

## Nurturing Student Ownership and Responsibility: A Vital Ingredient of a Positive School Climate

Robert Brooks, P.h.D.

I have had the opportunity to interview many students about their perception of school and their thoughts about what factors are involved in creating a positive school climate. Not surprisingly, in most instances their first responses capture a theme I have addressed in previous articles on my website as well as in other writings, namely, the relationship that teachers develop with their students. When students feel that teachers and school administrators genuinely care about them and help them to feel welcome, they are more motivated to cooperate and to succeed. I should note that the importance of a sense of belongingness is not confined to schools but to all environments including those in the business and corporate world.

In addition to educators helping them to feel welcome, another factor that students describe as integral in reinforcing a positive tone in schools is whether or not they are provided some input into their own education, that is, whether they experience a sense of ownership. While many students with whom I have spoken feel that their teachers invite and respect their opinions and explain the rationale for different educational practices, many others perceive this quality to be lacking in their schools. The following opinions are a representative sample offered by this latter group:

“No one explains why homework is important. They just give it to you.”

“There are so many rules in a school. I think some of the rules are there to aggravate students.”

“I wanted to read a certain book for a book report. Even though the teacher said we could choose our own book, he wouldn't accept this one. He said that it was about sports and not challenging enough. But he never even glanced at it. Just because a book is about sports doesn't mean it's not good.”

“Kids have no say in anything they do in school.”

Some might dismiss these and similar sentiments as complaints lodged by a dissatisfied group of children and adolescents who believe they should have total control of what transpires in school. For instance, at one of my workshops an educator responded to a discussion about “student ownership” with the view, “Most students never feel they have enough say. If it were up to the students, especially adolescents, they would make up all the rules and probably do away with homework and tests.”

I do not agree with this teacher’s observation. I do not believe that the goal of the vast majority of students is to dictate what all of the rules of a classroom or an entire school should be. If anything, in my interviews I have found that most students are receptive to parents and teachers establishing rules and limits as long as they feel the adults have listened to and respected their opinion. Some may argue that students only feel listened to when adults agree with them, but I have not discovered this to be the case. From my perspective, problems arise when students sense their voice is not being heard, when they experience rules as arbitrary and imposed with little explanation, and when they perceive that adults are speaking down to them. In such instances, a feeling of ownership is lacking, replaced by resentment and a lack of cooperation.

### **Ownership, Motivation, and Resilience**

My interest in the theme of ownership has been heightened because of its close link to the concepts of motivation and resilience. Not surprisingly, motivation to engage wholeheartedly in a task is reinforced when people feel they have had some choice in selecting the task and/or understand its rationale. Children as well as adults are more likely to resist an activity that holds little meaning or relevance for them or they feel was arbitrarily imposed. Relatedly, a major ingredient of resilience is the belief that we have some control over what transpires in our lives. The experience of personal control and ownership is nurtured when we have choices and are allowed to make certain decisions.

In my consultation with schools I frequently pose questions for educators and students to assess their perception of personal control and ownership. These include:

For teachers:

“In the past couple of months what choices have you had or what decisions have you made about your own classroom?”

“Do you feel your input is sought and valued?”

“What choices do you regularly provide students in your classroom?”

“Would students say that you provide them with opportunities to make choices and decisions?”

“Do you believe that a classroom climate is enhanced when students feel they have some choice?”

For school administrators:

“In the past couple of months what choices have you had or decisions have you made about the activities in your own school?”

“Do you feel your input is sought and valued?”

“What choices do you regularly provide your staff?”

“Would your staff say that they regularly have opportunities to make choices and decisions about their classrooms?”

“Is parent input actively sought in your school? If not, why not?”

“Do you think your staff invites student input and offers choices to students about activities in the classroom?”

“Do you believe that a classroom climate is enhanced when all members of the school community have an opportunity to offer opinions and make some decisions?”

For students:

“In the past couple of months what choices have you had or decisions have you made about your classroom(s)?”

“Do you think the staff is interested in your opinion?”

