

# 1

---

## *Learner Independence*

*The greatest sign of success for a teacher . . . is to be able to say, "The children are now working as if I did not exist."*

—Maria Montessori (2007, online)

**L**ike every teacher, we want what is best for our students: while academic standards are held high, we strive for all learners to feel capable, valued, and powerful. We work diligently to interact with students in a way that will bring them success in both the classroom and the real world where our teaching ultimately is intended to impact students' lives. Throughout our years of teaching, we have found that learner independence consistently contributes to student success, but facilitating learning that fosters habits of independence can be a challenge.

Although we could craft a lesson, manage a classroom, and prepare for student learning, questions about our teaching practice remained. Can learner independence be taught? When is independence an appropriate expectation? And perhaps most importantly, what is learner independence? In sifting through our experiences, we first decided what learner independence is not: learner independence is not freedom without accountability, nor is it the systematic knowledge and completion of routines and procedures. Independence is not quietly staying on task and keeping busy or finishing work without teacher support. Learner independence has more to do with the thinking behind the decisions we make and the actions we take. The behaviors that belong to a truly successful learner are more complex than just following protocol and being self-sufficient.

## 2 Fostering Learner Independence

In order to further understand independence in the classroom, this chapter is devoted to defining learner independence, examining how it impacts student self-esteem, and analyzing the thinking habits of truly independent learners. Just as we took time to sift and sort through what we understood about learner independence, it is important that you analyze and evaluate your prior experience with respect to this topic. Reflect on the following questions and jot down some of your current understandings to support you as you read the rest of the chapter.

- What is learner independence?
- Why is the concept of independence important and to whom is it important?
- What kinds of teacher behaviors encourage students to be independent learners?
- What do I do now to encourage independent learning?

### **DEFINING LEARNER INDEPENDENCE**

It would be an error to assume that our definition of independence matches that of our readers; therefore it is essential to clarify this term from the beginning. When we researched independence in the dictionary (Merriam-Webster Online, 2007), we found over twenty definitions. As we analyzed the myriad of descriptors that followed ‘independent,’ we began to see just how complex deciding upon a common definition could be. While no one definition truly supported our thinking of independent learners, we concluded that to agree upon one definition was the only way to have common grounds for our written and verbal conversations. Our working definition is as follows:

Independent learners are internally motivated to be reflective, resourceful, and effective as they strive to accomplish worthwhile endeavors when working in isolation or with others—even when challenges arise, they persevere.

As we worked to create this definition, we aimed to keep it short and concise, making sure that this definition encapsulated all that we believe and understand about independent learners. We had many discussions about what was meant by “internally motivated,” “reflective,” “resourceful,” “effective,” and “worthwhile endeavors.” These are ideas that we will clarify throughout our book.

To expand on our definition and its relevance to the classroom, let us take some time to explain some of our wording. For example, notice how we wrote that independent learners are able to accomplish worthwhile endeavors whether they work in isolation or with others. Although others do not control them, independent learners are influenced by others’ thoughts,

beliefs, and actions. This influence occurs once the learner has the opportunity to sift and sort information, and as a result, he formulates his own ideas, culminating in a set of core understandings and beliefs. Through the reflective process, learners ask questions of themselves and of others, and make decisions based upon a clear set of standards. Learners who are independent proceed with confidence as a direct result of seeing the consequences of their decision-making process. Independent learners look similar to students who exhibit high levels of responsibility. In order to identify independent learners, you must further analyze the students' work, words, and actions for attributes of learner independence. Students who are independent do well with intrapersonal tasks as well as with interpersonal experiences. It may be helpful to describe independent learners in further detail by breaking down specific behaviors and by explicitly identifying them as actions of independence. As you read this list in Figure 1.1, you may want to consider how these descriptions relate to students you know.

