

The Influence of Student-Teacher Relationship on Construction of Students' Autonomy: What Roles Do the Teachers Play?

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ABSTRACT

Student-centered research have dominated the researches on students-teachers relationship. Teachers, as active actors in this relationship, are also important to be discussed. What roles do the teachers play? The paper attempts to identify the changes of the students-teachers relationship from the perspective of teachers. The prior perceived master-subject relationship has been reformed, as the ideology, technology, and education system changed. The construction of students' autonomy, which is becoming more and more significant in a time of individualization and modernization, is also affected. In this paper, the effects of the change in student-teacher relationship on students' autonomy and the reasons and approaches used to support autonomy are discussed. Conclusion reached suggests that the loss of power of teachers can positively influence the construction of autonomy of students.

Keywords: *Autonomy, student-teacher relationship, mass education, individualization*

1. INTRODUCTION

Have you ever tossed and turned at night, cannot help thinking about the eternal question 'Who am I'? In fact, this is a way you learn about your identity. The process of knowing yourself, significant as it sounds, links to the term 'autonomy'.

Autonomy has been discussed from different perspectives for a long period of time, and there is no one accepted and clear definition of the term.

The psychological definition of autonomy is deeply influenced by the western philosophical tradition, whose core assumptions include the inner, autonomous and independent psychological state of human beings and the emphasis on individual freedom. In fact, the product of negotiating with different social constraints and the internalization of social norms forms the rudiment of autonomy of a person [1]. According to current literature, however, psychological autonomy refers more to the ability to think reflectively and explore, focusing on the individual intentions, desires, and wishes [2]. In short, autonomy can be explained primarily as the recognition and construction of individual identity during adolescence and can be extended as a lifelong task.

From the philosophical perspective, autonomy and heteronomy are defined comparatively. Some factors including the community of mankind and the freewill of a person are influenced by the people's own will and situation; other factors including the corporate and the scientific disciplines are affected by external factors, such as laws, social norms, and circumstances [3]. Almost nothing can achieve absolute autonomy, which is to make a decision not to meet any dispositional ends.

When discussing autonomy from the pedagogical point of view, it is often a synonym to the term 'emancipation' or 'self-governance' [4]. Autonomy refers to a subject that has free will and is able to make one's own decisions.

In this paper's context, autonomy is interpreted as the right and ability to self-govern and self-determination, so as to facilitate further analysis of this study.

This paper aims to reveal the process of students' autonomy construction in formal education and evaluate the role that teachers play. First, the power relationship between students and teachers will be discussed. Secondly, this paper analyzes the influence of teacher-student relationship on students' autonomy. Finally, the strategies for teachers to construct students' autonomy are expounded.

2. RESEARCH QUESTION

The power relation between students and teachers has long been interpreted as master-subject. As a result, the self-governance of students was not a hot topic to be discussed. However, the relationship between the students and teachers has been perceived to be different in recent researches. Instead of master-subject, there is a more complex relation existing. Moreover, the importance of construction of autonomy has also been identified. Therefore, the correlation between student-teacher relationship and autonomy should be reassessed to evaluate the extent to which both actors have been asserting autonomy and the different approaches they use. The goal of this paper is to give consideration to the influence of student-teacher relationship on students' autonomy and how students and teachers construct students' autonomy together.

3. METHODOLOGY

This essay is largely based on the analysis of former paper, including the research discussing the traditional view of student-teacher relationship and the definition of autonomy. A qualitative method is used to identify students' struggle in protecting their right of self-governance and the approaches teachers use to establish autonomy of students properly.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

Autonomy in education has been identified as a great tool to be used to promote the motivation of students in formal learning, and it is incorporated in pedagogics as strategies for teachers to use. For example, Kaplan emphasized the activeness of importance of teachers in supporting students' autonomy for both adolescents and children, and that the different autonomy enhancing strategies and autonomy suppressing strategies can largely be recognized [5]. Moreover, researches state that there is strong correlation between the students' autonomy and academic performance. When students are allowed to learn and choose courses for autonomous reasons rather than compelling reasons, students have lower level of anxiety, better grade performance, and lower willingness to drop courses; in the case when students can recognize the teachers' attempts to enhance autonomy, they tend to be self-disciplined and would develop interest in the course [6].

