

Seeing Yourself as a Decision Maker

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This decision-making inquiry focuses on what drives teenagers with learning disabilities to take agency, and explores one possibility as to why they often do not recognize themselves as decision-makers.

Vignette

Welcome to just another day of high school as a student with a learning disability. It started out like any other; I went from homeroom to my geometry class. It's a mainstream class, so it's harder for me because the work goes a lot faster. Some of the teachers are messed up cause they won't give us much help, and they won't let our friends explain stuff to us. They think we're cheating when we do. But Mr. B, the tutor, is different. He helps everyone with the work until they get it. He doesn't care if it takes two months to get it, you're gonna get it. I like the class, though, cause with math, you don't really have to read out loud.

I hate reading out loud, which is why I hate my civics class. It's another mainstream class and the teacher makes you read out loud a lot, even if you don't want to. Sometimes I mess up when I read out loud because I get confused or nervous. Then the other kids think I'm stupid cause they don't understand what it means to have a learning disability. They don't get that it's like Miss D says; I just learn differently. Sometimes I go to sleep in that class or cut-up a lot just so I don't have to read.

After Civics I go to my reading class. It's LD so there are only like ten students in the class instead of thirty. It's so dumb though. The teacher's really nice and she helps us a lot, but we do the same worksheets every week. It's messed up; they act like we're in kindergarten the work is so easy. It's so boring and frustrating cause you spend like three weeks doing the same thing even though everybody gets it. Sometimes I get so insulted that the teacher gives me baby work all the time.

It was that way today. I had to read out loud in Civics, so I was already in a bad mood when I got to my reading class. The teacher gave us another worksheet, and I'd about had it. I knew my friend Nick was skipping most of the afternoon and he wanted me to go with him. I wasn't gonna go, but I was so bored and frustrated. And on top of it, my parents don't let me hang out with my friends after school that much, so I hadn't chilled with Nick for a while. Screw it. I decided to skip and go to the mall with Nick. Besides, I'd only missed four days this quarter, so I had two more days I could miss.

It's not that hard to skip if you don't come to school in the morning, but if you leave during the day it's a little harder. There are security cameras everywhere so I knew I couldn't just walk out cause somebody would see me and I'd get caught. I decided to forge a note from my mom saying I had a doctor's appointment from 4th to 6th periods. I wasn't gonna be gone all day; I still had to go to CMU for my class or my teacher would call my mom.

So, I wrote the note from my mom and put my cell phone number on it. The office always calls the number on the note to make sure the note's not fake. I had one of my friends answer my phone and act like she was the doctor's office. It worked, so I left, met Nick at his car and we left. I thought everything would be cool.

We were hanging out in the food court for about an hour when I saw my older sister, Karen. She usually works during the day, so I have no idea what she was doing at the mall right then. I tried to duck out of the way before she saw me, but I wasn't fast enough. She gave me a look that I knew meant she was gonna tell my mom. I ran over to her to try to talk to her, but she wouldn't listen.

Nick and I left a little while later so he could drop me off at CMU for my class. My teacher there didn't know that I had skipped, so she wouldn't snitch on me to my mom, but it didn't matter cause my sister was going to tell.

When I got home later, my mom was already mad, so I knew Karen had told her. I was going to be on punishment for two weeks and my mom told me if I skipped again I'd be

sorry. She said she couldn't understand why I kept messing up and told me not to screw up again.

Analysis

This vignette is not a story from any one student, but is a composite of what many Oliver High School scholars articulated during our conversations on coping with learning disabilities. To cope with or conceal their disabilities, many of them engage in activities such as sleeping in class, acting like the class clown, volunteering to answer some questions so the teacher will not call on them later, assuming the role of teacher's pet to either get preferential treatment or to get out of class, or skipping school altogether. While it is arguable that the students make 'wrong' or 'bad' decisions when they behave this way, there is another side to the argument. By dissecting the decisions made in the vignette, it becomes clear that the student was in fact taking agency and acting as a decision-maker *according to his values*. He often felt that preserving his dignity was more important than attending class or engaging in a valuable learning experience.

