

More Than Choice

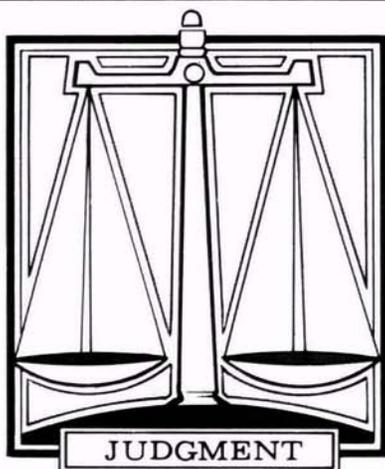
Louise M. Berman

"Focusing on the decision-making process does not mean the process is going to be easier." Yet ". . . the more persons reflect on their decisions, the more meaningful the decisions may be. Meaningful decisions have implications not only for the decider but for humankind."

Life demands each of us to make tough decisions. Persons vary in their readiness to make such decisions, yet, ignoring the process does not make critical issues disappear. At home, a person is faced with decisions of how to live most amicably with those close at hand. People also have to make decisions about what happens at work. What needs to be done? With whom? For what ends? Finally, people are faced with decisions relative to one's outreach. How do persons respond to injustices? to illness? to needs in the immediate community or in other parts of the world? Do people choose to be lulled into euphoria, or do they select to reflect on, even agonize about, situations needing attention?

That choice is inherent in life nobody can deny. Most educators are aware that children need opportunities to make decisions. Visit many of today's schools, and what does one see? Frequently large open spaces with varieties of materials displayed, assortments of books from which children can choose what they wish to read, colorful shelves full of games, toys in a play corner, or block corners where children may decide to reenact previous experiences or to create new ones. Such opportunities for decision are frequently seen within the school building.

Less frequently seen are school systems in which individual buildings and schools within schools have a clearly stated philosophy and program, such as Montclair, New Jersey,¹ where



parents are carefully informed about school possibilities available within the community. With their children and the help of school personnel, parents select the philosophy and program deemed most appropriate for their children. For example, parents can elect to put their children in a gifted and talented magnet school in which giftedness is defined to include all children. Or a secondary parent and child may select the School for the Performing Arts, again the as-

sumption being that all youth can perform with varying degrees of skill. Choice and decision are acknowledged, and parents engage in tough thinking as they make decisions about their children's education.

If one considers selected aspects of school programs, one can find much emphasis on choice. For example, guidance and career education programs frequently help the young deal with certain options that they have.

Even though evidences of choice are seen in many school settings, one is frequently hard pressed to find curricula in which attention is given to teaching the delicate and difficult processes of making tough decisions. Somehow people tend to feel that choice is enough. Yet, if we

¹Montclair, New Jersey, under the leadership of Superintendent Walter Marks, has developed a system of schools in which different philosophies underlie the programs. Children are bused to schools of parents' choice.

are interested in others becoming increasingly humane, we must go beyond giving choice. We must provide settings in which processes of decision are analyzed, taught, and evaluated. From early grades through the remainder of schooling, children and youth need help in learning behavior associated with the decision-making process. A common view is that decision making cannot be taught; it is learned through the process of living. A less common view, but one that is worthy of further investigation is that, despite the complexity of the process, it can be analyzed and taught.

Wise decision making involves skills or information gathering and sifting. It involves skills in finding and evaluating the information critical to the decision to be made. Decision making means being able to know and deal with problems of uncertainty generated by the impossibility of uncovering knowledge considered necessary to a decision.

Opportunities for Learning

If decision making is to become part of the school curriculum in any kind of organized form, then we need to give attention to opportunities children and youth have to try on and to learn behaviors associated with the process.²

Breaking Away from the Right-Wrong Syndrome

Reading specialists, principals, and the general public frequently lament the fact that standardized achievement test scores are dropping. Whether or not such is the case is not the issue. Rather one issue in the dilemma centers around the appropriateness of having testing programs limited to "right" and "wrong" answer questions. When so much of life is uncertain, a need exists for persons to know when they do not know and to be willing to search for alternative solutions to problems. Such an approach to life is far more in tune with the complexity of the times than the approach that rewards quick solutions to less than problematic questions.

In thinking about breaking away from the right-wrong syndrome, educators need to think about developing contexts in which children have the opportunity to pose questions that require establishing alternative solutions and then test-

ing them out. Evaluation of individuals would be based upon the ability to state what is unknown along with what is known, and upon the ability to ask the questions that would assist in finding information appropriate to alternative solutions.³

Negotiating Decisions

A series of studies focusing on aspects of the decision-making process was conducted in the Center for Young Children.⁴ In studies utilizing interview and observations as techniques,

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findings consistently indicated the significance of peers in children's decision making. For example, in the study reported by Horowitz, children were asked to name what they planned to do when

² A useful instrument for gathering information about decision making is found in: Carol A. Stevenson. "The Development of an Instrument to Examine Teacher Influence on Decision Making Behaviors of Children Ages Three to Five." College Park: University of Maryland, 1973. Unpublished doctoral dissertation.