School, a key to formal learning, is a place that emphasizes both individualism and collectivism, preparing an independent person to live in a society. In this sense, transculturalism is important in education. It is closely related to autonomy because it is a tool that people can use to enter society while maintaining their own sense of identity. Therefore, due to the lack of teacher training from a cross-cultural perspective, it is difficult to train students to develop independently and

gain autonomy while entering constructive groups, that is, the ability to interact with others while being themselves [3].

Not surprisingly, when the teachers try to utilize an autonomy-supportive style, students can react positively in terms of the perception of autonomy [7]. When students realize that teachers take students' reactions and opinions seriously and recognize the value of the curriculum, the satisfaction of autonomous needs is also maximized [8].

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Power relations between teachers and students

Schools are like a miniature society. As there are constant conflicts in society, schools are no exceptions. Schools are constantly producing conflicts [9].

Traditionally, the teachers had considerable power in classroom, and the student-teacher relationship is often perceived as master-subject. The students had almost no power to revolt or negotiate with teachers in formal learning, and the teachers are the only route for students to acquire knowledge. Students were considerably disadvantaged in the educational system, due to the fact that they were not considered as an active actor in the educational system [10]. Instead, students were regarded as passive recipients of education, and were excluded from decision-making process that might determine their future [11].

However, things have changed, probably at the end of the twentieth century. The society was changing faster at this period of time, with the development of technology and profound shift in ideology. As there was rapid social changes, many industries went through revolution and reformed. The relationship of teachers and students and the roles teachers play in formal education have also changed, for three main reasons.

5.2. Mass education

First of all, there is a transformation in the kinds of education teachers deliver. A shift from a small-size education system aiming to cultivate a few elites to mass education characterized by compulsory school is one of the main changes that symbolized the modern society [12]. The reasons behind mass education were discussed in several researches. One of the main arguments is that mass education helps to meet the functional need for integration of an increasingly more diversified and differentiated society. Education is perceived as a tool of social differentiation of the modern world.

However, the counterargument is that mass education is a tool utilized by dominant groups to incorporate their ideology deeply in the society for the reason of

manipulating, and cultivating the next generation as their loyal adherents.

In both circumstances, the effects of mass education on the roles teachers play and the tension between students and teachers are significant.

Teachers have to shoulder more responsibilities and pressure, as they have to meet the demands of both government and parents [13]. The increasing regulation of government constraints the power of teachers in classrooms. Moreover, as parents wish education can help the family to go through vertical differentiation, they tend to be constantly giving attention to formal education and often try to influence formal learning of students based on their own thoughts. Thus, due to the empowerment of government and parents, the power teachers gain at school reduces. Teachers have to take into account both groups when they deliver education, and they have to give reasonable explanation for their every action.

Therefore, due to the disempowerment of teachers, students tend to preserve their right of self-governance, and the construction of autonomy seems natural and feasible in the modern world.

5.3. Individualization

The profound and rapid processes of individualization in the modern world also causes the reform of the relationship between the students and teachers.

Individualization is characterized as a sign of the twenty-first century, and arouses with the worldwide trend of capitalism and neoliberalism. Nowadays, the government is emphasizing the responsibility of living the own life and discouraging the dependence of people on social welfare. The same characteristics can be found in schools. For instance, the meaning of life taught by teachers has shifted from lessons of moral responsibility to an emphasis on individual dreams and rights in China [14].

Individualization is different from freedom, and does not mean that everyone should be unique and special [15]. It refers to changes in attitude in individuals [16]. The individuals generally detach from the family and are seen as distinct social units.

There are four main features of individualization process brought up by Beck and Grande:

- 1)Anti-traditional
- 2)Detaching the individuals from the family (there is supporting security system)
- 3)government pushing individuals toward pursuing one's own life
- 4)Internalization of systemic risks [17]

Due to the change of ideology and the shift of desired social actors, the approach the school use to deliver the 'final products' changed. The 'final product' have to be self-determined so they can deal with the increased options of personal choice due to individualization; the 'final product' also have to learn to cooperate and communicate, for they still have to learn in an aggregated society.

