Autonomy-Support: How It Is Managed in Intermediate and Secondary English Classrooms

By

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain an understanding on how intermediate and secondary school English teachers encouraged autonomy-support. Interviews were conducted with two secondary school teachers and one intermediate school teacher. This research highlights significant vignettes of different ways in which teachers understand and practice autonomy-support. The findings show that teachers who are student-centric are more likely to encourage autonomy in the classroom. The challenges in autonomy-support is in the lack of teacher autonomy.

*Key words:* autonomy; autonomy-support; motivation; choice; intermediate; secondary classrooms
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Autonomy-Support: How It Is Managed in Intermediate and Secondary English Classrooms

Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study.

"...without freedom they cannot exist authentically" (Freire, 1970).

Classrooms are often set up in a top-down structure in which the teacher, as the beholder of the truth, is the one who has the authority to give the information and set the rules and assignments. The teacher is the oppressor, and the student is the oppressed. Without freedom, the student becomes an automaton and is then dehumanized into an abstract being. Those who revolt against this oppression become the outcasts of the institution (Freire, 1970).

In order to ensure success in students, the Ontario Ministry of Education mandates that teachers assess their students in three ways: assessment for learning, as learning and of learning (Growing Success, 2010). With assessment for learning, the teacher gives students continuous feedback for improvement (p.32). This assessment leads to assessment of learning, which looks at the summary of the student's learning at a given time (Growing Success, 2010). Assessment for and of learning are represented as assessment and evaluation in The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 9 to 12: Program Planning and Assessment (2000), the document before Growing Success (2010). Assessment as learning is clearly defined as "helping all students develop their capacity to be independent, autonomous learners who are able to set individual goals, monitor their own progress, determine next steps, and reflect on their thinking and learning" (p. 28). The addition of assessment as learning in Growing Success (2010) highlights the importance of giving students the opportunity to become autonomous and reflexive learners. The phrase,
assessment as learning encompasses the wide scholarship on autonomous learning.

Educational research shows that giving students autonomy, therefore freedom, is essential for their success. Autonomy spurs intrinsic motivation, which eventually allows students to develop not only academically but also socially. When students are denied autonomy, they are perceived as incompetent; therefore, their levels of self-esteem and self-actualization diminish (Deci & Ryan, 1985). As a result, students become less motivated at school. Therefore, by satisfying students' need for autonomy, the teacher provides students the opportunity to be intrinsically motivated, and therefore, helps them become competent learners: "Intrinsically motivated behaviors are the prototype of autonomy" (Black & Deci, 2000).

**Purpose of the Study**

Despite the fact that the Ontario Ministry of Education mandates that teachers assess to help students become autonomous learners, therefore, free from oppressive learning, what I found problematic in the teaching field was that teachers often referred to assessment for and of learning (or formative and summative assessments), but rarely if not at all to assessment as learning. What's more, in a spontaneous conversation I had with middle school students about their experiences in alternative and regular schools, I found it alarming that their past experiences at regular schools were oppressive in that they were prescribed to learn in a set way. Their narratives showed that their teachers often perceived them as incompetent, which ultimately set them up for failure. In contrast, the students explained that they were far more successful at their present alternative school even though they were given more work. Their reason was that they were given the autonomy to work as they worked best.

Could it be that teachers continue to teach in oppressive ways because they themselves
are victims of oppressive pedagogy? As Paulo Freire (1970) puts it, "The oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his [sic] guidelines, are fearful of freedom. Freedom would require them to eject this image and replace it with autonomy and responsibility" (47). Therefore, the purpose of this study is twofold. It is an attempt to engage in the literature on autonomy and self-determination. It is also an attempt to find teachers who give autonomy to students and to learn from them.

**Research Question.**

Therefore, this study is intended to provide some kind of answer to how intermediate and secondary school English teachers encourage student autonomy in the classroom. Also, this research will attempt to answer the following sub-questions:

- How do teachers define or interpret the concept of autonomy?
- Do teachers understand autonomy in different ways?
- What are the challenges of giving autonomy-support?

**Background of the Researcher**

Closer to the end of my Master of Divinity in Christian education, I encountered Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Tetsuko Kuroyanagi's *Totto-Chan* (1981) and Parker Palmer's *Courage to Teach* (1998). All three books ignited a burning passion about teaching. Freire taught me to humanize pedagogy; Kuroyanagi taught me to give students their right to learn with autonomy; and Palmer taught me to teach with integrity.

To teach with integrity means giving students freedom to learn in the best way that they learn and trusting that they will learn in an autonomous atmosphere because in my own
upbringing, I was given that trust and autonomy. In grade 6, my family moved from downtown Toronto to Etobicoke, which is west of Toronto. This meant that I would have to transfer to a middle school, as all the middle schools in Etobicoke started in grade 6. I, however, wanted to graduate with my friends. When I asked that I continue at the elementary school downtown, my parents allowed me to travel by myself on the public transit each day. Because they trusted me and gave me the autonomy to choose my school, I diligently woke up early each morning and happily made my way to school where I evidently did well.

As a teacher acting as the students' *in loco parentis*, I want to teach with integrity by trusting that students can learn and thrive with autonomy. Freire (1970) writes, "They talk about the people, but they do not trust them; and trusting the people is the indispensable precondition for revolutionary change" (p.60). If I want any change, let alone a revolutionary change, in students, especially those who have no motivation to learn, I need to trust them first-- trust that they can and will learn in a system that frees them from oppressive pedagogy.

**Overview**

This study is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 includes the introduction of the topic, the purpose of the study, the research questions, as well as how I came to be involved in this topic and study. Chapter 2 contains a review of the literature. Chapter 3 provides the methodology of this study, including participants and data collection instruments, the limitations of the study and the ethical review procedures. Chapter 4 describes the findings organized under 7 themes. Chapter 5 includes a discussion of all the findings and its relevance, further research and conclusion. References and a list of appendixes follow at the end.
Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In order to provide context for this research, I examined the literature with my main research question in mind: how can intermediate and secondary school English teachers encourage student autonomy in the classroom? The research pertinent to autonomy-supportive classrooms clearly shows that it is beneficial for optimal student learning. This research particularly looked at studies dating from 1988 to 2012. Using the self-determination theory as their framework for autonomy-support, the researchers in this literature review agree that self-determination elicits intrinsic motivation, which results in students' becoming engaged in school and what they are learning, and ultimately becoming lifelong learners. In this literature review, I explored what it is that researchers have found to support self-determination theory, the implications of being intrinsically motivated, the implications of autonomy-supportive and controlling classrooms, the misconceptions of autonomy-support, and the benefits of having autonomy-support.