³ For another approach to learning to be uncertain, see: Joan E. Sieber, "Overcoming Secondary Ignorance: Learning to Be Uncertain." Research Memorandum No. 17. Stanford: Stanford Center for Research and Development in Education, Stanford University, 1968 (Mimeographed).

⁴ These studies were collaborative efforts by teachers and University students. See the following monographs edited by Louise M. Berman for details: Sandra Horowitz. *Decision Making in Young Children: Part I. A Report of Research Findings*, University Nursery-Kindergarten, Monograph 2, 1971; Joan Poultney. *Decision Making in Young Children: Part II. A Report of Research Findings*, University Nursery-Kindergarten, Monograph 3, 1970; Jessie A. Roderick, Joan Moyer, and Ruth Spodak. *Non-verbal Behavior of Young Children as It Relates to Their Decision Making. A Report of Research Findings*, University Nursery-Kindergarten, Monograph 5, 1971. All reports are from the College of Education, University of Maryland.

they were engaged in outside play. Observational data gathered on the playground indicated that who was engaged in a given activity was a significant factor in terms of whether children followed through on a given choice or not.

Studies indicated that even young children look to their peers as sources of information, as sources of support, and as sources of enjoyment. The implication of peer orientation even at an early age is that children need opportunities not

"Children need assistance in developing a repertoire of interpersonal skills—skills of intimacy and skills in reaching out to persons unlike themselves."

only for self-selection of activity, but also for how to negotiate with a peer, the most useful activity for both involved. For example, children can deal with such questions as:

- What can my friend and I do so that both of us have a chance to learn something new?
- What can I do with someone new today?
- What can any friend and I do that will help us know each other better?
- What skills do the other person and I need so that the differing ideas we both bring to an activity can be fully utilized? How can we use our differences creatively?

If peer-peer activity is to be utilized in a classroom, children need help in choosing with whom to work. Children need assistance in developing a repertoire of interpersonal skills—skills of intimacy and skills in reaching out to persons unlike themselves.

Making Decisions with Sustaining Power

Some decisions require immediate but short-term action. Other decisions, because of their complexity, because of the necessity to become involved with others, or because of their potential to cause new questions to be raised have a sus-

taining quality. For example, if a child sits down to play a lotto-type game, one can almost predict that completion of the game means completion of the thoughts contained in the game.⁵ However, if on the other hand a child in concert with others decides to construct something necessitating co-operation, imagination, flexibility, originality, and involvement, sustaining power is frequently built into the project.

For example, Joan Kissinger writes about five-year-olds constructing a police car as a result of the interest of children in criminals.⁶ Children learned to engage in creative thinking as they thought about and sketched how the car might look, and planned how they would carry out their ideas. According to Kissinger:

The fives devised problem-solving techniques of their own along the way. "Let's talk about it first" became a frequently used expression with each new building problem they met. They would list all their ideas and possible solutions and then make a final decision, often by vote. "How wide should we make the door?" They finally decided to measure the width of a classmate so "He can fit inside" . . .⁷

The questions that caused the activity to be a sustained one continued. Children became aware of their power to generate ideas and to build idea upon idea. "Although the children wrestled with one small problem after another, they never seemed to get tired. In fact, as they surmounted each one, they seemed to increasingly feel they could handle anything. 'Don't worry. We've got lots of ideas,' Suneel said."⁸

⁵ For the report of a project looking at involvement and the impact of setting on involvement, of which sustaining power is a factor, see: Louise M. Berman and Jessie A. Roderick, with Shirley Browner and Diane Lee. *A Study of the Impact of Specially Designed Settings on Children's Involvement: A Pilot Project. A Quality Improvement Project Sponsored by the Maryland State Department of Education in Cooperation with Anne Arundel County and the University of Maryland. Project conducted at Rippling Woods Elementary School, 1976* (Typewritten).