Instead of the controlled-style in the past, teachers have to deliver education in an autonomy-supportive style to cultivate the desired type of people for the society, by providing choices and encouraging students to take the consequences of their action.

Therefore, the construction of students' autonomy still seems indispensable in modern times.

5.4. ICTs

The development of Internet and Communication Technology (ICT) has caused a great reform in the field of the education, and further cause the change of student-teacher relationship.

First of all, the ICTs provide students a large amount of studying materials than can serve as supplement to the formal learning. Students who have access to internet can acquire knowledge they want at any time. Therefore, teachers is not the only route from which students can learn, and students do not have to rely entirely on teachers in terms of formal learning. As a result, the hierarchy that empowers the teachers due to their uniqueness collapse, and the former master-subject relationship between students and teachers collapses.

6. THE BENEFITS OF CONSTRUCTION OF AUTONOMY

6.1. The benefits of students

Lots of empirical evidence has shown that the construction of students' autonomy has long-term, comprehensive benefits on students.

First of all, the autonomy-supportive style of education enables students to learn in a motivational atmosphere of personal autonomy [18]. The benefits range from the students' consistent motivation to the psychological well-being of students [19].

More importantly, the effect of autonomy of students is incredibly great because the positive influence of students' autonomy can reach almost each student. According to Black and Deci [6], the benefits exist for students of all grade levels, from kindergarten students and graduates. Moreover, this conclusion can be generalized to all students despite of different races, nationalities, and genders [20].

6.2. *The benefits of teachers*

Surprisingly, teachers can also benefit from the construction of students' autonomy. As mentioned before, teachers nowadays are facing more pressure than ever before. Thus, if students' autonomy is constructed, students can govern themselves, and teachers can alleviate some of the pressure. In fact, recent researches show that the benefits of supporting students' autonomy include sense of personal achievement and reduced levels of teachers' emotional exhaustion compared with a traditional controlled classroom [21].

In addition, teachers who support autonomy tend to benefit from greater relationship satisfaction and more relaxed tension between teachers and students [22]. The positive attitude of both sides would inevitably make teachers' experiences at school easier.

7. HOW TEACHERS CONSTRUCT STUDENTS' AUTONOMY

Based on several researches, teachers are able to learn how to support autonomy. One piece of evidence is an intervention-based research in which teachers attend mentoring courses instructing how to support students' autonomy [23]. Further, both the experienced teachers and the inexperienced teachers of all grade levels can be successfully trained, meaning that there are no restriction in training of teachers to assert autonomy in class [24]. Therefore, the teachers can play an active role in the construction of autonomy, and the autonomy of students is a practical goal.

7.1. *Reward and punishment system*

From the pedagogics perspectives, one of the strategies that can be used to support students' autonomy is utilizing the reward and punishment systems. The reward and punishment system is linked to the operant conditioning, which was put forward by B.F. Skinner in 1937. In fact, a few studies have proved the effectiveness of operant conditional in influencing the actions of students. For instance, according to McAllister, the statements of praise and disapproval have positive correlation with the two behavior observed in a secondary school classroom.

Therefore, if teachers can give positive and negative reward and punishment properly, it is likely that an autonomy-supporting style would be cultivated in class.

What is difficult, however, is how the teachers accurately identify the manifestations of autonomy and reward them. It requires training and years of experience before a teacher can reach this standard and cultivate the desired atmosphere and students.

8. CONCLUSION

This essay reviews a few researches and identifies that the disempowerment of teacher in formal learning and the more equal position promote the construction of students' autonomy. As the type of person society needs changes, teachers are actively changing the way they cultivate students. With the global trend of individualization, mass education, and the improvement in technology, students tend to gain more autonomy in the near future. It is likely that teachers will also come up with more strategies to support the autonomy of students, giving them more individual rights and chances.

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