Self-Determination Theory

Autonomy-support is pivotal for student success. In order to have students intrinsically motivated to want to learn, to do well, and to continue to learn as lifelong learners, their needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness are necessary in the social context (Deci & Ryan, 1994). Therefore, it is important to have autonomy support, which, according to Black and Deci (2000) occurs when
an individual in a position of authority (e.g., an instructor) takes the other’s (e.g., a student’s) perspective, acknowledges the other’s feelings, and provides the other with pertinent information and opportunities for choice, while minimizing the use of pressures and demands (p.742).

Evidently, with this kind of autonomy-support, students become self-determined and, therefore, successful learners.

Deci and Ryan (1994) define self-determination theory as "the concept of intention or purpose" that regulates behaviour. People are considered to be motivated when trying to accomplish this intention or purpose. According to Black and Deci (2000), people are intrinsically motivated depending on whether they are autonomous or controlled. Deci and Ryan (1994) define intrinsic motivational behaviours as having "curiosity, exploration, spontaneity, and interest in one's surroundings" (p.5). In contrast, extrinsically motivated behaviours do not occur spontaneously. They act in response to the contingencies offered to them. By giving a student incentives to do an interesting activity, such as extra marks, it reduces the intrinsic motivation to do that activity again when given the freedom to choose (Deci and Ryan, 1994).

**Intrinsic Motivation**

Thus, in order for students to be intrinsically motivated, it is necessary for teachers to allow for autonomy in the classroom, in which case the outcome is not the focus but on allowing for choices. According to the study done by Patall, Cooper and Wynn (2010), students were given a choice of homework assignments. What resulted was "greater intrinsic motivation and perceived competence, as well as enhanced homework performance and academic achievement"
It is important, then, to emphasize that while choice is a fundamental component in self-determinant learners, it is not the only or most important factor. In fact, choices given to a student need to be "relevant to students' interests and goals, provide a moderate number of options of an intermediate level of complexity, and be congruent with other family and cultural values in order to effectively support motivation" (Patall et al., 2010, p.896). In other words, choice needs to not only encompass what Stefanou et al. (2004) call procedural autonomy support. That is, while it helps students to take ownership of their work, it is not enough to give choices of media to present ideas. There has to also be organizational autonomy support and especially cognitive autonomy support. With the former, students are encouraged to take ownership of their environmental procedures. For example, when students create rules together or set due dates for an assignment, they exercise their organizational autonomy. With the latter, students are encouraged to take ownership of their learning by exerting critical thinking (Stefanou et al., 2004).

**Autonomy-Support**

In terms of what autonomy support actually looks like, Reeve et al. (1999) categorized teachers as high or low in autonomy support and found that teachers who were high in autonomy support spent more time listening to students, allowed students to hold instructional materials longer, asked students questions about their wants, responded more to students' questions, and made more "perspective-taking emphatic statements" (p.546). What they did little of is give directives as well as solutions. In fact, according to Black and Deci (2000), a classroom that is
controlling uses coercion or seduction by means of material rewards, threats of punishment, evaluations, deadlines, imposed goals, and good player awards in order to elicit particular behaviours, which ultimately diminishes intrinsic motivation and therefore leads to a lack of motivation, incompetence, social anxiety, depression and self-derogation. In this research, I am attempting to find out what English intermediate and secondary school teachers do to demonstrate autonomy-support.

**Structure**

A misconception in autonomy-support is that it lacks structure when in fact, without structure, autonomy-support is not effective in facilitating engagement. The misunderstanding is in the definition of the term structure in that structure is most often related to rigid rules and demands (Jang et al., 2010). According to Jang et al. (2010), "whereas structure can be used in controlling ways and often is, control is by no means essential to structure" (p. 590). In other words, structure is imperative to have effective autonomy-support, but it does not mean that the kind of structure needed is at all controlling. In fact, if structure is used in controlling ways, it interferes with student engagement and their self-determination.

It is important that students receive adequate amount of structure on top of having autonomy-support. The reason is that without autonomy, students will lack self-determination, but without structure, students will lack the necessary skills and experience of the lesson, which would ultimately affect their "perceived competence and perceptions of control over outcomes" (Jang et al., 2010, p.590). Even in a performance-oriented classroom, Ciani et al. (2009) state that teachers can be both performance-oriented and autonomy-supportive: "an autonomy-supportive authority can be quite demanding and specific, and not necessarily loose or
permissive". That is, teachers whose focus is on optimal achievement in tests or performance can also "offer considerable choice about the how, when, and with whom of the process" as well as give rationale for the importance of meeting a goal (Ciani, et al., 2009). The important thing is that the teachers stimulate interest and internalization. What's more, when there is too much structure, although students may learn the skills being taught, they may react negatively to the experience. The main point is that autonomy-support and structure are both necessary for student success.