**Figure 1.1** Elements of Learner Independence

<b>Our Definition</b>	<b>Observable Behaviors of Independent Learners</b>
Internally motivated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• think and plan before they act</li> <li>• know when to act quickly and when to give more time to decision-making</li> <li>• strive to do their best because they care about the quality of their work</li> <li>• able to answer "Why are you learning this?"</li> </ul>
Reflective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• know how to seek and consider answers to their questions</li> <li>• suspend judgment of ideas, people, and concepts until they have carefully considered them</li> <li>• able to answer the question, "What are you learning about ____?"</li> </ul>
Resourceful	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• curious about the world around them</li> <li>• ask thoughtful questions of others and themselves (not the <i>do we have to know this for the test</i> type questions but those life-long questions such as <i>how do I solve this challenge</i> and <i>what resources will I need to do it?</i>)</li> </ul>
Effective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• reflect on what they believe and how that matches (or doesn't) with how they behave and learn</li> <li>• exhibit critical thinking skills in a metacognitive fashion</li> </ul>
Accomplish worthwhile endeavors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• productive decision-making capacities</li> <li>• aim to make connections to learning experiences</li> <li>• able to answer the question, "What are you doing and what will you do next?"</li> </ul>
Work in isolation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• modify their thinking and actions based on quality evidence</li> <li>• make their own and observe others' mistakes and successes and learn from them</li> <li>• have strategies for personal problem solving</li> </ul>
Work with others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• aware of how their actions affect others</li> <li>• understands and appreciates how various perspectives bring value to learning experiences</li> </ul>

#### 4 Fostering Learner Independence

There is no magic age at which we suddenly become independent learners; we've met toddlers who exhibit many of these characteristics and adults who show limited use of most of these behaviors. Ultimately, our goal is for students of all ages to develop characteristics of independence. As you read this book, we will clarify our definition further and help you to expand upon the definition for yourself. It is our hope that you take our working definition and use it to create your own understanding of independent learning.

To aid you in creating your own definition, think about when you learned to drive. Most teenagers use their independent learning skills as they earn their driver's license. Did you make mistakes and learn from them? Did you watch others make mistakes and learn from those errors? When you made a lane change and almost hit a car driving in your blind spot, was your thinking modified? Did you check your blind spot when doing future lane changes? Are you careful not to drive in other people's blind spots? Were you curious about learning how to parallel park? Were you thinking and planning before you acted? Most likely you were using critical thinking skills, productive decision-making capabilities, and you had an incredible sense of internal motivation. It is very unlikely to hear someone in a drivers' education class ask, "Why do we have to learn this?"

Whereas driver's education is unquestionably motivating, we believe it doesn't require a topic like this to encourage independent learning skills in students. We can set up any learning environment to help students develop the critical life skill of being an independent learner. Most people are motivated to be independent learners as they learn to drive and a huge part of that is because they have an authentic purpose for learning the skills associated with driving. We believe that teachers can set up their classrooms so that students have genuine purposes for their learning. Research has shown that authentic learning experiences, rather than tasks that are void of meaning for learners, have a positive impact on learning. Duke, Purcell-Gates, Hall, and Tower (2006) monitored the authenticity of literacy activities in a variety of classrooms. They found that those teachers who included a greater number of authentic literacy activities more of the time had students who showed higher growth in both comprehension and writing. We can only conclude that incorporating genuine literacy into the classroom increases learner engagement, thus impacting student learning.

A recent article found in the National Science Teachers Association's journal, *Science and Children*, provides another example of how an authentic learning experience impacts student independence. The article (Coskie, Hornof, and Trudel, 2007) summarizes a five-week study that taught students how to write a field guide (Figure 1.2) that identified the plants in a small wooded area on their school property. By creating this authentic genre of scientific writing, students came to understand and care for the natural world in their immediate environment. They also developed important science, reading, and writing skills through purposeful work.

