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Educator Perceptions of Student Ownership and Self-Authorship: Building a Connective Framework Between Two Constructs

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The Constructs of Ownership and Self-Authorship

Student ownership in K-16 education is well defined in the literature, with multiple examples of the benefits to individual students. According to Fletcher (2008), "Students feel connected, engaged, and meaningfully involved when they are addressing relevant issues that reflect their interests, their passions, and their identities" (para. 4). Simply defined, student ownership or autonomy is an "action that is chosen; action for which one is responsible" (Deci & Ryan, 1987, p. 1025). Scott (2009) suggests that teachers help students develop ownership in the classroom by "including students in school-decision-making processes, by ensuring that students have the opportunity to express their opinions about the way schools are run, and by creating school communities that are symbiotic" (para. 2). It is critical students actively interact in constructing the curriculum, and indeed, their own learning experiences (Scott, 2009).

In close relation to ownership is the developmental construct of self-authorship. Baxter Magolda's (2001) concept of self-authorship is a derivative of more general cognitive developmental models, grounded in work attributed to developmentalists including Piaget, Kohlberg, Perry, and Kegan. Self-authorship is a constructivist phenomenon, and is exhibited as an individual constructs or makes meaning of their relationship to the world around them.

Specifically, self-authorship is the term describing a shift of meaning-making capacity from outside-of-self to inside-of-self. As an individual constructs self-authorship, they "integrate values, beliefs, convictions, generalizations, ideals, abstractions, interpersonal loyalties, and interpersonal states" (Kegan, 1994, p. 185).

Achievement of self-authorship is therefore recognized in the coordination of defining identity, beliefs, and social relationships while critically considering external variables and perspectives. Complete development therefore includes three elements of construction, including the intrapersonal (self), interpersonal (in relation to others), and epistemological (how we view the world) (Baxter Magolda, 2008).

With an interrelation of ownership and self-authorship in healthy developmental processes of the individual, the authors of this study determined to qualify educator perceptions of these constructs, both in terms of assigned value and classroom manifestation.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this research is situated in social and critical constructivism. Social constructivism is defined as knowledge that is constructed individually through personal experiences as well as through social and cultural influences (Schreiber and Valle, 2013). Critical constructivism is defined as an epistemology that is affected by socio-cultural context and aids in cultural transformation (Taylor, 1996). When students possess a high level of ownership in their learning process, they will build through meaningful, relevant experiences that also connect to personal interest. In addition, the pathways for their self-authorship will be strengthened by the social-cultural allowance for freedom of choice. In other words, if peers and teachers provide opportunities for the ownership of learning experiences through personally interesting activities, students will gain a stronger internal voice. This research also draws from self-determination theory, positing that individuals have a strong psychological need to feel competent, to feel connected, and to feel autonomous (Deci, 1975).

Methods

This pilot qualitative study involved a twenty-question descriptive survey sent via email link to a small group of randomly selected teachers in the local school district from K-12 levels. It was also sent to university professors and contingent faculty in the college of education at the local university. Detailed responses were received across the different levels. Participants described their level of familiarity with the constructs of ownership and self-authorship. Additionally, they described the importance of the constructs and their usage of such ideas in their respective classroom environments. The authors, using a compare-contrast analysis (Walk, 1998), examined the descriptions of the participants, identifying four emergent themes including Teacher Dominance and Control, Teacher Modeling and Facilitation, Personal Experiences Inform Pedagogy and Practice, and Teachers Value Ownership and Authorship.

Results and Discussion

Baxter Magolda and King (2004) believe self-authorship represents the capacity of an individual to internally define a belief system and identity that engages in the larger world. Self-authorship entails a "seat of judgement" in which an individual is able to develop a personal authority that is unhindered by external constraints or expectations (Kegan & Lahey, 2009). As a developmental process, individuals mature from a reliance upon external authorities to an internally-defined orientation in which one becomes the "author of one's inner psychological life" (Kegan, 1994, p. 31). Ownership, as defined previously, is simply a student's capacity for choice and self-determined actions within the classroom. A deep and previously unexplored connection exists between the constructs of ownership and self-authorship as many school processes, instructions, philosophies, and assessments maintain an expectation of individual reliance and dependence upon the external authority (i.e. teachers, administrators, curriculum specialists).

Participants' responses indicate a perceived connection between academic effort and success. Many participants expressed the importance of effort and success when asked to describe both ownership and self-authorship in their classroom and in their own educational experience. For example, one participant responded that self-authorship is manifested by "self-confidence" and success in school. The same respondent said, "I have strong self-authorship due to my successes in school." Furthermore, the participant said that if the "family respects and encourages the construct of education, then the child is likely to as well." Another stated, "I equate success in academics to success in athletics - regular skills practice, learning new techniques a little at a time, following the coach's rules and guidelines, talking to the coach if you are unhappy with your playing time, and expecting to have to work harder to get more playing time." These responses align with a reproduction of authoritarian control and student compliance under the umbrella of academic success. Responses do not mirror the constructs of ownership or self-authorship development.