**Evaluative Practice**

Not only is structure important in motivating students to success but also evaluative practices (Dam & Legenhausen, 2011). In fact, according to Dam and Legenhausen, it is the "pivot of learner autonomy" (2011). Assessment and evaluation are necessary to encourage motivation, as it makes sense of not only what students have learned but what students have to say about their learning experiences (Dam & Legenhausen, 2011). What is misunderstood about evaluative practice in autonomy-supportive classrooms is that learners are thought to be the ones who make the decisions as to what is to be evaluated (Dam & Legenhausen, 2011). The teachers, however, are in fact still responsible for the objectives of the assessment, the activities and procedures, as well as the organization of the classroom and the types of social interaction that is to take place (Dam & Legenhausen, 2011). Furthermore, Dam and Legenhausen (2011) state that it is "essential that learners get regular and palpable evidence that they are making progress (not just when tested)" (p.178). In order to have effective evaluation and assessment, it is important that students begin with reflection. By critically thinking about what was well done and what needs improvement, students prepare themselves to evaluate what they had done. As such, in self-evaluating, students look at their own performances and form their own opinion and offer a
reason why they had this opinion (Dam & Legenhausen, 2011). Assessment, on the other hand, indicates quantitative data. Assessment gives learners in an autonomous classroom a concrete understanding of their own progress. By going through this process, learners will have better cognitive control of their learning process, which eventually leads to effective decision-making concerning their personal development (Dam & Legenhausen, 2011).

**Benefits of Autonomy-Support**

Ultimately, by giving students autonomy, it helps them become better at conceptual learning and become more creative (Black and Deci 2000). Furthermore, it increases ego development, self-esteem, self-actualization and personality integration (Black & Deci, 2000). Ciani et. al (2010) report that high autonomy support leads to high mastery goals even if the teacher emphasizes performance. Because students feel respected by the teacher, "autonomy support enables students to internalize what they are doing, so that they view their activity as important even if it is not enjoyable, or if it creates stress and pressure" (Ciani et.al, 2010, p.95).

In fact, in a study done by Vallerand and Bissonnette (1992), the researchers found the more autonomous the educational setting was the lower the drop-out rate was in first-term junior-college courses. It is clear from the research that offering autonomy to students is integral for student success.

**Conclusion**

Self-determination theory provides a framework for teachers to understand why autonomy-support in the classroom is important for student success. A review of the current evidence related to autonomy-support in the classroom reveals what autonomy-support looks like and that when students become intrinsically motivated, they are more likely to succeed in the
subject as well as life long learners. Therefore, these findings have established reason for having autonomy-support in the classroom. Because most of the research found was related to elementary school classrooms, sciences both in secondary and post-secondary levels, and English Language Learning, further research related to intermediate and secondary English classrooms is needed.
Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The research described in this document is based on qualitative research methods. The purpose was to draw on the expertise of teachers in order to inform and develop my own teaching practice. The overall purpose of this research has changed over the course of the research from investigating what secondary English teachers do to encourage autonomy to what intermediate and secondary English teachers do to encourage autonomy. A comprehensive literature review was conducted and three teachers from the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) were interviewed to gain an in-depth understanding of this topic through their experiences and perspectives. The interviews were transcribed, coded and analyzed to uncover significant themes. The following chapter outlines the procedure and the limitations of this study.

Procedure

Literature Review

Prior to the primary data collection, I conducted a literature review to gain relevant background knowledge, particularly on the topic of autonomy, motivation and self-determination theory. The literature found was mostly focused on the effects of autonomy and the ways in which teachers support autonomy. It became apparent that most of the research was related to elementary school classrooms, sciences both in secondary and post-secondary levels, and English Language Learning. However, there was very little research related to intermediate and secondary English classrooms. The literature has been organized into prominent themes related
to self-determination theory by looking for areas of repetition and differences between the sources.

Data Collection and Analysis

Because the purpose of this research was to investigate what teachers were doing to give students autonomy, I conducted face-to-face interviews with teachers to collect data on their personal perspectives and experiences. Early on in the study, I formulated open-ended questions with which I would conduct the semi-structured interviews (See Appendix A). The questions were created in a way that would allow the participants to talk about autonomy without necessarily knowing about it or knowing that they supported it. For each of the interviews, which were 30-45 minutes long, I scheduled a private meeting in a quiet place that was convenient for the participant.

In order to uncover my findings, I began by reading the transcribed interview data several times. Focusing on key words in the literature review, I highlighted and used different colours to indicate words and phrases that seemed to repeat in the three interviews. As well, I made notes in the margins, which I transferred onto a table, to identify the themes that I noticed. I identified more than 10 themes and consolidated them into 7.

Participants

This research focuses on a small sample of participants. Originally, the participants for this research were two high school teachers. The first participant, Martin, teaches in the Toronto District School Board and was introduced by a teacher acquaintance. The school where Martin teaches is a more academic school. This interview took place early on in the research. The second interview took place later in the research. The participant, Ellen, was a teacher who
teaches in the Peel District School Board and was an acquaintance. After coding and analyzing the two interviews, I was introduced to the third teacher, Sophia, who teaches in an alternative middle school also in the Toronto District School Board. In the informal conversation I had with her, it was apparent that she exemplified autonomy-support in her classroom. Seeing her as a perfect candidate for this research, I asked her for an interview. Hence, instead of having two participants, I had three.

**Limitations**

The biggest limitation in this research project is the limited number of participants. With only three participants, the data is not a significant representation of teachers. Another limitation is that the first interview and the last two interviews were conducted with a considerable amount of time in between. Therefore, the first interview and the last two interviews differed in the quality of answers. That is, because the first interview was earlier on in the research when I was not very familiar with the topic itself, I was not able to clearly explain my questions when the participant asked to clarify them. What's more, in the latter interviews, with a clearer understanding of my topic, I was able to address some impromptu questions, such as the challenges of autonomy-support, which I did not ask my first participant. Also, I could have done member checking to make sure that I was able to clarify the answers of the first participant, but I had run out of time, which was another limitation. That is, because this was a research project completed in the duration of the Master of Research program (2 years), it meant that there was a limited amount of time available to investigate the research problem and to measure change or stability within the data.
Ethical Review Procedures

As a Master of Teaching research paper at the University of Toronto, Ontario Institute for Studies of Education (OISE), I followed the ethical review approval procedures for the Master of Teaching program.