Cross-section of a 'bad decision'

More than just stating that the vignette represents a student's capacity to make decisions, dissecting the story reveals where the decision-making occurred.

- 1) He made the decision in the morning to attend his first few classes
- 2) He decided to skip because a) he was already in a bad mood from reading aloud b) the work in his LD class was not challenging c) he calculated that he still had two days he could miss that term and d) he wanted to spend more time with his friends
- 3) He forged a note from his mother
- 4) He included his cell phone number on the note so the office would think it was legitimate
- 5) He elicited a friend to pose as the doctor's receptionist
- 6) He left school and went to the mall with his friend
- 7) He tried to convince his sister not to tell his mom instead of explaining the reasons why he skipped

- 8) Even though his family already caught him, he went to his CMU class so he wouldn't get in trouble with school, too
- 9) He took his punishment, but didn't talk to his mom about his problems in school that led to his decision to skip class

Despite the agency the student exerted in this situation, authority figures do not credit him with having made decisions because his behavior was considered bad. In fact, the student himself probably does not see himself as a decision-maker or view this event as a decision. Even when I presented this idea to the scholars, they agreed that these nine steps were decisions, but that they had never before thought of skipping school as an example of taking agency. The students also said it is the consequences that make a decision bad, not necessarily the behavior. Although they may have felt perfectly justified in their behavior at the time they made the decision, once they face the consequences, both the authority figure and the agent classify them as mistakes and disregard any informed decision-making that occurred.

For example, in the vignette, the student's mother does not discuss with her son why he made the decision to skip class or reassure him of his ability to make decisions. Instead, she chastised and punished him for his 'mistake.' If parents and teachers did more to reassure teenagers of their autonomy, perhaps the students would be more aware of the decision-making process and in turn, make better decisions.

It was this reassurance, or show of faith in a student's ability, that helped Lives on the Boundary author Mike Rose continue his education into college.

"One day in the December of my senior year, Mr. MacFarland asked me where I was going to college. I hadn't thought much about it. My folks would say that they wanted me to go to college and be a doctor, but I don't know how seriously I ever took that; it seemed a sweet thing to say, a bit of supportive family chatter, like telling a gangly daughter she's graceful...When I finally said, "I don't know," MacFarland looked down at me and said, "Listen, you can write."

Until MacFarland explicitly stated his belief in Rose's ability, Mike had never even considered the possibility of college. He did not see himself as college material because his grades were below par and he felt he didn't match up to the abilities of other non-vocational students. This is not dissimilar to the Oliver students' failure to see themselves as decision-makers. Few people have told them that despite their learning disability or age, they have faith that the students can take agency for themselves. As Rose illustrated in his example, sometimes this reassurance from an authority figure is necessary to help a teenager recognize her potential.

In "Inventing the University," David Bartholomae reveals another aspect that may influence teens' ability to see themselves as decision-makers. Bartholomae discusses what it means to be an insider or outsider of a group; outsiders must mimic the behavior of insiders in order to gain credibility and entrance into the group. However, if outsiders are not taught how to behave, how will they ever gain entry? Additionally, Bartholomae notes that it requires risk-taking for one to abandon her comfort zone and attempt to learn a new way of doing things.

"I am arguing, then, that such sentences fall apart not because the writer lacks the necessary syntax to glue the pieces together but because he lacks the full statement within which these words are already operating" (Cushman 523). Although Bartholomae's argument focuses on writing in an academic setting, it is akin to asking teenagers to take agency. By taking agency, they are, in essence, asked to assume a more responsible, or more mature role in their lives. However, if they are not shown how the decision-making process works, or reassured when they are exercising agency, how will they ever really become decision-makers? Teenagers garner a much greater response from authorities for bad decisions than for good ones, which suggests they may be largely unaware when they do make a good decision. A good decision elicits no response because the student was expected to behave that way. In Bartholomae's terms, the students do not receive positive feedback when they, as outsiders, successfully imitate the customs of the insiders. This lack of feedback makes it more difficult for outsiders to identify how they *should* be acting, but instead focuses on how they *should not* be acting. The outsiders are given very little, if any, guidelines of how to become an insider of the decision-making crowd.

