

The Importance of being autonomous

The Scottish Executive's Ambitious Excellent schools presents a collection of change levers propelling the education system towards increasing autonomy. This is good news as autonomy is the crucial ingredient for effective teaching and self-motivated learning. It is a great benchmark against which to consider relationships between pupils and teachers, schools and authorities and authorities and the executive.

Autonomy is often confused with independence but it doesn't mean a 'free for all'. To separate autonomy from independence first think about dependence. The opposite of dependence is detachment, not autonomy. Autonomy is acting in your interests while staying affiliated with the values of the organisation. It means helping to shape values not just accepting them. It is asserting yourself while also fitting in. The well-adjusted teenager keeps good relationships at home while developing an increasing self-reliance unlike those for whom adolescence is characterised by detachment, defiance or dependency.

Autonomy is both a human need with political implications and a right with psychological consequences. It is best thought of as a way of relating to others. As with our fledgling parliament, autonomy is always a question of degree and open to question and as such is often tested. Resistance is a natural part of life because relationships invariably involve inequalities of status. The success of Ambitious Excellent schools will depend largely on how we deal with the inevitable tensions inherent in encouraging autonomy while limiting professional discretion.

There are four main types of autonomy responses. In relation to pupils I call them 'classrumstances'. Firstly, autonomy itself, apparent in those pupils and teachers who have a sense of purpose, set realistic goals, like challenges, are adaptable and cope with setbacks. They are cooperative but also assertive in that they can stand up for themselves and negotiate with and challenge authority respectfully. The autonomous teacher commits to the shared mission but isn't hide-bound by a template mentality that says there is only one way to do things. In the same way improvement plans of autonomous education authorities are driven by local needs and are founded on a careful selection of relevant initiatives that improve learning.

The second type of response reflects the opposite, a sense of having no autonomy, of being 'overwhelmed'. This is reflected in for example pupils who opt out of the exam system due to a sense of hopelessness. The development plans of overwhelmed schools can also be characterised as defensive reactions to external pressures.

The third response is 'restricted-autonomy', which is an over-compliant, over-trusting or over-dependent approach. This response is underpinned by an over-cautiousness or an unwillingness to work out any values. In the absence of principles, unfocused values fill the void, illustrated by teachers who constantly pass discipline problems onto senior colleagues. The final type reflects a distorted-autonomy', seen in a stance that is defiant, oppositional and detached. It may also involve an arrogance where teachers see themselves as above school policies and think they can just do what they like. Learning climates can be categorised using the same four types.

Classrooms can be epitomised by an 'over-protective' and undemanding climate, that in turn encourages a restricted classrumstance. Others can have an 'autonomy-crushing' climate, characterised by coercion and personal blame, resulting in no sense of autonomy for the learner. The purpose of educational initiatives is always to unlock creative potential but this often gets crushed through an over-emphasis on targets. The more accountability is stressed over autonomy, the more teachers will download this distrust to pupils through a command climate that emphasises strict control and punitive discipline. Such destructive climates are marked by a controlling communication style with lots of 'you should be' directives towards the 'right answer', by an insistence on the teacher's standpoint and by forcing meaningless tasks on pupils. Suppressing any opportunity to express an opinion about the learning climate is particularly damaging to autonomy and self-determination.

Thirdly, an over-competitive 'prove yourself' atmosphere marks the 'exposing' climate where unpredictability and uncertainty contribute to the development of a distorted sense of over-autonomy.

The 'autonomy supportive' climate is characterised by motivation to share power with pupils as soon and as much as possible. Teaching here is not about issuing orders and expecting blind obedience but communicating and negotiating in a confident manner. Teachers talk to pupils in the same way they talk to colleagues and don't shout at children or make comments such as 'shut it'! They encourage pupil initiative, allow them to solve their own problems, let pupils take responsibility for their work and involve them in decision-making. They stress the relevance of learning to pupils' goals and interests. This requires tuning into the pupils' perspective and helping them identify and follow their interests. They encourage questioning and independent thinking.

While head teachers are being sent on leadership courses, they should also study first hand the principles of autonomy support alive and well down the corridor in their most engaging classrooms.

This culture of autonomy must permeate all the way from the parliament to every classroom. The more self determined teachers are, the more autonomy supportive they will be with their pupils. Although schools have been enjoying increasing autonomy in recent years, classroom culture lags well behind. While the ethos of most schools has moved from a punitive to a reward culture, the control model dominates and pupil autonomy is generally low. Teachers still do things to and for pupils rather than with them. The move from a control to a reward culture is only a transition phase. Learners will enjoy the new Science curriculum because it supports their autonomy and encourages them to become stakeholders in and architects of their own learning.

Autonomy is important but in the end is only a stage, albeit an essential one, towards the higher goal of collaboration. Just as we can't achieve autonomy without first experiencing the security provided by clear limit setting, so interdependence needs to be founded on a sense of autonomy. In our most effective schools professional autonomy is so well established that it is readily sacrificed in the interests of teamwork.