“Can you give an example of a time you felt you had a choice or made a decision about your own education and a time you did not?”

This list of questions can be expanded. It has been my experience that if most members of a school community perceive that they have limited input into what transpires in that community, the motivation to teach and to learn will be compromised. Years ago I read an article about stress and burnout in the teaching profession. It noted that if teachers feel they have little say about what occurs in their own classrooms they are vulnerable to burnout. As an antidote to burnout the article recommended focusing on your “wobble room,” that is, even small areas at work that are within your sphere of influence. The term “wobble room” prompted me to think about what educators might do for themselves and their students to become active participants in the educational process. I should like to share three suggestions for enhancing a sense of ownership in students.

### **Providing a Rationale for Educational Practices**

I believe that at the beginning of the school year educators should explain to students the purpose of classroom practices that are typically seen as “givens.” The rationale for these “givens,” which include such activities as tests, reports, and homework, is rarely, if ever, discussed in classrooms. Some may counter that a teacher should not consume valuable class time to explain to students the purpose of these basic features of education. However, I believe doing so will strengthen one’s teaching. Also, such explanation does not suggest abdicating responsibility for one’s classroom or allowing students to make up all of the rules or decide which classroom requirements are acceptable. Rather, it means educating students about the reason for various class activities with the goal of increasing their feeling of ownership and motivation.

A middle school teacher reported that a student surprised her by asking about the purpose of homework. This teacher, rather than becoming defensive, wisely used the question as an opportunity to discuss her thoughts about the function of homework. She also encouraged her students to ask other questions they had about her class expectations. She told me, “I was so impressed with their questions that I decided that in the future I would not wait for students to ask me any questions they had about classroom requirements. I realized they might not do so since I had not structured time for such questions. Instead, I decided I would take part of the first day of class at the beginning of each new school year to review my expectations and what I saw as the purpose of homework or tests or reports. It was a good exercise for me since I was forced to think about why I gave homework or why I gave tests in certain formats.”

This teacher continued, “I would have never thought of having this kind of discussion if the student had not asked me about the purpose of homework. Yet, now I would not think of not having this kind of discussion.”

### **Making Choices and Decisions**

Choices by students should be built into classroom routine. When I have interviewed students, some cannot recall any choices they have had in the classroom. The benefits of offering choices are noteworthy and are easy to include in one’s daily activities. I visited a school where teachers constantly built in choices. For example, they said to students, “Here are your six math problems (or social studies or science questions) for homework. You have to look at all six, but you only have to do four. It’s your choice to select the four that you think will help you to learn best.” The teachers reported that when they instituted this practice, they received more homework than ever before.

I had a teacher in high school who was demanding and stimulating. One aspect of his teaching style that I especially remember was that he always provided choices. He would say, “Your test is in two weeks. Let’s take a vote. Who would like to have the test on Friday and who would like to have it after the weekend on Monday?” Choices were also offered on when to hand in a paper. “Your paper is due at the end of the month.

Let's vote on whether you would like an extra weekend to turn it in. It's your choice." Never once did we have the option of whether to take the test or complete the paper. Nor did he present individual options for each student, which would have been unmanageable, especially in terms of when the test was administered. I do not believe this practice was a gimmick on his part. Rather, he was genuinely interested in providing some choice within certain parameters. As I look back, I believe that he reinforced our feeling of ownership and still maintained high expectations and requirements.

Opportunities abound in schools for students to sharpen their problem-solving skills, to explore options, and to make decisions. For instance, in an elementary school a question was raised about whether students should be allowed to use their skateboards on school property. Interestingly, the administration referred the issue to the Student Council for consideration. The students discussed what information they needed in order to make a sound decision, which prompted conversations with lawyers, the police, and the chairperson of the town's Board of Selectmen to review the existing laws and the extent of the school's liability should an accident occur. Given what the students learned, they recommended that skateboards not be permitted on school grounds.

