



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1980 Volume VI: The Present as History

Decision-Making

Curriculum Unit 80.06.03
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The number of teen-agers who are incarcerated is growing at an alarming rate. Some reports indicate that most serious crimes are committed by youths between the ages of 15 and 19. Only recently, a fourteen-year old boy was arrested for operating as a “hit-man.” When he was arrested, he had a “hit list” in his possession. At the present time correctional institutions are filled; there are more people in prison than any other time in American history. In New Haven, Connecticut, it costs over \$2,000 a year to educate a student; but to incarcerate him costs over \$10,000 a year.

The question is: “What can be done?” What can we do as teachers and counselors to help discourage our students from a life of crime? What can we do to stop him or her from committing that very first criminal act? The purpose of this unit is to begin to provide some answers to these questions. Judging from my experience, I feel that the sooner we confront our students with literature, talks, and workshops about decision-making, the better. We can at least show them how it is to become trapped in a situation they did not anticipate would lead them to prison.

Objectives

The focus of this unit is on decision-making and values-clarification. Students so often think of themselves as powerless that they neglect to look at their lives in terms of the decisions they have made. They do not see that one bad decision can transform them from a student with friends, a car and a room of their own to a lonely individual in a ten-by-twelve cell. They need to learn the difference between a major decision and a minor one. They need to know how major and minor decisions are related, and how such decisions affect their lives.

Students need to be made conscious of values as well. They need to be asked: What is a value? How do values affect decision-making? How do decision making and values work hand and hand? The lesson plans which follow are intended to show the relationship between decisions and values and to illustrate the profound effect of values on the decisions that individuals make. I’m fully aware that we cannot change anyone by ourselves; they must want to change themselves.

Definitions

People are faced with decisions every day of their lives. How they decide can and usually does have an enormous effect on their lives. As teacher we face all kinds of decisions throughout the school day; so we should be especially sensitized to the decisions confronting students who have yet to experience even the minimal powers of adulthood: students who are confused, lonely, hungry, poor and unloved, is just because of this confusion that teachers and counselors must take care to define the role played by values and decisions in students' lives. Students must be aware of the meaning of a decision and a value before they can be expected to make an intelligent choice on their own.

A decision can be defined as having to think about and to choose from a range of choices or options; for example: what to wear to school; what course to take; whether to cut classes; what to buy for lunch. These choices, once made, do not produce the same consequences in students' lives though they may carry equal weight in their minds. They may not have realized at the time, perhaps, that cutting a class might have lost them the credit necessary to graduate, and that failing to graduate lost them the opportunity of a certain job, and so on.

The job, of course, must be something that is wanted by the student, which is where values enter the picture. A value is something that means something to the person, an idea, a belief, or a rule that motivates him or her. Values differ between people. A value may have an enormous impact on you, but the same value may have little effect on someone else. Values involve what is most and least dear to you. Students should be encouraged to think about the source or origins of their values, once those values have been articulated. Do they see them as coming from friends, school, television, family, church? They should also be made aware that their values may change as they mature and grow older, or that they vary according to the people with whom they associate. Values and decisions affect one another. Values may influence one's decision to associate with others, just as one's decision to associate with others can shape the values one eventually holds.

In this process of defining the stages and values of decision-making, the teacher must make clear that he or she is not passing judgment on the values of the students. The intention is not put students down for values they might hold or decisions they might have made. The purpose is to relieve students of their feeling of hopelessness and lack of control over their lives. One of the first steps in that process is the effort to distinguish a minor from a major decision: the decision as to which television program to watch as opposed to the decision over whether to buy a new car or attend college.

Students should be urged to take time when making major decisions. They must be encouraged to consider all aspects of the problems and choices facing them. Listed below are five steps in decision-making that students ought to reflect upon:

STEP 1. Look at the situation.

STEP 2. Think of as many different alternatives or solutions as possible for the problem.

STEP 3. Evaluate the alternatives according to which offers the least physical or psychological harm to oneself and to others, and the greatest benefit.

STEP 4. Decide definitely upon one alternative and state your reasons for doing so.

STEP 5. Act; plan each action.

Examples

Cutting Class: Facing the Consequences of Decisions

1. You might have missed a surprise test and thus failed the course.
2. You might have left with your friends only to be picked up for a crime you know nothing about. Truancy can be a ground for suspicion.
3. You might have gotten into a fight and have been expelled from school.
4. You might have been arrested for smoking pot in the bathroom.
5. You might have had your parents called by a teacher who knows you never cut class.
6. You might have begun an unpleasant argument with your parents over skipping school.

As can be seen from the six examples listed above, any number of consequences can flow from the apparently “minor” decision to cut class. Students can be asked to read this list of possibilities, add ones of their own, and think about the consequences of decision-making.

Good and Poor Decisions

Students can now be asked to think about a poor decision *they* have made, perhaps something they decided recently? Why do they consider their decision to be a poor one? Was it their own judgment or that of other people? Were they thinking about the decision itself or the outcome? Was it a case of: It didn’t turn out like I thought it would?

Students must not only see the relation between a decision and its outcome, but also the difference. They should be reminded that a person has direct control only over the decision, not over the outcome. If they make what they feel is a good decision, there is no guarantee that it will produce a good outcome. One can only hope to limit the possibilities of bad outcomes and expand the possibilities for satisfactory outcomes. A good decision is one in which the individual uses a number of tools to come to it; tools such as: the ability to clarify values, to acquire appropriate information, and to assign probabilities. A good decision is based on how it was made, not on how it turns out.

Additional Lesson Plans #3

Teachers write down different decision-making situations on a small piece of paper. Place them in a hat, a cup or some other container. Each student will pick a slip of paper, after he or she has picked and read the situation they will discuss how they will handle the situation:.

Questions the teacher may ask:

1. Is it a minor or major decision? If so why?
2. How has your values played a role in your decision?
3. Have you said what you truly feel about the situation or have you simply attempted to please the group?
4. Has this particular situation reminded you of a situation you faced in the past? If so, in what way?
5. How would you have handled this situation last year?
6. How do you feel now that you have made your decision?
7. Have you considered all the alternatives.

Lesson Plan #4

Teachers have your students role play a decision-making situation. Pick two students from the class and confront another student on the decision he made.

1. After the two students have given their views on the decision situation have the class give their opinion on each of the two students decisions who were involved in this exercise.
2. Which decision does the class favor? Why did they prefer one over the other?
3. How did values play a role in their decision making?
4. Have any of the students experienced a similar situation? If so, how did they handle it?

Teacher Bibliography

Lakein, Alen and Wyden, H. Peter. *How To Get Control Of Your Time And Your Life* . New York: Alan Lakeim &Co., 1973.

Has good coverage for teaching comprehension.

Marvin, Philip. *Developing Decisions For Action* . Homewood, Illinois: Dow Jones Irwin, Inc. 1971.

A good effective book on decision making.

Wesley, Addison. *Making Decisions* . Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company 1978.

Decision making process is well explored in this book.

Student Bibliography

How To Be Your Own Best Friend . Mildred Newman and Bernard Berkowitz. An account on how you can solve your problems, but first you must like yourself.

Man Child In The Promise Land . Claude Brown. A very powerful and provoking book on the life of a black kid who's trying to make it in a cruel world.

The Sixteenth Round . Rubin "Hurricane" Carter. A book concerning a kid who almost won the middle weight crown, but found himself behind bars for a crime he claims he didn't commit.

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