



THE POWER OF CHOICE: CREATING STUDENT AUTONOMY





What Is Student Autonomy?

When we create opportunities for students to take initiative, we underscore their personal autonomy. Personal autonomy is linked to the competency of assertiveness—the ability to stand up for one’s ideas without hurting or negating others, to seek help, to persevere with a challenging task, and to recognize one’s individual self as separate from the environment, circumstances or conditions one is in (Center for Responsive Schools, 2019).

When age-appropriate choices are offered, children are more likely to engage in their academic and social environments (McCombs, 2010). Research shows that motivation and self-determination are linked, which encourages students to take ownership of their learning (McCombs, 2010). Student autonomy can show up in a number of ways in the classroom:

- Practicing academic choice in a learning environment
- Seeking out topics of interest that support independent learning
- Empowering students to be vocal about their questions and learning

With practice, students will become more comfortable making independent decisions in a classroom environment, even as challenges arise. Encouraging children to tie their personal interests into their learning activities will make them more likely to participate and apply meaningful choices in an academic setting. Research shows that when students are more interested in their learning materials, their intrinsic motivation, or natural motivation, and satisfaction are engaged (Schwartz, 2019). Providing choice can also stimulate their creativity and inform students about what really matters to them in and out of school settings.

Why Student Autonomy Matters

With autonomous choice, comes independence—but it won't happen overnight. Fostering student autonomy is worth the effort because it is beneficial in a variety of ways. Setting clear performance expectations gives children a better understanding of goals and expectations for their work (McCombs, 2010) If they are aware of how they will be graded as well as where additional learning support exists within school communities, it will help sharpen other social and emotional learning (SEL) competencies, such as responsibility and assertiveness.

When there is empowered decision-making in an academic setting, students are more likely to make responsible choices in a low-risk environment. Studies also show that students who demonstrate autonomy take ownership of their learning and become well-rounded members of society (Bandura, 1993). Student autonomy can create independent thinkers who aren't afraid to ask for help. Fostering autonomy also allows for less student isolation, promotes positive growth, and gives learners at any age a voice to develop personal and social responsibility (McCombs, 2010).



References

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