



Practitioner Researcher

Autonomous development in early childhood

Yidong Zhao

Postgraduate Diploma Student, New Zealand Tertiary College

Autonomy is a critical aspect of early childhood development. This article will introduce the concept of autonomy in the early years, as presented by philosophers such as Rousseau, Montessori and Steiner. The article will also examine how young children cultivate a sense of autonomy and possible influences that impact upon their development. Finally, I will critically reflect on autonomy in relation to my own childhood and in relation to diverse contexts.

Definitions of autonomy in early childhood education

A number of different definitions apply to the term autonomy. The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2011), for example, defines autonomy as “[the] freedom that a place or an organisation has to govern or control itself” or “the ability or opportunity to make your own decisions without being controlled by anyone else.” Both definitions approximate independence. Put differently, Collins Concise New Zealand Dictionary (2008) adds that autonomy also means “[a] state, community, or individual possessing autonomy” and philosophically it represents “the doctrine that the individual human will is or ought to be governed only by its own principles and laws.” Moreover, Heffner (2012) states that, according to biology, autonomy refers to existence as an “independent organism and not as a mere form or state of development as an organism.” It seems the autonomous person has not only “the capacity to act on particular desires and choices ... [but also on] a more general capacity to be self-determining, to be in control of one’s own life” (Honderich, 2005, p. 72). Upon considering the aforementioned definitions, one can devise that a general definition of autonomy speaks to a person who is independent and free enough (in other words, possessing the right of self-governance) to process and own his or her autonomy. This definition suggests that autonomy enables people with a capacity to use and enjoy their right to control and manage themselves.

Cannella (1997) notes that early childhood education is intended to guide young individuals toward independence. Thus, facilitating autonomy should be one of the main aims of early childhood education provision. As an essential concept, autonomy was clearly represented throughout many educational philosophies in history. Much like the biological definition of autonomy, Darwin regarded the child as an independent organism. Rousseau, on the other hand, likened an autonomous person to the Christian church's concept of an “individual soul” (Cannella, 1997, p. 37). Wollstonecraft focused on “educated, independent motherhood” (May, 1997, p. 11), which speaks to the notion that women are just as able as men to enjoy freedom and be educated as autonomous people in preparation for rearing subsequent generations. Sometime later, Froebel's philosophy acknowledged that children are individuals; accordingly, he developed educational procedures that allow youngsters to develop at their own



pace with adequate freedom (Manning, 2005). Children's "self-empowerment" (Manning, 2005, p. 372) was encouraged and reinforced by teachers and schools under Froebel's perspective, which enhanced children's' autonomy as a result. In the same vein, Pestalozzi's "child-centred teaching philosophy" (McKenna, 2010, p. 122) also asserted that children wish to grow up in an active, spontaneous way. Montessori (1985) similarly mentioned that children prefer to choose what they want freely and receive "spontaneous discipline" (p. 126). Moreover, "freedom to self-construction" (Weinberg, 2009, p. 34) is essential to Montessorian pedagogy.

Educational philosophies about autonomy in early childhood

Although many theorists apply the concept of autonomy uniquely in childhood education, the approaches of Rousseau and Montessori wield significant influence. Their definitions of autonomy and respective foci on how best to foster individuals' autonomy are not exactly the same, but all roads lead to Rome; their educational philosophies each aim to help children seize their own autonomy.

To begin, Rousseau stated that man is born free and education is intended to build the new free man. With freedom, children can learn limitations and possibilities by themselves and create happiness and autonomy thereafter (May, 1997). In the meantime, Rousseau claimed that, if children are brought up in a natural way, without social intervention, then they will learn and make appropriate decisions on their own, an idea that I examine, through personal experiences, towards the end of this article. Rousseau refuted the idea that children should learn through obedience. They can instead develop by necessity, gain knowledge and understand restraint via the natural world (Reed & Johnson, 2000). Moreover, Rousseau's "educational process that follows natural" (Reed & Johnson, 2000, p. 65) indeed emphasises young children's autonomy. Provided sufficient freedom, independence and proper guidance, they will come to understand common sense and a general will to consciously redirect personal desires toward the common good. In fact, according to Rousseau, there are two types of dependence: "dependence on things, which is natural, and dependence on man, which is social" (Reed & Johnson, 2000, p. 66). His conception of autonomy seems to rely primarily on nature but is independent from society, which implies deliberate human interference. Further, Rousseau believes that work, study and play are equally crucial for children, so long as they choose each freely, in accordance with their personal interests and needs. In this way, their lives are characterised by happiness and satisfaction (Reed & Johnson, 2000).

