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Humanities

10/12/23

Student Autonomy in Education

Education is recognized as an inherent right, free to all. Despite this, do students truly have the freedom to exercise their own choices when it comes to their education? In the field of education, the question of who holds the authority to shape a student's learning has long been a subject of debate. It is arguable that as adolescents age, they should be granted a more significant role in determining what they learn. This perspective acknowledges the evolving autonomy and cognitive capabilities of high school students, emphasizing the importance of fostering their agency in the educational process. While younger students may not be able to make the same decisions, high schoolers should have the same amount of influence as the parents in deciding the content of their courses.

High schoolers should have the autonomy to choose the topics they study within their courses, given that they already possess a comprehensive knowledge of their own capabilities and a modern perspective of the world around them. They have a better understanding of their own interests and needs than their parents do. At this stage in their lives, students are on the brink of adulthood, and they are gradually developing a sense of identity and purpose. This period of self-discovery often involves a keen awareness of their passions, strengths, and areas of interest. Consequently, they are better equipped to make informed decisions about what they want to learn. Hiatt-Michael argues that “a tension often exists between professionals ... and

parents...who believe that they should have a voice in ... compensatory public education”.

However, she does not consider the perspective that students could also make some of these complex decisions. This omission highlights the need for a more inclusive approach that acknowledges the agency and evolving maturity of high school students. By engaging students in the decision-making process, education can better cater to their unique needs and interests. High schoolers also have the advantage of exposure to a wider range of viewpoints and experiences beyond their homes. They interact with peers from diverse backgrounds and engage with the broader world through the internet and social media. These interactions expose them to a multitude of ideas, cultures, and perspectives, which can significantly enrich their educational experience. High school students, therefore, possess a unique vantage point from which they can shape their curriculum to reflect their evolving worldview and interests.

Students should also be able to choose what they learn in school because their parents already have influence over various other aspects of their lives. Parents have a substantial influence on their children's upbringing, from their choice of residence to their extracurricular activities. In many cases, parents guide their children's social interactions, screen their TV shows, and even dictate their after-school commitments. While these parental influences are often well-intentioned and necessary for a child's development, they underscore the importance of allowing students to have a say in their education. Recent instances of parents banning books from schools due to misinformation demonstrate the potential pitfalls of excluding students from educational decisions. Misinformation campaigns have led to the removal of books that offer valuable insights and diverse perspectives (Winkie). If students were part of the conversation, they could contribute to debunking false information, ensuring a more balanced and inclusive curriculum, and fostering critical thinking skills. These incidents are not isolated, either; parents' rights

advocates have spread misinformation about highly political issues in schools, including false claims about litter boxes for students who identify as furries and the teaching of critical race theory (Stanford). In these situations, students, if given a voice, could play a crucial role in fact-checking and countering misinformation, thereby promoting transparency and trust between educational institutions and parents.

Education is one of the few areas where students are more affected by decisions than adults. Allowing them to participate in the decision-making process regarding their curriculum not only empowers them to take ownership of their learning but also prepares them for the responsibilities of adulthood. In the context of LGBTQ+ rights and education, it becomes evident that students, particularly transgender youth, are deeply affected by the decisions made by parents and policymakers, both positive and negative (Gambino). The voices of those most directly impacted should hold significant weight in decisions regarding their education. Students can offer invaluable insights into creating an inclusive and supportive environment, ensuring that their needs are met, and advocating against discrimination. This inclusion of students' voices can bridge the gap between the controlled environments they experience at home and the freedom they will encounter when they enter the world as independent individuals. Engaging students in decision-making about their education not only benefits their personal growth and development but also contributes to the overall quality of the educational system. When students actively participate in shaping their learning experiences, they become more motivated and engaged in the educational process. This engagement can lead to improved academic performance and a deeper sense of purpose. Furthermore, by involving students in curriculum development, educators and policymakers gain valuable insights into the evolving needs of the younger

generation, helping to adapt and improve the educational system to meet these changing requirements.

In conclusion, high school students, as nearly legal adults, deserve to have the same amount of influence as parents in deciding the content of their courses. While parents' guidance and expertise are invaluable, it is essential to recognize and respect the growing maturity and autonomy of high school students. Involving students in decision-making cultivates autonomy and equips them with skills to make informed choices. Their participation in choosing courses and topics fosters agency and responsibility, boosting motivation and commitment. Moreover, it fosters respect for diversity and individuality, promoting inclusivity. This active role in education develops vital life skills, including self-advocacy, informed decision-making, and constructive communication. Allowing students to actively participate in shaping their education empowers them to take ownership of their learning journey and prepares them for the responsibilities of adulthood.

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