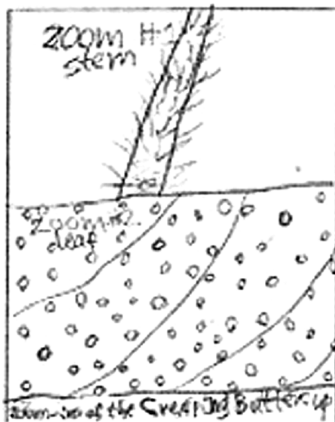
Once their field guides were published, the students' families were invited to a special afterschool event where students took their guests on a scavenger hunt. The authentic learning opportunity culminated when students had the opportunity to watch their guests use their class-created field guide to find each plant listed in the scavenger hunt list.

Our goal is to develop learners, and in turn, citizens who rely on an intrinsic desire to keep learning. Children are naturally curious, and we believe that tapping into this internal drive to inquire and discover can encourage habits of independence in learners. School can be a place to foster the growth of the independent learner at any grade, age, or stage of development. Success comes to those teachers who figure out how to further develop independence in themselves and in their students, while still meeting or exceeding academic standards.

Figure 1.2 Sample Field Guide Page

Scientific Name: Ranunculus Repens

Leaf: Each leaf is compound and the side parts look like hands and the top part looks like a head making the leaf look like a person. There are pin-head sized dots of light-green where each lobe meets and specks of light-green all over. There are also odd claw-like hairs growing on it. The leaves are about an inch long and an inch and one quarter wide.



Did you know? These weedy species reproduce when its nodes touch the ground.

---



---



---



---




---

(Continued)

Figure 1.2 (Continued)


Common Name: Creeping Buttercup

What's that shiny-petaled yellow flower in your garden? Is it a Dandelion? No. It is a Creeping Buttercup!



Plant: This plant will most likely have five petals but could have up to nine. This plant has parts and sizes, here are some: stem, meter in length, flower, one inch by one inch centire plant, six inches by six inches or smaller and about one to four inches tall. This plant grows in moist soil, or by the water

drawing of the Creeping Buttercup's Leaf



SOURCE: From Coskie, Hornoff, and Trudal (2007). Reprinted with permission from *Science & Children*, a publication for elementary level science educators published by the National Science Teachers Association ([www.nsta.org](http://www.nsta.org)).

## LEARNER INDEPENDENCE ENCOURAGES SELF-ESTEEM

As adults, we have a vast repertoire of experiences, some of which resulted in success, whereas others ended in failure. Reflect on your own life and think about a specific skill that resulted in success and another that resulted in failure. Which are you more likely to continue, the activity that was “doable” or the one that was seemingly impossible to accomplish? Although there are exceptions when people have chosen to prevail over failure, as a rule people choose to continue with a specific activity when it positively contributes to their self-esteem. How many adults have you met

who openly admit that they hate math because they struggled in school? What about people who choose not to read for pleasure because it was a chore growing up? The same concept can be transferred to young learners: how students feel about their own capabilities influences their ability and internal drive to learn. This does not mean that learning should be easy for students and all attempts successful. As teachers, this knowledge should drive us to set up learning experiences where students take on a challenge because they are equipped to do so. Kostelnik, Whiren, Soderman, Stein, and Gregory (2002) have identified three dimensions to self-esteem: competence, worth, and control.

- *Competence* is the belief that you can accomplish tasks and achieve goals.
- *Worth* can be viewed as the extent to which you like and value yourself.
- *Control* is the degree to which people feel they can influence the events around them.

Examining each of these qualities can help a teacher concentrate on specific ways for developing habits of learner independence while impacting self-esteem. We have chosen specific examples, not to tell you how to promote learner self-esteem but to demonstrate why each of these components is such a powerful influence in contributing to student independence.

