White's researchers found that a highly competent child had a highly competent mother. They called her Super-Mother. She was above average in the time she spent with

her child, but more important, there was a balance between mother-initiated interactions and child-initiated interactions. In other words, a Super-Mother frequently lets the child take the initiative. She is also a skillful, spontaneous teacher. She disciplines her child with reason and often provides alternatives. One could conclude that the Super-Mother provides the same kind of learning environment for her child that a child-centered, choice-oriented school seeks to create.

The highly competent mother contrasted sharply with two other types of mothers described by the Harvard team. One type they called the Almost Mother. She was less likely than the Super-Mother to start interactions with her child, often waiting for the child to express his needs and then not being able to interpret his cues. She calls to mind the totally non-directive teacher who thinks that freedom for the child means that the teacher must always react to the child rather than actively stimulate his interest.

A third type of mother identified was the Smothering Mother. She was just the opposite of the Almost Mother. She interacted a great deal with her child and initiated almost all of the interactions. This type of mother is so attentive that the child barely has to express himself to make his needs known. The Smothering Mother also spends many hours tutoring the child in carefully planned sessions. She sounds a lot like the over-controlling teacher.

Both the Almost Mother, who took almost no initiative in mother-child interactions, and the Smothering Mother, who took all of it, had children who were significantly lower in intellectual and social

competence than the children of the more flexible and balanced Super-Mothers. If these kinds of relationships between adult and child behaviors exist in the home, they most likely also exist in the school.

(4) Finally, there is also direct evidence for freedom in the classroom -- coming straight from comparisons of the achievements and attitudes of children in informal schools, where choice is permitted, with the achievements and attitudes of children in traditional formal schools.

Little-noted studies in the 1920's, 30's and 40's found that American progressive school students were equal to formal school students in mastery of subject matter, and superior in those characteristics which the progressive schools sought to develop: initiative, work spirit, and critical thinking.

But the really impressive findings on informal education come from England. Between 1951 and 1963, the University of London Institute of Education studied children from equivalent pairs of formal and semi-open schools (informal for up to half the day).

At the end of junior school (age 11), informal students showed clear superiority in six of fourteen tests of achievement and attitude. They were superior in spoken and written English, drawing and painting, "listening and remembering", "neatness, care and skill", ingenuity, and the breadth and depth of out-of-school interests. The informal schools also showed some superiority in children's reading ability, their ability to concentrate on an uninteresting task, their moral judgment, general information, handwriting, and ability to work with other children.

When given a choice among tasks in the testing situation, informal school children more often chose activities that involved working with others. They also freely selected reading as a task on which to be tested twice as often as did formal school pupils. Observers of the British informal schools report that reading problems there are fast disappearing.

Back in the States, similar evidence is beginning to come in. The PTA of P.S. 84, the New York City site of Lilian Weber's open school experiment, reported last year that 99 per cent of the children in the open-corridor program were reading by the end of the first grade -- an event without precedent in that school. On the Metropolitan Achievement Test, which taps vocabulary and reading comprehension, second-graders in the experimental program scored well above the national norm. Of the black and Spanish children, four times as many in the open corridor group were on or above grade level as those not in the new program.

John Holt once described what an open school would be like to a 6th grade girl and said, "Tell me, what do you think of it? Do you think the kids would learn anything?" She replied with firm conviction, "Oh, yes, it would be wonderful. You know, kids really like to learn; we just don't like being pushed around."

The weight of the argument and evidence, as I see it, is on the side of that 6th grade girl. It remains for those most directly responsible for what happens in the nation's classrooms to examine the evidence, and chart their course. For as Joseph Featherstone has wisely observed, "Good open classrooms will come to American schools, if they come at all, only when teachers believe in them."