Teacher Dominance and Control

Participants' responses evidenced inherent levels of teacher-control and an authoritarian mindset. The language often reflected the level of control. Participants typically responded with first-person language, which was followed by a qualifier. For example, one participant wrote, "I hold my students accountable," and "I ask what steps the student has taken to take advantage of the many resources I provide for them." Another wrote "I encourage…ownership…by asking [students] to put forth the necessary extra effort." Still another wrote, "I can provide…assignments to help students practice, but it is up to them to implement them outside of the classroom." Teachers perceived students developing ownership and self-authorship if they followed the teacher's assignments, the teacher's timetable, and learned to implement the teacher's advice for success. One respondent wrote, "students develop tests" and another wrote, "I require that students attend community events…however, students can make choices about what events they want to attend (with some exceptions). With some choice comes the potential for some ownership and larger scale development of self-authorship, but it is still situated in a controlled environment with approved directions for students.

For those whose views more closely aligned with the constructs of ownership and self-authorship, the evidence for teacher-directed activity and systemic barriers was

substantial. From the question on barriers to ownership and self-authorship, it was evident that teachers saw control as an obstacle. "Students are not granted autonomy," one person wrote. Another focused on the system and how it conditions children by saying, "I find so many students have experienced the socialization of conditioning in K-12…they may find themselves focused on grades and testing rather than learning," and students do not focus "on assignments that are more open-ended." The same person said, "compliance is an important construct that deters ownership and self-authorship."

Teacher Modeling and Facilitation

If ownership could properly be modeled and then facilitated by teachers, then students would be more likely to develop along the continuum of self-authorship. One teacher wrote, "My role is to model these behaviors for them…I need to approach situations with an open mind and a critical thinking lens while treating others involved with respect." This was a common attitude expressed throughout the responses across both ownership and self-authorship questions. However, what teachers expressed as modeled ownership and self-authorship often did not match the defined constructs of those terms.

Personal Experiences Inform Pedagogy and Practice

Personal experiences inform pedagogy and teaching practice. The fourth theme revealed across responses generates from participant student-personal story narratives and the ways in which these memories inform the participants' understanding of their approach to teaching as well as their strategies for teaching in the classroom. Effectively, nearly all participants provided a written account of connected events in his or her own educational experience as a student, from which the researcher identified parallels to later participant responses concerning teaching pedagogy and practice. For example, a participant shared the following, "As an on campus student at all levels, I tended to learn as much if not more from my professors outside of the classroom. These experiences have influenced me to get to know my students." While this participant disclosed that he did not perceive a high level of ownership or authorship in his own student experience, he recognizes that in order to meet the goals that he has set for his students (e.g. to make independent decisions), it is critical for him, as a teacher, "to know them personally". His early experiences as a student are informing his approach to instruction and attainment of goals for his students, a shared theme across participant reflections.

A related response further highlights the relationship between personal student-narratives and teaching pedagogy and practice, and the influence of shared gratitude, or the quality of being thankful, in the classroom. The participant shared the following memory of her experience as a student teacher. She wrote, "As a student teacher, I had the privilege of teaching several honors biology classes. At the conclusion of the 3 month stint, my students put together a series of notes from each member of the class. Students thanked me for my positivity and faith in them. They recognized that I strove each and every day to provide them a welcoming, safe and fun classroom. This recognition has shaped my perceptions of others and my approach to education." This particular participant's approach to teaching mirrors her positive experience with gratitude and kindness, which she includes as one of her teaching goals, "Treat others with

respect and kindness", and her understanding of sociocultural impacts on the ability to facilitate ownership and authorship in young students. She writes, "The culture of the community and the individual family play a big role in ownership and self-authorship. If the family respects and encourages the construct of education, then the child is likely to as well. This will lead to both constructs."

Teachers Value Ownership and Authorship

Regardless of the contradictions between participants' working definitions of ownership and self-authorship, participants overwhelmingly supported the use of ownership and self-authorship in the classroom. For the purpose of gauging perceptions of value of these constructs, participants completed a number of questions that specifically requested their perception of importance. Questions followed the definition of ownership and self-authorship as provided by the associated, primary authors of the construct. The questions included: 1) How important is it that students have ownership in their educational experience, and 2) How important is it that students develop self-authorship in their educational experience? When asked about ownership in the classroom, participants marked responses ranging from "important" to "extremely important," with six of eight selecting "extremely important." Similarly, when asked about self-authorship in the classroom, responses ranged from "somewhat important" to "extremely important," with six of eight selecting "extremely important." These responses indicate a high level of perceived value of both constructs, and lends to the question of probability of student ownership and self-authorship in the participants' classrooms.

Following the question of importance, and for the purpose of gauging perceptions of probability of student ownership and self-authorship in the participants' classrooms, participants completed a number of questions that specifically requested their perceptions of likelihood. Questions followed the definition of ownership and self-authorship as provided by the associated, primary authors of the construct. The questions included: 1) How likely are students to have ownership as previously defined in your classroom, and 2) How likely are students to have self-authorship as previously defined in your classroom? When asked about ownership in the classroom, participants marked responses ranging from "somewhat unlikely" to "extremely likely," with six of eight selecting "somewhat likely." When asked about self-authorship in the classroom, responses ranged from "somewhat unlikely" to "extremely likely," with four of eight selecting "somewhat likely," three selecting "extremely likely."

Despite a high value, educators did not indicate positive outcomes of ownership or authorship in their specific classrooms. Essentially, the data indicate teachers do not have the skill-set or knowledge base that informs the successful facilitation of student ownership and authorship. While many teachers mirror the behaviors and strategies used by their own instructors of the past, they perhaps lack strategy. These trends are strongly suggestive of an opportunity for researchers and teacher educators to directly confront this gap in knowledge. Introducing these terms early in teacher preparation may support stronger familiarity, perceptions of value, and student outcomes; continued research is warranted.

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