Competence is the belief that you can accomplish tasks and achieve goals. Select from your experiences a time in which you felt encouraged to continue on a specific task, not because of your automatic mastery, but because you experienced gradual success. Your sense of competence was the fuel you needed to continue regardless of the level of challenge you faced. Figure 1.3 shows how a teacher can focus on student approximations while building learner competence by using the *I am learning to . . . I can* sheet (adapted from Campbell Hill, 2001; Graves, 1983). When this type of monitoring sheet is implemented, the teacher identifies the next learning step as she evaluates student work. As she meets with students in writing conferences, either the teacher or student records one writing goal in the “I’m learning” section of the chart. For example, Cashawn’s “I’m learning” goal might be “I will capitalize people’s names.” Once his teacher notices that Cashawn is capitalizing proper names without adult support, she will move this skill to the “I can” section of his chart and record the date (see Figure 1.3). As Cashawn’s “I can” list builds, he will feel a growing sense of competence as a writer. Focusing on one goal at a time and then seeing his writing skills and strategies grow will encourage him to continue learning and working. His sense of competence will also be increased as he is held accountable to continue applying the writing skills and strategies that are now listed in the “I can” side of the chart. Cashawn’s competence is not assessed by a “one time application”; instead high and clear expectations will support him to employ the skills and strategies of an independent writer.

Figure 1.3 I'm Learning/I Can Sheet

Cashawn

I'm learning...	I can...
9/13 • to use capital letters for names of people & places	9/22
9/22 • to start sentences with different words so my writing is more fluent	10/17
9/29 • to start my writing in a way that grabs my reader's attention (no more "once there was a...")	10/7 - Able to share 3 different ways authors start stories began a story with dialogue
10/7 • to plan <del>with</del> my writing projects prior to drafting	10/17 - has used 2 different planning strategies: web and storyboard
10/17 • to write an invitation	10/23 - able to describe all parts of an invitation published & sent invitations to our class "Books & Breakfast" event
10/23 • to use quotation marks to show when characters speak (dialogue)	

Worth can be viewed as the extent to which you like and value yourself. Consider how a learner's sense of worth increases when students are encouraged to focus on sharing their own lives and accomplishments. Brian Bowser, a third-grade teacher, aimed to increase his students' sense of worth by having learners use a unique text feature to write about their lives. The social studies curriculum required students to learn about timelines so Brian decided the best way to begin this study was to have students design timelines on something they have expertise in: themselves. When he explained this assignment, he encouraged learners to highlight accomplishments they were proud of achieving. Brian encouraged students to think of a wide array



of successes from academic, athletic, artistic, social, spiritual, to family responsibilities. Once the timelines were complete, students shared their lives with others as they presented their final product to their peers. This example illustrates that students can demonstrate habits of independence in a teacher-chosen activity when learners see an authentic purpose for the task and are encouraged to focus on individualizing the assignment within certain guidelines. In previous years, Brian had simply used a worksheet where students looked at a timeline of Amelia Earhart's life and were asked to place certain life events in order. By changing the assignment, Brian was still helping students learn about timelines, yet in a more meaningful way; but now he was also addressing his students' sense of worth.

Control is the degree to which people feel they can influence the events around them. As adults, it is our sense of control of a situation that empowers us with a feeling of confidence. When we plan for the day, for example, we will approach specific tasks with more vigor if we make the decisions. If we have control over how we spend our time, even the tasks that are less than appealing are easier to accomplish. The same is true with the learners within a classroom when a teacher decides to offer more choices to her students during literacy time. Jillian Portly works diligently to empower her third graders to be in control of their own learning throughout the year. She structures activities so that learners receive modeled and guided instruction when beginning new learning, and then gradually releases responsibility to learners when they demonstrate readiness for independence. At the start of the year in her literacy block, Jillian may begin by structuring student learning by assigning learners specific jobs: "During our literacy block today, you need to read the book about castles and work on drafting your story about living in a castle." Although she is not giving choices about what to read or write, she is allowing students to choose which task to complete first. Afterwards, she will debrief the students about their choices. "Who read the book first? Why did you choose to do that first? How did that help you when you wrote your story? Who decided to write your story first? Why did you choose to do that first? How did that help you read and understand the book?" It is this process of reflecting on why learners made certain decisions and evaluating the consequences of such actions that allows students to gain habits of independence. In order to support learners, Jillian might begin by determining how much time is spent on each assignment by giving a cue to students when it is time to switch to their second task. "Today you'll decide whether to read or write first, just like you've been doing for the last week. But we're going to add a new responsibility today. You will decide when it's time to change to your second activity. How will you know it's time to move onto your next task?" Students will use a variety of strategies including splitting the time evenly, writing or reading for a particular amount of time and then switching tasks, and then there will be students who require or seek teacher support as they make these choices. Jillian will encourage her third graders to think about how they will decide when to switch from