In a newspaper interview the principal of the school noted, "Some people are afraid we're giving away our power to the kids. Others worry that, if given the chance to vote on school policy, students will abandon order and pass irresponsible rules. In fact, the opposite is true." The principal, who maintained veto power over the students' recommendations, stated that he has not had to exercise this authority, observing, "So far the kids have been really great. I'm just an adviser willing to offer wisdom whenever it's necessary."

Edward Deci and Cristine Chandler, experts in the field of motivation, advocate for a school environment that has as a top priority the support of autonomy and competence in students. They describe such an environment in the following way: "Concretely, it means: using as little control as possible; encouraging children to think through their own problems rather than giving them solutions; permitting them to try out their own plans and ideas; and allowing them to work at their own speed. Pressuring them with rewards, tokens, deadlines, and prescriptions is counter to supporting autonomy."

## Holding Parent-Student-Teacher Conferences

I believe that beginning in the early grades students should be invited and encouraged to be active participants in parent-teacher conferences (the name should be changed to parent-student-teacher conferences). An increasing number of schools have implemented this practice. Several years ago, in an article titled “Three’s Company” by Linda Jacobson that appeared in *Teacher Magazine*, it was noted, “When Michelle Baker first learned that her son Colin would take part in a parent-teacher conference, she was skeptical. ‘I thought this is going to be a fiasco. Instead, the meeting turned out to be a big success. Colin showed unusual insight into his academic strengths and weaknesses. He had the opportunity to hear his teacher talk about him with him sitting there. He was able to communicate and understand better what he was being judged on.’” It should be noted that Colin was in the first grade.

The article emphasized the importance of students not only participating in parent-teacher conferences, but also taking responsibility to lead the conversation. One principal observed, “It forces the child to be introspective.” Another educator said, “Many teachers and school administrators believe that it makes kids more accountable for what they are learning, helps them develop self-confidence, and sharpens their presentation skills.”

In response to the concern that the presence of students at parent-teacher conferences might restrain teachers from discussing students’ weaknesses, the article reported that, when indicated, educators could schedule another meeting time to discuss issues that might embarrass students. In contrast to this view, other educators contended that three-way conferences make it easier to deal with sensitive issues; teachers noted that it forced them to think about constructive ways to introduce and discuss hot button issues that everyone knows exist.

A more recent article, titled “Talking Points” by Debra Gordon that also appeared in *Teacher Magazine*, encouraged the use of student-led parent-teacher-child conferences. One parent commented, “It engages both the children and their parents and gives the teachers a chance to observe important dynamics. Plus, it puts the responsibility for learning back on the kids and shares accountability with the parents.”

Lori Dixon, assistant principal of Hershey Middle School in Pennsylvania that uses student-led conferences, emphasized that such conferences are effective for all learners and not just high achievers who can identify and describe their accomplishments. Dixon contends, “In fact, it is especially important for students who struggle with some type of learning difficulty to take the time to engage in the self-evaluation process—especially the process of selecting a piece on which they did well. Students who struggle can easily lose sight of the fact that they are a learner, that they can learn, and that they have made growth over time, which can easily be seen as they review their work.”

One main caution about student-led conferences was highlighted in the article. “The only downside to the conferences is that they won’t work if schools don’t prepare their students to participate.” Thus, it is incumbent on teachers to assist students to assess their strengths and weaknesses and to describe their learning style and learning needs. I believe that assisting students in this way will promote ownership and responsibility for one’s own learning.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The words of students and teachers as well as my first-hand experiences have convinced me that motivation, cooperation, and resilience are fortified when students (and teachers) feel they have some say in what transpires in the classroom. As I have noted, the concept of “having input” is not synonymous with students taking control and dictating events. Rather, the concept implies that students are afforded realistic choice, that they are encouraged to voice their opinion, and that they feel these opinions are acknowledged and validated. When this occurs, it is likely that high levels of intrinsic motivation, excitement about learning, and respect will dominate the classroom environment. Such an environment also prepares students to become more adept at identifying and solving problems and assuming greater responsibility and accountability for their actions—important characteristics that will contribute to their becoming resilient adults.