While skipping school may not be the kind of behavior mentors, teachers and family members should endorse, there are valid reasons behind these decisions. One of the protagonist's reasons for skipping school was to avoid the embarrassment and frustration of having a learning disability in a high school classroom. However, because these 'mistakes' often have consequences, he, and many other students are so preoccupied with concealing their actions that they never have the opportunity to reflect upon their decisions and the reasons behind them.

Ignoring such incidents as decisions has greater consequences than those the student faces for breaking a rule. More than a suspension or detention, it perpetuates the notion that the students have no control, and it also conceals the real problems: assignments that belittle and bore the students; classrooms that force students to display their weaknesses at the expense of being teased; and a lack of respect for the students' as independent agents.

Ignoring the real issues seems to reinforce that teenagers are unable to make decisions, making them feel powerless, and subsequently less accountable for the poor decisions they do make. It also reveals a problem in the classification of these decisions as 'bad' or 'mistakes.' In many of the scholars' discussions about why they skipped school or got into trouble, they had valid reasons for acting the way they did. However, they said no authority figure ever asked for their reasons, but just punished them for their 'mistake.' By avoiding the reality that the student might have weighed his options and felt he had none but to skip school, authority figures enable a learned helplessness and avoidance of accountability. It's not that kids who skip school are necessarily bad, but rather that some condition is making them feel they have no alternative but to make subversive decisions, such as sleeping or cutting-up in class, or skipping. If teenagers were given the opportunity to express the reasoning and frustration that accompanies such decisions, it is more likely that real solutions could be found.

Such subversive actions are defense mechanisms for the students to protect themselves from what they feel is outside of their control. This is similar to what Mike Rose described in his book as an acceptance of mediocrity. In order to shield

themselves from failure or criticism, students in his vocational classes strived to be average and, like the Oliver students, accept reputations as being lazy or having a bad attitude to protect themselves from the criticism of their peers.

“You’re defined by your school as “slow”; you’re placed in a curriculum that isn’t designed to liberate you but to occupy you, or if you’re lucky, train you, though the training is for work the society does not esteem...What Ken and so many others do is protect themselves from such suffocating madness by taking on with a vengeance the identity implied by the vocational track. Reject the confusion and frustration by openly defining yourself as the Common Joe. Champion the average...The tragedy is that you have to twist the knife in your own gray matter to make this defense work. You’ll have to shut down, have to reject intellectual stimuli or diffuse them with sarcasm, have to cultivate stupidity, have to convert boredom from a malady into a way of confronting the world. Keep your vocabulary simple, act stoned when you’re not or more stoned when you are, flaunt ignorance, materialize your dreams. It is a powerful and effective defense—it neutralizes the insult and the frustration of being a vocational kid.” (Rose 28-9)

Rose was able to avoid adopting this defense mechanism, but it wasn’t until teachers gave him respect as a student that he realized his own potential. This is the same for the learning-disabled scholars; until mentors, role models, parents and teachers validate them as decision makers, they are less likely to see themselves as independent agents, and it is not until they see themselves as such that they will feel empowered to make informed, adult decisions.

Most of the scholars felt discussing these issues with authority figures would be fruitless; they feel adults don’t care what they think or why they do things, but would conclude that they were making excuses for poor behavior. The students disagree with the actions of people in power, but feel they are helpless to influence others’ decisions and make real change. However, the scholars feel strongly enough about their own reasons that they disobey the rules of these authority figures.

In conclusion, based on the testimony of the Oliver students, current classroom settings are not conducive to varied degrees of ability, and exclude and cause stress for many students with learning disabilities. Students respond to these conditions with subversive behavior, which is not reinforced as taking agency, but with consequences that prohibit the student from reflecting upon the reasoning behind her decision. Consequently, students ignore these occasions as evidence of decision-making, and try harder to conceal their actions in the future.

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Community Literacy and Intercultural Interpretation