In order to maintain ethical procedures, before any of the interviews took place, each participant was given a consent letter that outlined what the research was about and about their rights to withdraw whenever they wanted (see Appendix B). In fact, they were informed that they could refrain from answering any of the questions during the interview. The consent form also assured the participants of their anonymity. Hence, each of the participant names in this research paper is a pseudonym. Upon reading the consent letter, each participant signed it. The participants were also informed that they could request a copy of the interview transcripts and that they would be advised when the project was completed. The interviews were recorded in its entirety so that they could be transcribed for accurate data analysis.
Chapter 4: FINDINGS

This chapter will discuss findings from the three interviews conducted. The findings of this research are divided into seven themes. A close analysis of the data has revealed that student-centric teachers were more likely to give more autonomy to their students; autonomy was often synonymous to giving students choice; teachers extrinsically and intrinsically motivate their students; there is structure with autonomy; the more the teachers gave students autonomy, the more they conveyed humility, trust and equity in their evaluative practice; and finally that there were many challenges in giving students autonomy.

Philosophy of Teaching

When asked about their philosophy of teaching, the teachers who explicitly said they were student-centric tended to give more choice to their students. One of the candidates, Sophia, stated that part of her philosophy of teaching is to know "how [students] learn in the ways that they learn". She also stated that "for the most part, kids get a choice in almost every aspect of [her] classes". Her statement exemplifies that her philosophy of teaching correlates to the way she organizes her class. Similarly, Ellen equated student-centeredness with choice. According to her, students want to have the autonomy to do things for themselves: "You have to have choice, I think in terms of student-centered learning, because if choice isn't there, [students] feel that you're spoon-feeding them".

In contrast, when asked about what he knew about autonomous classrooms, Martin answered, "They're encouraging us to have a bevy of choice in the classroom. That is happening in many classrooms. Sometimes it works very well". Although he did not explicitly state who "they" were, in this statement, choice was generally something he and his colleagues should
implement not because it was part of his own philosophy of teaching but because it was mandated to them. Not only that, Martin explicitly stated that "there's only so much room for autonomy in education". After all, he conveyed that it was necessary for him as the teacher to transmit to the students, "an experience" or "a broad range of ideas and exposure to things that will help them in university". As a result, the area in which he confidently gave students choice was in the realm of technology. He stated that he believed students were much more of an authority when it came to technology: "Where we do have to take a backseat is when we're working with [technology].... [Students are] so familiar with that. We have to recognize that that's their world, and they can do a better job on everything on that than we can". While students were the authority on technology, he, as the teacher, was the authority otherwise.

**Choice**

The participants' philosophy of teaching, therefore, was an indication of how much choice they gave their students. The more student-centric the participant was, the more choice they gave their students. The representation of choice can be grouped into sub-themes that Stefanou et al. (2004) call procedural choice, organizational choice and cognitive choice. Procedural choice gives students choice in the type of media used to present their learning; whereas, organizational choice gives students the choice in taking control in such things as due dates or choice in groups. Cognitive choice creates a condition where students can advocate for their own academic pursuits through critical thinking and inquiry.

*Procedural Choice*

In the interviews, autonomy in the classroom was most often related to giving students choice in their output of learning. Sophia, who proclaimed that her teaching had a student-centric
approach, explicitly stated, "In our school, and in my classroom, autonomy looks like giving students an awful lot of choice". At the school where Sophia taught, students and teachers made a monthly or six-week contract that included a wide range of choice. It was evident that open-ended projects were important to her. At this school, the students choose their assignments depending on the unit. If the unit were on novels, the students choose the book they would read. After they choose their books and read them, "they [have] the opportunity to present what they had learned from or their understanding of one of the narratives." They are given "a wide spectrum of choices" which include "visual work, collage work, drawing, painting, etc." They are essentially given open-ended projects with choices that are "endless". To an extent, Sophia's students create their own curriculum as they choose the assignments they want to do.

Likewise, one of the ways Ellen gives students choice is by allowing them "to come up with an original piece of their own" when working on their poetry unit. After teaching literary devices, she allows the students to pick three to four devices and include it in their own poetry. The poetry, however, could be expressed in a song or a rap. It could also be a spoken word. "It could be anything". This last statement is important to note as it shows that Ellen trusts her students to do whatever they want for their output. Although the students do not create their own curriculum, they still have the freedom to choose how they want to present their learning.

Even in Martin's English classrooms, students are given some choice, but it is within the confines of a set assignment. For example, when given a choice to read a novel for their novel study unit, Martin gives students a choice; however, the choice is limited to a certain list of 15 books, all of which are books that had won an award, such as the Pulitzer or the Governor General Award, etc. What's more, the final output of the assignment is limited to an essay.
According to Martin, when it comes to giving students choice, he does not believe that they can have full autonomy to choose: "I can't say that we can leave it completely up to [the students]".

**Organizational Choice**

Choice was also connected to the kind of freedom that students have in the organization of their learning. When Sophia gives her students autonomy, a large part of it deals with the students' ability to manage time. So, in Sophia's class, students create their own schedules in terms of their assignment due dates. Depending on their contract, they choose which assignments they want to work on each week and which assignment they would complete and hand in each week. Each of the students in Sophia's class have a chance to manage their time in a "realistic" way. In Ellen's class, she gives organizational autonomy-support by allowing students to "pick the groups". Similarly, by allowing students to "work on their geography or math" when the class is doing presentations, Martin also gives students some organizational choice; however, it is still in the confines of his rules.

**Cognitive Choice**

The teachers interviewed also discussed instances in which they encouraged students to think critically about their work. In doing so, they were giving students cognitive choice to think for themselves. For example, when teaching *Midsummer Night's Dream* to her grade 9 class, Ellen had her students "formulate their own thesis". She states, "Instead of me saying, 'argue this,' I would say, 'Come up with your own argument'". Supporting high cognitive autonomy, she required her students to connect the characters and theme to ultimately create their own unique thesis: "They would pick the character. They'd have to pick a third character, and at the end, I would say give me a theme that connects all three characters together". Then, in their essays,
they had to argue their choices. Another example Ellen showed to give cognitive autonomy-support was in her challenge to the students to connect poetry to Shakespeare. As a result of this challenge, she stated that the students "were able to connect better to King Lear after that".