According to Montessori (as cited in Blount, 2007), in prehistoric times, children between 2 and 6 years old were not constantly by their parents' side as they are today. They tended instead to spend more time with older peers. During their daily explorations, children observed and modelled adults' use of tools and materials and tried to master them through constant repetition. In this stage, it is said that young children need to "physically act upon their environment in order to satisfy their immense desire and will to understand their world" (Blount, 2007, p. 85). When given free access to society, young children began to understand social structure and went on to engage in basic apprenticeship in an area that appealed to them. Although current life expectancy is much longer than it was in prehistoric times, humans' biological clocks have changed very little, by



comparison. Thus, childhood ages are nearly identical, meaning that children indeed have the potential to master some degree of independence, even at a young age (Blount, 2007).

Parents in today's society are often hard-pressed to provide adequate time and space for their children's physical activities and supervision. Children are more likely now to stay inside watching TV or playing video games, either of which may include violence or similarly aversive content. Unlike many adult-staffed early childhood education centres, Montessori centres foster small communities in which children can implement their own choices, observe and imitate older peers, play with stimulating natural materials, spend ample free time outdoors, and deconstruct practical problems with teachers' support and guidance. Under Montessori principles, children are given the opportunity to engage in the same types of growth-encouraging activities their ancestors did in their childhood. Today's Montessori children therefore learn to possess a sense of fulfilment and confidence, which is essential to one's autonomy (Blount, 2007).

Facilitating autonomous development in the early childhood centre

In light of the philosophies that address the development and nurturance of autonomy, it becomes clear that it is equally important to address optimal avenues for autonomous development. Practically speaking, the Montessori philosophy shares similarities with some other educational philosophers in its approach to encouraging children's autonomy. For instance, both Montessori and Steiner advocated for a child-centred educational philosophy, enabling environment, well trained-teachers as supporters, and free play (Blount, 2007; Oldfield, 2009; Ullrich, 1994; Weinberg, 2009). A centre that adopts Steiner's philosophies, for example, also emphasises a child-centred environment. That is, the syllabus and pedagogy are designed according to children's "genetic and organic development" (Ullrich, 1994, p. 6). There are no standardised textbooks in Steiner's kindergartens. Pupils prepare the most important learning materials (for example, epoch notebooks) without much instruction from their teachers. In fact, teachers are educated to consider themselves companions to children's development (Ullrich, 1994).

While autonomy is nearly always important to children's well-being, one's sense of autonomy is developed with considerable influence from the environment. Productive environments, in other words, can afford children greater chances to foster their autonomy, although some are more amenable to this than others (Bridges, 2003). Grossman (2007) offers examples from two early childhood classrooms in America to illustrate this point. In the first classroom, after explaining the group conversation, all 4-year-olds were allowed to choose their toys and activities. During this time, they were also able to talk and visit different centres within the room set-up, according to their interests. Voices were seldom raised over the course of the morning, and none of the students acted out of control. In the second classroom, all same-aged children were asked to sit in their own chairs, listen quietly to the teacher and respond correctly to questions for over half an hour, and then follow the teacher's instructions. Children were expected to be respectful, polite, and quiet the whole time. Unlike in the first classroom, frustration and unhappiness were common in the second. Even the teacher had trouble addressing some children's "misbehaviour". Obviously, most



children prefer the first learning environment, which offers many choices to help them practice self-control and self-governance.

School-aged children are also quite sensitive to stress in their surroundings. The Steiner approach advocates an unhurried approach to afford youngsters' adequate time to complete their self-construction (Oldfield, 2009). Children in a Steiner-based centre experience a kind of "confidence-building sense of freedom" (Oldfield, 2009, p. 16), which means they partake in rich, creative activities of their choosing within a stress-free, emotion-regulating and supportive environment. There are neither compulsory questions to be answered nor specific tasks to be completed. During this process, children only need to follow their whims and explore at their own pace to develop boundaries. By taking the initiative to exercise and learn, young children's confidence and sense of autonomy begin to bloom (Oldfield, 2009).

