

Individual Autonomy: The Magnificent Obsession¹

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If autonomy is to be the goal of education, the key issue is to bring its facilitation "from the unconscious, unplanned level to the level of conscious awareness."

A MAJOR thread running through the history of American education has been a concern for students as individuals. This may be seen through an examination of the reports of the numerous commissions and committees which have studied the functions of our schools during this century. Although expressed in various terms, the persistent theme which emerges as the purpose of American education is the optimum fulfillment of the individual. For example, the Educational Policies Commission² in 1938 identified self-realization, human relationship, economic efficiency, and civic responsibility as the four major objectives of American education. Twenty-three years later the same commission stated:

The basic American value, respect for the individual, has led to one of the major charges

¹ An earlier version of this article appeared in the *Faculty Forum*, College of Education, Pennsylvania State University, July 29, 1975.

² National Education Association and American Association of School Administrators Educational Policies Commission. *The Purpose of Education in American Democracy*. Washington, D.C.: the Commission, 1938.

which the American people have placed on their schools: to foster that development of individual capacities which will enable each human being to become the person he is capable of becoming.³

But, in addition to this charge, the schools have also been designed to serve society's needs. Schools have a responsibility to facilitate those qualities which will enable students to interact compatibly with others, to become economically sufficient, and to assume civic responsibilities and leadership. This then has been and continues to be the American dream: to provide educational experiences which will fill both individual and societal needs. The nurturing of personal autonomy and individuality is recognized as being central to the realization of both goals.

To what extent have educators fulfilled these basic purposes? Numerous critics have pointed out that in reality we have fallen far short of our goals. For example, in spite of a public commitment to the maximum devel-

³ National Education Association and American Association of School Administrators Educational Policies Commission. *The Central Purpose of American Education*. Washington, D.C.: the Commission, 1961. p. 1.

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opment of each individual, group-oriented instruction and procedures are the rule while individualized and personalized programs are the exception. Conformity rather than individuality appears to be the norm. The relatively few persons who are willing to become actively involved and assume responsibility and leadership in civic affairs at all levels of our government is cited as evidence that we are also falling short of filling societal needs.

A Capability To Be Developed

What has turned this magnificent and worthy obsession into what appears to be a difficult if not impossible dream? Although there have been numerous impediments to those goals, a partial answer may be found in the approach that has been taken. The major thrust has been in designing programs and procedures which were to facilitate reaching these broad goals. The emphasis has been on the *processes* of instruction. What has been missing is a specification of the characteristics which educators are hoping to foster in students that will in turn make possible the reaching of the larger goals.

An examination of the concept, independent study, may help to clarify this point. Independent study is frequently mentioned in educational literature as a method of instruction which recognizes and provides for differences in individual students. Dressel and Thompson have pointed out that program developers have generally failed to discriminate between independent study as a learning experience and as a capability to be developed.

At the heart of the problem of definition is the fact that independence has not been defined adequately in an academic context. It has come to mean independent of classes, independent of other students, or independent of faculty. Acceptance of any one or even all of these as essential would be missing the most important aspect of the whole process which is that the student become capable of self-directed study.⁴

This interpretation which recognizes that individual independence, initiative, and responsibility are the valued end of independent study and not just the experience per se provides a change of focus for educators structuring curriculum.

The same problem exists with programs of individualized instruction. These have been designed specifically to provide for individual development. Yet, as with independent study, the concept has not been defined in terms of the kinds of characteristics and qualities that these programs hope to cultivate in students. Rather, the developers talk in terms of the processes involved such as diagnostic pretesting and self-paced learning. The identification of the behavioral and attitudinal goals would provide the conceptual clarity needed to determine both the program objectives and the supporting structure.

It therefore appears that if individual autonomy is to be sought as a goal of education that will lead to students' self-fulfillment and will, at the same time, promote the acceptance of a responsibility in the larger society, the realization of this goal will be facilitated by the identification of the behavioral and attitudinal components of this quality. Autonomy is an integrating characteristic that connotes a relationship between an individual and the environment with regard to decision making and includes the two sub-concepts of inner regulation and independent behavior.

Piaget,⁵ discussing the socialization

⁴ Paul L. Dressel and Mary Magdala Thompson. *Independent Study*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1973. pp. 3-4.

⁵ Jean Piaget. *The Moral Judgment of the Child*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Company, Ltd., 1932.

process of the child, described the evolution of sequential stages which he identified as moving from "heteronomy" to "autonomy." The following summary provides a delineation of behavioral and attitudinal components characteristic of autonomy and heteronomy:

<i>Autonomy</i>	<i>Heteronomy</i>
cooperation	egocentrism
mutual respect	unilateral respect
individual creativity	conformity
flexibility	rigidity
rational criticism	blind faith in authority
inner directed	other directed
independence	dependence.

An examination of these components indicates that these behaviors and attitudes are important not only to individual development, but are essential to the survival of our democratic form of government.

To Teach About—or To Become?

Using the components of autonomy identified here, what are the conditions and procedures which are essential to their achievement, and about which educators are concerned? The answer to this question is complicated by the recognition that autonomous behavior is not taught or learned as ordinary content in the curriculum. One can teach *about* autonomy, independence, and responsibility, but this is not *becoming* autonomous in one's thoughts and actions. One learns responsibility and self-direction through experiences in which one is given the opportunity to be self-directed and responsible for one's actions. Therefore, if we want students who will be capable of making autonomous judgments, we must provide a learning environment in which they are encouraged to make autonomous judgments. Individuality and creativity will be fostered when students' ideas and contributions are sought, recognized, and valued. Cooperative relationships are facilitated through a climate of mutual trust and respect while an environment which emphasizes competition fosters alienation and distrust. Autonomy thus

evolves indirectly as a concomitant to a student's total school experience.

No particular curriculum model has a "corner" on the factors which facilitate autonomy. If one is committed to the development of these capabilities, a learning milieu which will foster their attainment can be designed. The crucial step is the identification of the desired behaviors. Only then will experiences and procedures be developed which will facilitate their growth.

A survey of the literature related to autonomy provides impressive evidence in support of these conclusions.⁶ Although generally recognized as a viable goal for education, teachers have rarely identified the facilitation of autonomy as a behavioral goal of instruction. Instead, it was thought that autonomy would evolve as a concomitant to participation in the school's academic program. Although this may be a valid assumption, the fact is that little formal attention is paid to the fostering of autonomy at any level. Therefore, not only has the development of this capability been largely ignored, but the lack of awareness of the concomitants of educational experiences has resulted in practices and conditions which are counterproductive to students' functioning in an autonomous mode. This lack of awareness by teachers concerning the multifaceted effect of schooling upon students means that educators have felt no responsibility for these concomitant learnings.

If autonomy is to be a goal of education, the key issue is to bring the facilitation of autonomy from the unconscious, unplanned level to the level of conscious awareness. The realization of this goal will then be dependent upon a clear explication of the behavioral goals associated with autonomy. It is only when teachers make a conscious commitment to the facilitation of individual uniqueness, independence, and responsibility that the processes, conditions, and experiences will be provided for the development of personal autonomy. □

⁶ Jennette Dittman. "Concomitant Learning in Home Economics Classrooms." Unpublished dissertation. University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University, 1974.

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