When asked whether Sophia lectured at all in class, she explained that there was quite a bit of teaching, but in a Socratic method, which demonstrated that she gave her students cognitive freedom. With the students sitting in a circle, she and her students debated ideas freely. Although she admitted that she tended to talk a lot about things that she felt were important, she said that in her method of teaching, students freely discussed the issues prevalent to the novel or subject. What's more, when she did use worksheets, she gave questions that were "not just about... what happened in the book". Instead the questions she gave her students were about their reactions, their emotional connections, and their "sense of the greater themes of things," which ultimately motivated students to understand the problems for themselves. Hence, through the group discussions, Sophia demonstrated cognitive autonomy-support.

There were also examples in Martin's description of his classes that exemplified cognitive autonomy. He explained that after the students studied *Twelfth Night*, "the kids [had] to go and find something on the beloved Internet that [he] didn't cover in class". In doing so, they were given autonomy to search and add new ideas to the discussion on *Twelfth Night*. Another way Martin attempted to help students engage in cognitive autonomy was through round table discussions where students acknowledged one another, validated each other's comments, and made connections.
Extrinsic and Intrinsic Motivation

What emerged from the participants' answers to the way they motivate their students were two different types of motivation: extrinsic and intrinsic. In Martin's case, he added that in the round-table discussion mentioned in the previous theme, he told students that he would give them a level 4 for participation. In his opinion, students are motivated by marks, which is what makes them participate. In fact, in his answer to what he does to motivate students, referring to academic students, Martin stated, "The academic kids are motivated by their parents' ambition, their own interest, their own ambition, and what they perceive to be important". Unfortunately, sometimes, what they see as important is not what the teachers see as important. Because of this, Martin expressed that to his disappointment, students need to have quizzes and homework checks to motivate them. He remarked, "If you don't check homework regularly or quiz them, they won't do the work.... It's heartbreaking for us 'cause we like to live with the illusion that literature is important to everyone, and it's not to them sometimes". Therefore, Martin motivates students extrinsically.

Sophia, on the other hand, said that giving choice to students is what motivates students. She stated that "motivation is to give [students] the freedom to do the things that they love to do". This statement is pivotal in understanding that when students do what they love to do, they are intrinsically motivated to continue to do what they are doing. For Sophia, "if kids are not engaged in what it is that they're learning, then they're not going to do the work and they're not going to enjoy it, and it's not going to be their best work". As an example, Sophia explained how several of her students, one of whom had a major attendance issue because of anxiety and coming to school, another one of whom needed to have something interesting to engage him, asked to do their urban agriculture assignment on Minecraft, a computer game of building blocks
that the students were "crazy about". Even though she did not know what the game was about, she encouraged the students to use the platform to do their assignment. She related the result of the project in this way:

And, they spent 20 hours on a project where somebody else probably spent 3 or 4. The assignment was urban agriculture. And, I gave them the assignment of "show me what urban agriculture can look like." So, I didn't know what I was going to get, and they put on a PowerPoint projector, and there were these things. I mean, the cows were blocks, the fields were blocks and the crops were blocks, but they had actually spent a lot of time organizing their farm because they really liked the building in that platform.

The students were intrinsically motivated to do the project because they were given the choice to do the project in a way that stimulated their interests. In Sophia's words, "If you give kids enough choice, that there is some process that they become engaged in, then that is the motivation".

**Structure**

One of the most significant findings in the interviews with the participants was that autonomy in the classroom did not simply mean freedom in the classroom. With autonomy, there was considerable amount of structure. According to the participants, in order to have a successful autonomous classroom, there had to be enough structure. Structure, however, could be further understood as being accountable to students, giving clear guidelines and expectations, having purpose, as well as having well-planned assignments.

**Accountability**

First, all three participants noted that teachers cannot simply give students complete freedom without being accountable to them. Being accountable to the students, however, does
not mean being controlling. Instead, it meant checking up on students and making sure they were on track.

Even though Martin had his students read their books through homework checks and quizzes as his way of extrinsically motivating them, he was still trying to keep them accountable. Without it, he explained that the lesson or activity would become unsuccessful, "especially when there's an expectation that the kids do some work that [he hadn't] been tracking". In other words, according to Martin, without the accountability of the teacher, extrinsic or not, the activity or lesson will not be successful.

In comparison, because Sophia's class was designed in a way that gave students immense amount of autonomy, she made it part of her day-to-day teaching to include consistent accountability. She described a typical routine check up in the following way:

So every week, I have to go around to each kid, and I just, while they're sitting doing whatever, I go around with my binder and I say, "Okay, you said this week that you're going to do a review of your dad's restaurant. Have you done that?" "Okay and you said you were going to do a book report. Are you working on that? Yes? No, you're held up. Okay. What's the issue? You want to write to your grandma, but she's away. Fine. You can switch that up".

For Sophia, it was important to make sure that kids were on track by checking on them once a week. Checking on the students was not a matter of hovering over them to nag at them to get things done. Instead, it was simply a way to keep students on track and to have them adjust their own schedules accordingly.
Another way the participants kept students accountable was through teacher-student conferencing. When Ellen had her students make a connection with the characters and a theme in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, she kept students accountable by meeting with the students frequently. Ellen said, "that's [the students'] opportunity for them to tell me where they're struggling. If they're completely off-topic, then we'll talk about how to get them back on".