The "active, repetitive, habit-forming environment ... [plus the] trained example of the teacher" (Oldfield, 2009, p. 17) also helps young children to develop self-regulation. According to Steiner, imitation is particularly important during young children's first seven years of life. Teachers who are well trained are therefore a crucial component of the environment (Oldfield, 2009). There is an old saying in China, "[t]eaching by personal example is even more important than verbal instruction," which is quite similar to Steiner's educational philosophy. Providing children with strong examples to model and learn helps foster self-regulation. In Montessori's view (Weinberg, 2009), teachers in early childhood centres are closer to observers, rather than directors. Just like many child-centred kindergartens, the teacher's role focuses on supporting and guiding children, instead of directly 'teaching' them. This idea was reiterated in the experience of a colleague (personal communication, March 22, 2014), who visited an early childhood centre in New Zealand that followed Steiner's educational philosophy. She noted that children received "unhurried" time to finish tasks at their own pace. Their choices were respected, and teachers supported them by modelling behaviours and working with the children to help them develop freely at their own pace. Autonomy is naturally fostered in this type of environment.

Free play is another key activity that encourages young children's sense of autonomy. Steiner notes that children acquire confidence and qualities of independent learning when they engage in free play (Oldfield, 2009). During playtime, youngsters will pursue play that is personally comfortable for them, either individually or in a group. By doing so, they show respect for the environment while being warm and social toward their peers. Rousseau also emphasised allowing children to play freely in their natural environment, thereby encouraging them to explore their world (instead of repressing curiosity) to best develop well-balanced and open-minded generations (Reed & Johnson, 2000). Similarly, free play, especially outdoor free play, was Montessori's preference as well (Blount, 2007).

Personal autonomous development stories

Reflecting on my own childhood, my sense of autonomy was also developed in several ways. Using anecdotal childhood experience as a touchstone in one's teaching career must be done carefully, as it is likely to interfere with one's professional judgment. Personal history is likely to be narrow and even distorted



(Jalongo, 2002). That being said, everyone's childhood is unique, meaningful and educational, and critical self-reflection is necessary for every teacher. The process especially helps teachers identify discrepancies in personal constructs of childhood and integrate knowledge and skills across different contexts to devise novel solutions to problems (Larrivee, 2000). Therefore, I will carefully examine my own childhood experience as I evaluate my autonomous development.

Unlike most traditional Chinese parents, my mother actually respected my independence and autonomy when I was young. My grandmother once told me that, as a toddler, I loved to pile blocks up high and then push them over, again and again. My mother never discouraged me from doing so, even when it was dinner time. She opted instead to stand aside quietly until I decided I was through. Montessori (1985) insists that education is not simply about teaching; it is instead primarily geared toward assisting children's "psychological development" (p. 28). For instance, when children engage in a repetitious activity, it is best for teachers to respect and not disturb them. Doing so affords children the chance to practice concentration and self-construction, even as they begin to form their personalities (Weinberg, 2009). From a personal perspective, I certainly appreciate my mother's patience in cultivating a stress-free environment for such exercises. I also recall visits to the park where, unlike many other parents at the time, she simply sat on a bench, made sure my surroundings were safe and proceeded to watch me wander around, playing by myself or with other peers. During that period of time, unless I was seriously injured, she let me deal with my own problems (for example, falling down or squabbling with other children). Indeed, I never left her sight; she just empowered me to experience my own life. As explained earlier, Rousseau, Montessori and Steiner each emphasised the importance of free play (Reed & Johnson, 2000; Blount, 2007; Ullrich, 1994). These experiences enabled me to accept and work through challenges as I grew.

It is important to note that responsibility plays an important role in enhancing autonomy. According to Morrison (1997), decision-making approximates problem solving for children. This is not an easy process for young children because they must try to integrate information to consider a given issue and consider the consequences of a particular choice. For example, as a 5-year-old, I was given the liberty to decide an extra-curricular activity that I wished to pursue. I was reminded that I needed to take responsibility for my choices, in that if I decided to give up an extra-curricular activity, I would not be permitted to consider another one that year. Thus, if parents could offer limited choices and help children understand the ramifications of a decision, they could help ease children's pressure and implement a more comprehensive decision-making process. The experience above played an important role in the development of my autonomy. At that stage, my mother, just like many teachers in Montessori and Steiner kindergartens, took on the adult role of supporting and coaching children in making their own choices (Weinberg, 2009; Ullrich, 1994).

