

## ACCOUNTABILITY AND AUTONOMY

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Writer's name: Jim Knight

Contact Information:

Phone: 785.550.8708

Fax: 785.864-5728

Email: [jknight@ku.edu](mailto:jknight@ku.edu)

Address:

University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning

1122 West Campus Road

Suite 508

University of Kansas

Lawrence, Kansas 66045

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## Accountability *and* Autonomy<sup>1</sup>

When describing professional learning, people often adopt an either/or stance. For example, some believe that instructional leaders must hold teachers accountable in order to improve the way they teach. If there's no accountability, they claim, no meaningful improvement will happen in classrooms. Others say the exact opposite: Because they are professionals, teachers must have complete control over their learning. The idea that teachers would be “held accountable,” they say, is insulting to the profession of teachers.

After collaborating with schools around the world for a decade and a half, I have come to believe that professional learning is not either one or the other: Both are needed. That is, effective professional development honors the autonomy of teachers but recognizes the importance of a form of accountability grounded in that autonomy. Both are essential.

### What Do We Mean by Autonomy?

Autonomy, as I've written about in *Unmistakable Impact: A Partnership Approach for Dramatically Improving Instruction* (Knight, 2011), involves at least three elements: choice, thinking, and status. Each of these is briefly described below.

**Choice.** At its heart, autonomy involves offering choices—in this context, trusting professionals to make many of their own decisions. If we don't allow others some measure of choice, any change initiative is doomed to fail. The surest way to ensure that someone doesn't do something, whether they are 6 or 66 years old, is to tell them they have to do it. In Timothy

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<sup>1</sup> \*from Knight, J. (2013). *Focus on teaching: Using video for high-impact instruction*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Gallwey's (2001) words, "When you insist, they will resist."

Giving people choices is important for other reasons than just reducing resistance. If we tell staff they must do what we, the principal, the central office, or the state say they must do, we are working from the assumption that there is only one answer and that we know what it is, or at least that we know better than them what they should do.

In reality, however, those who work directly with students know a lot about what is best for those students. Teachers' knowledge should be embraced, not suppressed. When we give teachers choices, we ask them to think carefully about what they are implementing in light of what they know rather than simply implementing a one-size fits all plan. And when teachers' knowledge is a part of the process of planning and implementing, better teaching occurs.

Finally, choice is important because when we employ professional development programs that don't give teachers choices, we are, in effect, pushing an approach that can only be called dehumanizing. As Freire (1970) states, "freedom ... is the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion ... without freedom [we] cannot exist authentically" (p. 31). Similarly, Peter Block (1993) emphasizes the primacy of choice: "Partners each have a right to say no. Saying no is the fundamental way we have of differentiating ourselves. To take away my right to say no is to claim sovereignty over me . . . If we cannot say no, then saying yes has no meaning" (pp. 30–31).

**Thinking.** If we want reflective educators, teachers who think, we must make sure that teachers are free to make meaningful decisions about what and how they teach. Telling someone exactly what they must do leaves no room for thinking. Autonomy, therefore, is also essential for reflective practice. Thomas Davenport (2005) describes the attributes of people who use their knowledge, skills, and imagination to do their work—knowledge workers—in his book *Thinking*

*for a Living: How to Get Better Performances and Results From Knowledge Workers*. Based on interviews and surveys designed to identify the attributes of knowledge workers, Davenport found that “one important characteristic of knowledge workers” is their need for autonomy:

Knowledge workers ... don't like to be told what to do. Thinking for a living engenders thinking for oneself. Knowledge workers are paid for their education, experience, and expertise, so it is not surprising that they take offense when someone else rides roughshod over their intellectual territory. (p.15)

A teacher with 32 children, who is trying to communicate clearly, to keep each student engaged, and to gauge how well each student is learning, is a prime example of a such a professional.

In *Unmistakable Impact* (Knight, 2011), influenced by Donald Schön (1991) and Joellen Killion (Killion & Todnem, 1991), I divide reflection into three processes: “looking back,” “looking at,” and “looking ahead.” The ability to think for yourself, autonomy, is essential for each, and each way of reflecting is an important part of how teachers learn from video recording their lessons.

When we “look back,” we consider an event that has passed and think about how it proceeded and what we might have done differently. When teachers use video recordings to “look back” at a lesson, they explore what worked and what didn't work and reflect on what they might do differently in the future. Schön refers to this as “reflection on action.”

When we “look at,” we are thinking about what we are doing in the midst of the act itself. For this form of reflection, therefore, teachers think about their actions based on what they learned from watching a video of a previous lesson. Teachers often see their classes through new

eyes after watching their lessons and therefore might make adjustments based on that insight—increasing praise, adjusting activities to increase student motivation, clarifying expectations, and so forth. Schön refers to this way of thinking as “reflection in action.”

Finally, “looking ahead” is thinking about how to use an idea, practice, or plan in the future. When we “look ahead,” we consider something we have to do in the future and what we can do to ensure success. Teachers collaborating with instructional coaches, for example, might “look ahead” by using a video recording as a point of departure for exploring how ideas might be adapted to meet the needs of students in a future lesson. Killion and Todnem (1991) refer to this as “reflection for practice.”