*Guidelines and Expectations*

The teachers also expressed that there has to be clear guidelines and expectations when giving assignments that are autonomous. When asked to describe a lesson or an activity that did not go well and why she thought it did not go well, Ellen admitted that she had given a rant assignment where the students were to rant about something that they were not happy about in the high school they were at. They had some criteria, but for the most part, they were given the freedom to speak on whatever they wanted. Ellen admitted that the assignment did not go well because the students took to ranting as a way to "release their angst on the world". She reflected on her assignment saying that she "should have gone back and fixed the instructions more to have more guidelines as to what to include and what not to include". In Sophia's case, with many of her open-ended projects, it was important that students were creative. With this creativity, she said that there was only one criteria: "the only criteria I have is that the student spends 50% of the time being immersed in whatever the creative process is. And, at least 50% of their efforts go to demonstrating what it was that they knew from whatever it was that they read", and in the 50% of the creative process, she is "upfront" about giving the kids expectation about what it is she looks for.
Purpose

Structure is also embedded in the teaching of both Ellen and Sophia in that their purpose is infused in the choices students are given. Ellen clearly stated that "freedom is much needed," but teachers need to provide "structure for that freedom". Albeit, this structure "shouldn't be limiting". For Ellen, structure simply means that there needs to be some sort of "purpose behind it". Similarly, although Sophia gives her students the freedom to choose whatever project it is that they want to do, she still develops a list of projects that would particularly demonstrate a certain skill that she wants to focus on in that unit. For example, if she wanted to focus on critical thinking and writing, she would develop a list of projects that students could do:

So, I choose, if it's over the course of let's say six weeks, six different areas that I would like them to be able to demonstrate some competency in. And then, within those areas, they have between five and a dozen different choices. So, you know, they could, if they are looking at, um I don’t know, critical thinking. They can look at the way a joke is told and why it is funny. Or they can tell a joke.... At the end of it, the choices range from creating a children’s book to making a comic strip to using bitstrip to writing and telling jokes to doing a book report to stalking people on the subway and writing notes about them on the spot and coming up with some possible narrative for the people that they have observed based on the information that they can gather.

It is clear in her example that in the wide range of choice that she gives to her students, there is great thought behind each choice so that there is purpose in each choice.
Planning

In addition to making sure there is a clear purpose for each assignment, it is also important that the assignments are well-planned. One of the ways that Sophia plans well for her assignments is by making sure that she has ample resources when students choose their own projects. This way, students do not get lost in the world of resources: "Also, if I am giving them an open-ended research project, I do my best to supply them with resources.... I have... a list of resources that I have read and think that they would be good for the kids at that age instead of just saying go out and find a book." It is important to note that the students are not left to struggle with finding resources, even the stronger students. According to Sophia, "a lot of kids who are really, really good readers have a hard time having the confidence to choose something for themselves". This means that teachers need to be diligent in finding resources.

Not only do teachers need to be on top of their research, they also have to "stay on track with [their] own program". That is, they need to "give kids enough time" so that they are not rushed or anxious. Sophia explains that a successful autonomous project is the result of having planned well so that students have enough class time to do the projects. If there are "a bunch of loose ends at the end of the contract where [they] have a whole week... doing busy work," it is considered a bad open-ended project unit. In other words, without great planning, which includes proper allotted time, the result is a less meaningful project where students are rushed to complete their work.

Evaluative Practices

Through discussions about evaluative practice, something that surfaced was that the more invested the teachers were in giving students autonomy the more they evaluated and assessed
students in a way that conveyed humility and trust.

Trust and Equality

Ellen, who demonstrated autonomy in the classroom, assessed and evaluated her students in a way that showed humility. Ellen said that the rubrics she used were created together with the students. Using the criteria that they made together, Ellen and her students evaluated a sample work together, "and then, [they found] some common ground between". Instead of being the sole authority that assessed the students' work, Ellen empowered the students to have equal authority. This showed that Ellen was humble enough to be on equal terms with her students by letting go of her power in assessment. Furthermore, Ellen showed that she trusted her students when she said that it was important for her that the students did peer assessment. In doing peer assessment, she trusted that her students would take "ownership and responsibility... for someone else's progress or success". For Ellen, this process of peer assessment is integral to her students' learning.

Similarly, Sophia conveyed humility as a teacher when she explained her open-ended projects and the way she assessed them. In the most recent open-ended project, the whole class read the same novel. After a month learning about the issues around the book and having meaningful discussions and reflections with each other, the class went into their own groups to create their own curriculum. They had to start with an inspirational point, which was a list of resources that Sophia had comprising for the students. Then, they had to choose a concept, place or thing that would help them engage deeper into the novel. The list included choices like "poverty, racism/internalized racism, alcoholism," and etc. Finally, the students had to choose a method of assessment. This included "a dance performance, photo collage, food preparation,"
and etc. One group took the life of the main character of the novel and created a board game that was much like Monopoly. As it turned out, all 5 groups in the class ended up creating something completely unique. As a result, Sophia confessed her limitations when giving equitable assessment of such projects. She explained that she could not authentically assess every one of her students when it came to their level of engagement or level of reflection:

I could not figure out how to [assess] in any other way. I had made some notes, I had some memory of what was going on, but I was also so engaged in the project that I did not stand there as an observer with a class list, and go through every kid and check off,... are they writing? are they speaking? are they contributing? what's their level of enthusiasm? And, it was impossible because of the way the kids were in the groups.

Consequently, she trusted her students to assess themselves. She gave the students a question sheet that consisted of questions like, "What was your role in the final project? Were you a good team member?" The students, she remarked, "did a good job of that assessment". She added that there were several students who gave themselves really good marks for being good team members even though they had done nothing for the project, but when she had a conversation about this, the students were honest and admitted that they were not good team members.

As a result of trusting in her students to assess themselves, she was able to have a better understanding of the students, which led to authentic assessment. For example, two students who did not normally speak in public gave themselves a good mark for being engaged in the discussions. Sophia explained the situation in this way:

So, from their point of view, I think they saw themselves as being very active listeners. They were really grabbed by it, they were really excited to be listening to what everybody
else was saying, and I don't think they saw their own lack of speaking in those discussions as being a problem.

Not only did Sophia trust her students' assessments of themselves, she was humble enough to lay aside her preconceived ideas (that they were not talkers) and acknowledged their points of view. As such, without this trust, these students would have been hidden from Sophia's observation and, therefore, unable to get credit where credit was due.

