

**Obedience or Responsibility? Further Thoughts about  
Motivation and Self-Determination  
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My past three articles have addressed the theme of intrinsic motivation and “motivating environments.” I emphasized that a key underpinning of intrinsic motivation is what psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan refer to as autonomy or self-determination, the belief that we have some input or influence about our personal and professional activities. In my last article I noted that Daniel Pink captures the concept of autonomy in his new book *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us* when he writes:

The fundamentally autonomous quality of human nature is central to self-determination theory (SDT). Deci and Ryan cite autonomy as one of three basic human needs. And of the three, it’s the most important—the sun around which SDT’s planets orbit. In the 1980s, as they progressed in their work, Deci and Ryan moved away from categorizing behavior as either extrinsically motivated or intrinsically motivated to categorizing it as either controlled or autonomous. “Autonomous motivation involves behaving with a full sense of volition and choice,” they write, “whereas controlled motivation involves behaving with the experience of pressure and demand toward specific outcomes that comes from forces perceived to be external to the self.”

**Nurturing Responsibility and Self-Discipline as Opposed to Obedience**

In my workshops and writings I continue to express the position that children and adults will be more motivated and energized to engage in those activities in which they feel that they have genuine choice. I recognize that there are limits to the extent to which any of us can just do what we want without consideration of the impact of our actions on others. However, if we do not possess a sense of what I have referred to in earlier writings as “personal control” we are likely to feel constricted and not as motivated to participate in an activity that we experience as being dictated by others.

In my presentations about raising resilient, self-disciplined children I frequently emphasize that we are fortunate to live in a democracy; as such our goal is not to raise

submissive, obedient children, especially if we reflect upon Webster's definition of the word *obedient*, namely, "submissive to the restraint or command of authority." Rather than focusing on obedience, we must strive to nurture an attitude of responsibility and self-discipline in children. We must avoid being overly controlling of children. Instead, we must provide children with opportunities to make realistic choices, to offer feedback, to respectfully question and challenge the status quo, and to appreciate that exercising personal control must always be done within parameters of caring, empathy, and responsibility.

A teacher in one of my workshops wondered if there was a point when offering choices to students or inviting them to give feedback to their teachers might be "counterproductive."

I asked what he meant by "counterproductive."

He responded, "I'm concerned that if you give kids choices they may begin to see you as not being very decisive, which might weaken their image of you as an authority figure. Also, when you recommended we encourage feedback from students about our teaching, might not a student who is not doing very well in school or a student you have had to discipline give you a poor rating even if you are a good teacher?"

I replied, "Those are important questions. I would never suggest to teachers that they introduce any practice that would lessen their authority. Obviously, a teacher, and I might add a parent, must be comfortable with the choices the child is given. In terms of students giving feedback, I think that there are ways of doing so that will lessen unfair negative comments."

I smiled and added, "Although most people in schools and the business world say they welcome feedback, the unsaid message is 'as long as it's good.'"

The audience laughed and I continued, "I always look at my workshop evaluations. I must admit that it's easier to read and accept the positive ones, but I have learned to reflect upon and attempt to learn from more critical comments. I think if at the beginning of the school year teachers discuss with their students the purpose of feedback it can become a more natural, regular part of the classroom routine."

The teacher nodded in agreement and said, "I think one issue is that as teachers we are not accustomed to inviting student feedback and are not certain the best way to do

it. I don't remember discussing the topic of student feedback in any course I had as an undergraduate or graduate student." Other teachers in the group concurred with this observation.

I added that similar to many teachers, students are not accustomed to offering feedback since they rarely, if ever, are asked to do so. I told of a high school teacher who upon hearing me speak asked his students to complete an anonymous questionnaire about his teaching style, including what aspects they found beneficial and what they would recommend he change. He thought the students would be delighted to provide their input. However, much to his surprise they were hesitant at first. Some asked if they were being graded on what they wrote (even though their responses were anonymous). Others wondered what his "ulterior motive" was. When he asked why they thought he had a "hidden agenda" one student noted, "We're in high school and we have never had one teacher in all of our school years ask for our feedback."

This teacher wisely responded, "My only motive is to become a better teacher." It was only after hearing this explanation that the students enthusiastically engaged in providing feedback about his teaching. The teacher said that their comments were very helpful. He also felt that the very act of requesting their input contributed to a more positive classroom environment.