Whether “looking back,” “looking at,” or “looking ahead,” teachers are quintessential knowledge workers, and if they are going to use video effectively, they need autonomy since autonomy is essential for reflection. Most of us want our children to be taught by reflective professionals who think for themselves rather than by skilled laborers who primarily implement what they are trained to do. To get the kind of teachers we want for our children, we must ensure teachers have the autonomy they need to truly be reflective practitioners.

**Status.** A final reason autonomy is important is that denying autonomy sets up an unequal relationship that interferes with learning among professionals. That is, when teachers don’t have autonomy, those who tell them what to do clearly have more power. Edgar Schein (2009) makes this case in his book *Helping: How to Offer, Give, and Receive Help*:

All human relationships are about status positioning and what sociologists call “situational proprieties.” It is human to want to be granted the status and position that we feel we deserve, no matter how high or low it might be, and we want to do what is situationally appropriate. We are either trying to get ahead or

stay even, and we measure all interactions by how much we have lost or gained.

(p. xi)

According to Schein, we do not feel a conversation has been successful unless we are given the status we think we deserve.

When a conversation has not been equitable we sometimes feel offended. That usually means that the value we have claimed for ourselves has not been acknowledged, or that the other person or persons did not realize who we were or how important our communication was. (p. 30)

Like anyone else, teachers disengage from conversations, as Schein suggests, when they perceive they are not getting the status they deserve. And being prescriptive with teachers in ways that deny choice and reflection inevitably puts them in a one-down position. When people feel one-down, they are “vulnerable to dysfunctional, defensive behavior” (Schein, 2009, p. 37). Additionally, according to Schein, “if the other person acts very parental by talking down to us, we may feel it is appropriate to act childish by being passive aggressive” (p. 25).

In other words, teachers who make it clear that they are not listening during a workshop by reading newspapers, grading, or engaging in side conversations are communicating that they refuse to be put in a one-down position. Put differently, doing sudoku, rather than listening in a workshop, is a way of saying, “I’m not going to put you in a one-up position.” Giving teachers meaningful autonomy is one way by which leaders can give teachers the status they deserve and, in the process, dramatically decrease “dysfunctional, defensive behavior” (Knight, 2009).

In short, autonomy is a vital part of authentic professional learning that makes an impact. When we do not give teachers autonomy, we deprofessionalize teaching by suppressing teacher

knowledge and humanity, inhibit reflection, and dramatically increase the likelihood of resistance. Positioning teachers as equal partners—see *Instructional Coaching* (Knight, 2007) and *Unmistakable Impact* (Knight, 2011) for more information on how to do that—is essential. However, autonomy will not bring about the changes we need to see in schools without accountability.

### **What Is Accountability?**

When the term *accountability* is used in professional learning, it has many different meanings. For example, it may mean that teachers have to give an account of what they do and implement a program or practice that others have chosen for them. Accountability also might mean that teachers are accountable to district leaders, students, or parents. However it is described, accountability means to be obligated to act in certain ways for reasons that are external to ourselves.

How is it possible then for teachers to be both accountable and autonomous? For our purposes here, when educators are accountable, their professional learning has an unmistakable impact on student learning. In this way, educators are accountable to the process, and especially to children, parents, other stakeholders, and the profession of teaching. Furthermore, at the individual or school level, accountability is a genuine commitment to learning and growth on the part of every educator, a recognition that to have learning students, we need learning teachers, learning coaches, and learning administrators.

Some insight into how this kind of accountability can coexist with autonomy can be gained by reviewing Robert Fritz's work. More than two decades ago, Fritz (1989) described the dynamics of personal growth in his book *The Path of Least Resistance*. Growth, he wrote, involves two factors: a clear picture of current reality and a clear goal. When we know our

current reality and commit to an improvement goal, we create a tension that compels us to strive to get better so long as we remain committed to the goal. Peter Senge (2006) summarized Fritz's ideas as follows:

The juxtaposition of vision (what we want) and a clear picture of current reality (where we are relative to what we want) generates what we call creative tension: a force to bring them together, caused by the natural tendency of tension to seek resolution. The essence of personal mastery is learning how to generate and sustain creative tension in our lives. (p. 132)

Two factors, then, are essential for growth as described by Fritz and Senge: a clear picture of reality and a clear goal. These two factors are also essential for accountability as I describe it here. Meaningful change will not happen in a classroom or school unless both those factors are in place. If there is no picture of reality, we cannot be sure that whatever professional learning is taking place addresses what is most needed. Additionally, if there is no goal, we are unable to monitor progress and determine success. Professional learning that is not grounded in current reality and not focused on a goal will most likely not produce significant change.

Let's look at how this might work out in for an individual teacher. Imagine a teacher who views a recording of her lesson and realizes that only 5 of her 31 students are answering the questions she is asking. After watching the video, she might set a goal of 20 of her students responding to questions during each lesson. Then, once she has set the goal, she can try various strategies to meet her goal. For example, she might use Thinking Prompts, Effective Questions, or a cooperative learning structure such as Think, Pair, Share from *High-Impact Instruction* (Knight, 2013) or other resources on effective instruction. She could use her camera to monitor



her progress toward the goal. As long as she remains committed to her goal, she can keep trying strategies or refining what she is implementing until she hits her goal.

This is an example of professional learning that is accountable—measurable changes will occur that will mean real improvements for students. However, this type of professional learning also involves a high degree of autonomy because the teacher observes her own lesson, sets her own goal, monitors progress, and determines when she has hit the goal.

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