**Challenges**

While talking about autonomous classrooms, Sophia touched on the challenges of giving students autonomy. When she said, "I also don't have to fight with my administrator about [giving students autonomy]," she was alluding to the fact that administrators are often uncooperative when it comes to giving students autonomy. Another challenge Sophia mentioned was the school system itself. That is, in a rotary system, it would be impossible for teachers to keep the class "a whole extra period" just to continue what they had been doing. In her own alternative school, if she needed an extra period for presentations, she would talk to whomever it might be that had her kids next and swap. Another difficulty with autonomous classrooms is "supplies, money, and budget". In order to have an effective autonomous classroom, there needs to be a lot of resources, but without the monetary funds, teachers have to build the resources themselves and "make sure that the kids don't keep the stuff". Finally, the biggest challenge Sophia mentioned is the "pre-research". In order to have meaningful and purposeful projects, Sophia explained that it was necessary that she do the research for each and every one of them. Sophia described an example of this as such:

So if I'm going to tell them that I want them to do, for instance every year we go to the
Royal Winter Fair, which encompasses geography and English 'cause it's written work and field studies, and etc. I go down to the Royal Winter Fair by myself. I spend an entire day there. I talk to the presenters. I find out who's going to be at their booths on the day that we're coming down. Then, I come back to school, and I create a seven-page worksheet for them that is super specific because not only do I look to see what people are talking about, like maybe they have a booth on aquaculture, I need to find out how aquaculture fits into exactly what I want them to learn about it since it's a huge field. Um, so that piece is challenging.

In short, she does the research so that she has the background to teach the subject well. However, she argued that "it involves doing work on weekends".
Chapter 5: DISCUSSION

Introduction

The purpose of this research was to explore how intermediate and secondary school English teachers encourage and implement student autonomy in the classroom. I also looked at how teachers defined or interpreted the concept of autonomy and how their understanding differed from each other. Finally, I looked at the challenges of autonomy-support. Using self-determination theory as a framework, the analysis, extrapolated from the interviews of three teachers, took into account student-centric teaching, choice, extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, structure, evaluative practice, and the challenges around autonomy-support. These findings suggested that not only do teachers differ in their understanding of autonomy-support, but that they execute it in different ways.

Student-centered

As a result of this research, what surfaced in the themes was that the more student-centered the teacher’s philosophy was, the more autonomy they gave to their students. All of the teachers interviewed were asked to describe their philosophy of teaching. In response, Ellen and Sophia explicitly said they were student-centric while Martin implied that his philosophy of teaching was more teacher-driven. Consequently, in the responses that the teachers gave, the teachers who labeled themselves as being student-centric described their teaching practice in a way that coincided more with what the literature (Black & Deci, 2000; Ciani et al., 2010; Deci & Ryan, 1994; Luftenegger et al., 2012; Stefanou et al., 2004) said about autonomy-supportive practice. What is important to note is that Martin also related instances of autonomy-support although it was less than the other two participants.

Choice

All the participants related autonomy-support with choice, which is a fundamental component of autonomy-support as Black and Deci (2000) purport. What's more, each of the teachers gave students
choice and saw their students motivated as a result. This finding reinforces the idea that choice gives students more intrinsic motivation to continue at a task (Patall et al., 1994). Stefanou et al. (2004) explain that autonomy-support can be given in three ways: through procedural choice, organizational choice and cognitive choice. During the interviews, the participants not only showed that they equated autonomy-support with choice, they gave examples that coincided with the findings of Stefanou et al. What was interesting in the findings was that while all three teachers gave students opportunities for choice in all three areas, Martin, who conveyed a more teacher-driven philosophy, gave limited choice. As such, the more teachers have a student-centered philosophy, the more choice they gave to their students.

**Structure**

Jang et al. (2010) explain that "teacher-provided autonomy support may be associated with the full range of students’ engagement, while teacher-provided structure may be associated more narrowly with the on-task behavioral aspects of engagement (e.g., attention, effort, persistence)" (p.596). Hence, in order to have students both engaged in the subject and on-task, both autonomy-support and structure are necessary. Incidentally, when talking about their experiences with autonomy, all the participants insisted that giving structure was important. As such, autonomy-support does not simply mean giving students complete freedom. Jang et al. (2010) also indicate that highly structured class communicates clear expectations and directions, as well as guidance. Similar to Jang et al. (2010), structure for the participants, meant giving clear guidelines and expectations, having a clear purpose, doing substantial planning, and being accountable to the students. This also aligns with Dam and Legenhausen (2011) as teachers are still responsible for the objectives, activities, procedures and the organization of the classroom. These findings are significant in that they refute the misconception that autonomy-support equates to having chaos in the classroom.
Evaluative Practice

This study was inspired by the Ontario Ministry of Education document *Growing Success* (2010) in the ways in which teachers are to assess students as learning. The Ontario Ministry of Education mandates that all teachers assess in three ways: assessment *for* learning, *as* learning and *of* learning. Of the three assessments, assessment *for* and *of* learning are the more familiar under the terms, formative and summative assessments, respectively. What's more, in my own experience, teachers often referred to these two types of assessment and not assessment *as* learning, which is a way to develop students' capacity to be independent and autonomous learners who set individual goals, monitor their own progress, determine next steps and reflect on their thinking and learning. Although I initially thought about how assessment *as* learning and autonomy-support were related, I did not look at evaluative practice as a major component of autonomy-support.

However, through this research, I found that without necessarily referring to their assessment as "assessment *as* learning," the teachers who were indeed giving autonomy-support were helping students become autonomous learners. Dam and Legenhausen (2011) who significantly point out that although it is the case that in autonomous classrooms students take control of what is to be evaluated, it is not just the students who are responsible for this. Their voices need to taken seriously yet also in a manner that is systematic. Similarly, when asked about their evaluative practice, Sophia gave examples that incorporated self-assessment as well as peer assessment and Ellen explained how she and her students created rubrics together. Both these teachers gave examples of autonomy-support in the ways in which they assessed their students. On the other hand, Martin, who showed less enthusiasm for autonomy-support in his interview, was adamant about using rubrics, especially as parents pressured teachers to making good rubrics.
Trust and Equality

Teachers who were highly autonomy-supportive inherently trusted their students. These teachers often described instances in which they were not the sole authority of the classroom. Through Socratic discussions, collaborated assessment and choice, the highly autonomy-supportive teachers demonstrated that they trusted their students to be competent, responsible, willing to learn and most importantly, brilliant. What's more, they also demonstrated a more democratic classroom structure. Instead of a top-down authoritative classroom, the teachers were very much on the same level as the students in terms of their willingness to give them authority to assess and create their own curriculum.