Recently a teacher was kind enough to share with me the response of his students to a question he occasionally asked on exams. "What can I do to make the class better?" He wrote, "Students are so unaccustomed to having their feedback solicited that they often assume that I want them to ask the question of themselves, i.e., what can THEY do to make the class better."

### **Recommendations from Students in Boston**

Given my interest in autonomy and personal control I was drawn to an article in the April 20 issue of *The Boston Globe* written by James Vaznis. It was titled "Students seek a say on homework assignments: Some are pushing for more relevancy, teacher feedback." The article begins with student observations about homework, which Vaznis summarizes. "Sometimes they say the homework doesn't appear to have anything to do with what's being taught in class. Other times, teachers hardly check to see if students completed the assignments or had difficulty with it. In too many cases homework assignments seem more like busy work, rather than opportunities to broaden students'

understanding of a topic.”

I have many questions about the purpose and efficacy of homework, which I may address in a future article. In terms of this article I want to highlight not only the insights of the Boston Student Advisory Council, a citywide organization of student leaders but, as importantly, the positive responses of both the superintendent of the Boston schools and the president of the teachers union to the proposals submitted by the students.

Vaznis writes that in addition to advocating for changes in the school district’s homework policy, the Student Council sponsored other proposals, one that “would enable students to provide anonymous written feedback to their teachers about their job performance and give students a say in hiring teachers.” Adam Fischer, a senior at Boston Latin Academy and president of the Advisory Council expressed the belief, “If students don’t get good teaching, they are out of luck for the rest of their lives.”

It was refreshing to hear the response of adults to the Student Council’s requests. School Superintendent Carol Johnson is working with the students to resolve some issues and once this is done she will make recommendations to the School Committee. Matthew Wilder, a School Department spokesperson, stated that the students and the superintendent have engaged in “a good give and take and the superintendent feels it’s important for students to have a voice.”

According to the *Globe* article the Student Advisory Council has been examining the homework policy for more than two years, surveying approximately 750 students at 25 high schools. About half of those interviewed characterized “their homework as busy work; it wasn’t meaningful or productive and rarely reinforced the lessons taught that day in school.”

The recommendations of the Student Advisory Council were thoughtful. They suggested that “teachers devote an hour of professional development a year to improving the quality of homework. The group also is seeking, among other things, that teachers reserve at least five minutes of class time to explain the night’s homework and take questions from students about it, instead of merely passing out the assignments at dismissal as students are departing the room.”

Richard Stutman, president of the teachers union, concurred with the suggestion that the district set aside one hour of its mandatory professional development time to

consider homework policies. The students “have some good ideas and we look forward to talking to them.”

The initial proposal for students to assess teacher performance involved having students formally evaluate their teachers and send the comments to administrators, a move that was opposed by the teachers union. Stutman was concerned that “some students have an ax to grind.” In response to this concern the student leaders modified their proposal to one that they hope will be more acceptable to the teachers union. Instead of completing a formal evaluation, students would offer feedback via a standardized form.

Vaznis explains, “Under the arrangement, students would anonymously review their teachers’ performances. The forms would then be forwarded to the teachers. The comments also would be compiled together for administrators, but that batch of information would exclude teachers’ names. The goal is to give students a voice while not causing professional harm to teachers. “

Stutman said the revised proposal “is heading in the right direction; I think people always appreciate positive, constructive feedback.”

### **The Importance of Collaboration and Ownership**

Although there is an increasing body of evidence that indicates people will be more intrinsically motivated to meet responsibilities in our schools, homes, and workplaces if they are afforded a realistic level of choice, input, and control, actual practices in many environments run counter to the research findings. Far too often policies and practices are dictated from above with little, if any, feedback solicited from those who are asked to follow these practices. Inviting opinions and offering choices do not weaken the authority of leaders, but rather contribute to a commitment from all members of that environment to work collaboratively in order to reach agreed upon goals. Where collaboration and ownership exist, one will discover satisfied, motivated, cooperative individuals. And one final thought: this collaboration and ownership can be nurtured at an early age, including during the preschool years. It is never too early to prepare children to live a responsible, self-disciplined life in a democratic society.