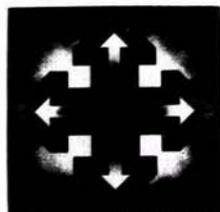
⁶ Joan Kissinger. *A Process Curriculum for Five Year Olds*. Center for Young Children, Occasional Paper Seven. College Park: Center for Young Children, University of Maryland, 1973. pp. 39-44.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

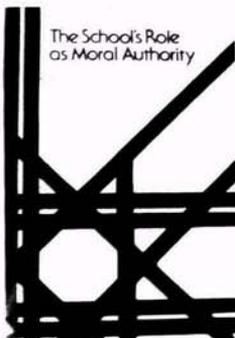
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As one explores the core of the decision process and the many related factors of decision one may be overwhelmed by the ramifications of the process. One way, then, to ensure not side-stepping the process because of its complexities is to teach for selected aspects of the process. For example, Murphy considered prediction as one aspect of the process.⁹ By training teachers in the process of prediction, she found that children working with them were more apt to make predictions than those children working in situations not giving specific attention to prediction. For example, to elicit predictions teachers asked questions such as the following:

- You said you've seen books. What could you do with the books?
- What happens if two of you want to play with the same thing?
- What could you do, if say, Laura and you both want to play with the puppets?
- What would you do if someone took a game from you?¹⁰

Getting Started

If educators are to teach such skills as negotiating decisions, breaking away from the right-wrong syndrome, or making predictions, they need to get started. One way of getting started is to let children, within a structure provided by the teacher, plan some of their own time. For example, a group of teachers in an open space school in Vancouver, British Columbia, decided to give 150 children more freedom in deciding how to use their time. One of the teachers, Pamela Proctor, writes:

The change we made this September is simple and may seem rather subtle, but the resulting differences are profound. We developed a communal choosing board including those activities for which the number of children is limited. The children who wish to do the activities take a ticket from the board and place it in the tin located in the area of their choice. When they have finished the activity, they return the ticket to the board. Now,

⁹ Joyce Murphy. "An Investigation of Teacher Influence on Two Decision Making Behaviors of Children Five to Seven." College Park: University of Maryland, 1974. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, typewritten.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

- The children move from one area to another during a session.
- More children have an opportunity to work in the areas where the numbers are limited.
- The children make many more decisions independently.
- The children use the resources in each area more fully.
- The children are more involved in planning for themselves and each other.
- The school is livelier and more exciting.¹¹

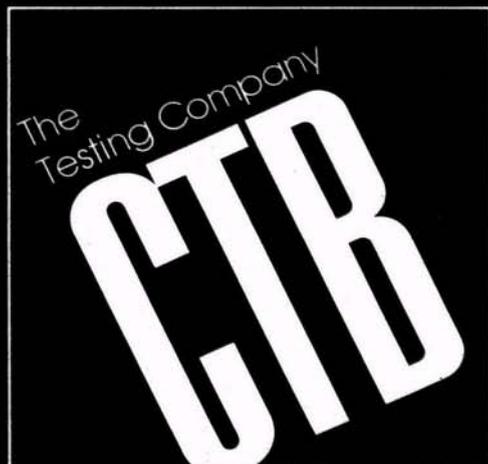
Planning for decision can also take place in smaller classes when one teacher has the major responsibility. For example, Marcia Haddock tells that after the children leave each day she turns out the classroom lights. Then she walks reflectively about the classroom, noting what the room looks like, what individuals have done. These observations precede planning for the next day. She tries to plan so that each child can make decisions, but these decisions are not made in isolation from the rest of the class and the teacher.¹²

Educators, when they are planning, need to think not only about opportunities for learning, but also about opportunities for deciding. Planning can include opportunities for children to move

- From nondecision to decision
- From impulsive decisions to reflective decisions
- From fear of risk-taking to taking more risks
- From mundane decisions to creative decisions
- From decisions requiring little searching for new ideas to decisions requiring much searching
- From decisions focusing basically on self to decisions incorporating self and others.

Unfortunately, focusing on the decision-making process does not mean the process is going to be easier. Indeed, the reverse is often true. The more one probes into the process and the more factors one considers, the more difficult decisions become.¹³ The question can then be raised as to why one should teach the process. The answer is simple. The more persons reflect on their decisions, the more meaningful the deci-

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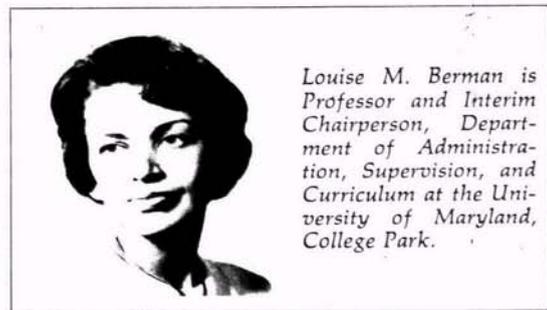
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sions may be. Meaningful decisions have implications not only for the decider, but for humankind.¹⁴

¹¹ Personal communication from Pamela Proctor, Charles Dickens Annex, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, November 1977.

¹² Interview with Marcia Haddock, Nishuane School, Montclair, New Jersey, October 1977.

¹³ For a further discussion of factors in the decision-making process, see: Louise M. Berman and Jessie A. Roderick. *Curriculum: Teaching the What, How and Why of Living*. Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1977.



Louise M. Berman is Professor and Interim Chairperson, Department of Administration, Supervision, and Curriculum at the University of Maryland, College Park.

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