Challenges: Teacher Autonomy

Initially in this discussion, I made a correlation between student-centered philosophy of teaching and autonomy-supportive practice. That is, the more student-centric the teacher was, the more autonomy-support they gave. While this correlation is evident in the findings, the environment in which the teachers teach cannot be ignored. The more freedom teachers had related to how much autonomy they could give to students (Reinders & Balcikanli, 2011). That is, when teachers have the freedom to make appropriate decisions, they are able to give students autonomy (Reinders & Balcikanli, 2011).

In the case with my participants, the teacher whose practice supported autonomy the most was Sophia. Evidently, she taught in an alternative school where the principal and all her colleagues were in agreement in the way things ran in her classroom. In addition, not only did Sophia teach in an alternative school, she also taught in a middle school where students do not have final exams at the end of a semester. As a result, the autonomy Sophia had as a teacher was a direct correlation to the kind of autonomy she could give her students.

In comparison to her situation, Ellen and Martin both taught in public high schools. Even with Ellen, who expressed that her philosophy of teaching was student-centric and gave plenty of examples of autonomy-support, showed that there were some limitations as a high school teacher to give full
autonomy. For example, she still had to work around a certain canon of literature each year, which ultimately limits the kind of autonomy she could give her students. Martin taught at a very academic school compared to Ellen. In his interview, he explained that most of the students at his school were university-bound. As a result, Martin's concern and desire to transmit something important to teachers and his comment was inevitable. In fact, it is not surprising that he thought there was only so much room for autonomy in a classroom.

Therefore, for it to be easy for teachers to give autonomy-support, it is important that they also have the autonomy. However, in a regular high school environment, it is difficult to implement autonomy because of constraints, such as class schedules, administrators, supplies, budget and time.

**Implications**

So much of the literature states that autonomy is important to intrinsically motivate students. The question I had was whether it was even possible and if so, how it was even possible for English teachers to implement autonomy-support. Especially, with the mandate to assess in a way that helps students to become autonomous learners, I wanted to know what teachers were doing. In light of the evidence from these few participants, it is quite clear that a student-centric philosophy helps in implementing autonomy-support. Even so, the teachers interviewed for this research have all exemplified that it is possible to give students autonomy to a certain degree depending on the school environment and system.

As a teacher who wants to have anti-oppressive classrooms, I have learned that autonomy-supportive classrooms allow me to have integrity in my own teaching. That is, I can teach not just as a teacher but a learner by allowing students to bring to the class their learning in the best way that they learn. However, this study has filled in the holes of my own understanding of autonomous classrooms in that it has informed me not only the kind of choices I can give to students but of the importance of structure, that is a clear purpose, strong plan and time well-managed.
Further Research

This research can be expanded. For one, this research did not focus on the types of schools in which the teachers taught. As such, it could be a point of interest to look closely at the present high school system and its limitations on autonomy-support. That is, one could look at whether the system itself is an impediment to autonomy-supportive classrooms. As such, it could also lead to looking closer at the curriculum.

Another way in which this research could be expanded is to look at the effects of autonomy-support of more academic students compared to the applied students in helping with student success. In my questions to the participants, I asked them what they did to give autonomy-support to students with IEPs (Independent Educational Plans). However, the question was in fact not very informative to this particular research but could be something to look at for the future.

Conclusion

The Ontario Ministry of Education wants teachers to help students become autonomous learners. Paulo Freire (1970) calls this conscientization. Instead of filling the minds of students as in the banking concept, it is to have students come to a critical awareness of one's own social reality. For students to "exist authentically" (Freire, 1970), teachers need to give them the freedom to learn the best way that they learn.

The purpose of this study, then, was to gain an understanding on how intermediate and secondary school English teachers encouraged autonomy-support. Paulo Freire along with many researchers in this field of self-determination theory and autonomy are all in the agreement that autonomy helps students thrive and become autonomous life-long learners. The findings in this study have highlighted significant ways in which teachers allow for autonomy in their classroom as well as the challenges in giving autonomy-support.
REFERENCES


Appendix A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Main research question: How do intermediate and secondary school English teachers encourage student autonomy in the classroom?

1. Could you tell me something about your philosophy of teaching?

2. What do you know or what have you heard about in terms of autonomous classrooms? (i.e. what is it?)

3. What do you do to motivate your children to take control of their own learning?

4. Can you describe a lesson or situation whereby you motivate students to take control of their own learning?

5. What was the most successful activity that you have used?

6. What have you done before that you felt was unsuccessful?

7. How do you assess that they are taking control of their own learning?

8. What are the challenges in cultivating autonomous classrooms?

9. What have you done to overcome these challenges?

10. What do you do with learners with IEPs and in trying to achieve self-efficacy and autonomy in the classroom?
Appendix B: PARTICIPANT CONSENT LETTER

Date:

Dear Participant,

I am currently a graduate student enrolled in the Master of Teaching Program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). As part of the requirements of this program, I am completing a Major Research Paper on autonomy in English classrooms in Ontario. I believe that your experience and insight would be an important contribution to my research.

My data collection consists of one 30-minute interview at a time and at a location that is suitable to you. The interviews will be audio recorded, transcribed and analyzed for common themes.

Confidentiality. The content of the interviews will be used for a final research paper, informal presentations to classmates and potentially at a research conference or for publication. Your identity will remain anonymous and only my research supervisor, Dick Holland, and I will have access to this data.

Right to Withdraw. Please be assured that your participation in this project is completely voluntary. In addition, you may decline to answer any question during the interview, stop the interview at any time and withdraw from the study for any reason. Should you have any questions or require further information, you may contact my research supervisor or myself.

If you agree to be interviewed, please sign below. Please retain a second copy for your records.

Thank you for your help.

Sincerely,
Consent to Participate

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty. I have read the letter provided to me by Cristina Lee and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described.

[ ] I wish to participate in the OISE/UT project as outlined above.

Signature: ________________________________

Name (printed): __________________________

Date: __________________________