Autonomous development in the context of diverse childhoods

My childhood experience only reflects some Chinese families' perspectives of young children's development of autonomy. When reviewing history, education



has long been central in political, cultural and historical contexts throughout different societies (Baader, 2004). It is therefore worth exploring the ways in which autonomy applies to early childhood in different countries as well.

A colleague who grew up in India shared that certain cultures in India do not promote autonomy (personal communication, April 5, 2014). She also noted that autonomy was not advocated for in the schools that she studied in. An adult-centred educational philosophy dominated Indian society at the time, to the point that the schools, as well as parents, did not respect children's autonomy much at all. Another Indian colleague recalled that she did not have an autonomous childhood either (personal communication, April 4, 2014). Her school's curriculum was too complex, and activities were seldom tailored to help children express their ideas and foster autonomy. Rousseau asserted that extensive social intervention in child education could hinder children's healthy development (Reed & Johnson, 2000). If children are not given sufficient freedom to observe and explore the world, their psychological development may be arrested (Montessori, 1985). Young children also need many independent practice opportunities to facilitate their cognitive development (Morrison, 1997).

Conclusion

Upon examining varied definitions of autonomy, reviewing choice educational philosophers' perspectives and different kinds of childhood experiences, this paper determines that autonomy is a capacity that can be developed through suitable methods. In sum, Rousseau's free child theory (that is, freedom and nature), Montessori's and Steiner's child-centred educational philosophy, and an enabling environment with well-trained teachers' support are quintessential elements that influence young children's sense of autonomy.

References

- Baader, M. (2004). Froebel and the rise of educational theory in the United States. *Studies in Philosophy & Education*, 23(5/6), 427-444.
- Blount, B. (2007). Why Montessori works. *Montessori Life*, 19(1), 84-91.
- Bridges, L. J. (2003). Autonomy as an element of developmental well-being. In M. H. Bornstein, L. Davidson, C. L. M. Keyes, & K. A. Moore (Eds.), *Crosscurrents in contemporary psychology. Well-being: Positive development across the life course* (pp. 167-175). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Cannella, G. S. (1997). *Deconstructing early childhood education: Social justice and revolution* (pp. 19-44). New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing Inc.
- Collins Concise New Zealand Dictionary* (7th ed.). (2008). Glasgow, UK: HarperCollins Publisher.
- Heffner, E. (2012). *Emerging autonomy*. Retrieved from <http://goodenoughmothering.com/2012/01/emerging-autonomy/>
- Grossman, S. (2007). *Offering children choices: Encouraging autonomy and learning while minimizing conflicts*. Retrieved from http://www.earlychildhoodnews.com/earlychildhood/article_view.aspx?articleID=607
- Honderich, T. (Ed.). (2005). *The Oxford companion to philosophy* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Oxford University Press



- Jalongo, M. (2002). Editorial: On behalf of children: "Constructing a childhood". *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 30(1) 1-2.
- Larrivee, B. (2000). Transforming teaching practice: Becoming the reflective teacher. *Reflective Practice*, 1(3), 293-307
- Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (5th ed.). (2011). London, UK: Pearson Longman.
- Manning, J. P. (2005). Rediscovering Froebel: A call to re-examine his life & gifts. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 32(6), 371-376.
- May, H. (1997). *The discovery of early childhood* (pp. 3-23). Auckland, New Zealand: Auckland University Press/Bridget Williams Books with New Zealand Council for Educational Research.
- McKenna, M. (2010). Pestalozzi revisited: Hope and caution for modern education. *Journal of Philosophy & History of Education*, 60, 121-125.
- Montessori, M. (1985). *The secret of childhood*. London, UK: Sangam Press.
- Morrison, G. S. (1997). *Fundamentals of early childhood education*. New Jersey, Upper Saddle River: Merrill/Prentice Hall.
- Oldfield, L. (2009). All about...the Steiner foundation stage. *Nursery World*, 109(4181), 15-18.
- Reed, R., & Johnson, T. (2000). *Philosophical documents in education* (2nd ed., pp. 61-71). New York, NY: Addison-Wesley Longman.
- Ullrich, H. (1994). Rudolf Steiner. A neo-romantic thinker and reformer. *Prospects: The Quarterly Review of Comparative Education*, 24(3/4), 555-572. Retrieved from http://www.ibe.unesco.org/fileadmin/user_upload/archive/publications/ThinkersPdf/steinere.pdf
- Weinberg, D. (2009). Maria Montessori and the secret of tabula rasa. *Montessori Life*, 21(2), 30-35.