task one to task two and then help students reflect on those decisions at the end of that literacy block. A teacher who focuses on fostering habits of independence knows it is important for students to hear each other reflect on these decisions; these reflections will be used to help them make future decisions with regard to independently managing time. As her students become thoughtful and reflective about the order in which they work, Jillian could opt to increase the number of choices students have during the literacy block. Perhaps learners are ready to add other activities such as word sorts, spelling practice, literature circles, listening center, and partner reading to their literacy tasks. At this time, the teacher might begin to support students in selecting their own writing topics, audiences, and purposes as well as their own independent reading. Helping students manage their time within parameters gives them a sense of control. Notice that in this example, increasing behaviors of independence has nothing to do with altering the curriculum, yet everything to do with the thinking behind the decisions students are asked to make.

It is the teacher's job to not only foster academic intelligence and meet standards when working with students; it is even more essential that the teacher does everything to preserve and encourage self-esteem through interactions and endeavors within the school setting. By focusing on student competence, control, and worth a teacher promotes learner independence and creates a classroom community that is internally motivated to learn.

Within any classroom one will inevitably find children who are unique and deviate from what we might consider the average student. Perhaps this student, or group of learners, demonstrates difficulty with time management, organizing assignments, or staying engaged. At the other end of the spectrum, you may find that students are looking for more of a challenge academically and their lack of challenge is evidenced in their work and behavior by sloppy workmanship and an indifferent attitude toward the task at hand. When we aim to differentiate instruction, we can plan to provide a variety of means and support for our students' learning goals (Tomlinson, 2001). Differentiation guru, Carol Ann Tomlinson points out that no matter what you are teaching, it will be learned better if taught in a way that is responsive to the needs of all learners. We believe one aspect of this should be a focus on how we acknowledge the competence, worth, and control of the students in our classroom.

Teachers who strive to encourage independent learners do not opt to raise student self-esteem by giving them unfocused or empty praise or through the use of awards or certificates. These teachers believe self-esteem will increase when students feel competent, worthy, and in control as a result of their own successes: they have learned that these feelings and beliefs come from within. The teacher can facilitate classroom experiences that enhance competence, worth, and control—but the teacher cannot give students self-esteem. Taking time to consider the role competence, worth, and a sense of control plays in developing a learner's self-esteem will help you begin to analyze where you can increase student independence and develop a strong sense of confidence in the learning community.

## INDEPENDENT LEARNING: A HABIT OF MIND

A teacher who values habits of independence is more likely to help students establish independent learning habits. Since there is evidence that independent behavior can be learned, then surely we believe that independence can be taught. Take a moment to examine Figure 1.4 for the differences between dependent and independent learner behaviors, regardless of age or stage of learner development.

As you look over this figure, consider how you encourage independence in your classroom by the questions that you entertain from your learners. What is your response to “Am I done?” Do you say, “No, because you need to finish this portion of your work” or do you respond by asking the learner to question himself, “Tell me what you would expect to see in a complete answer. How does that compare with your work here? Now answer the question yourself, are you done? Think about whom is doing the work. According to Harry K. Wong (Wong & Wong, 1998), “The person who does the work is the ONLY one who learns.” If this is true, it is essential to reflect on who is thinking with respect to student work. Are you making all of the decisions in the classroom, or are you supporting students as they learn to make decisions based upon their own understandings? If we are supporting students as they make decisions, instead of making decisions for students, we are in fact moving learners along the continuum of independence.

Often times when teachers move to dialoguing with students in a way that encourages independent thinking, they are met with resistance from their students. Anne Udall and Joan Daniels write about this in their book, *Creating the Thoughtful Classroom* (1991):

... students are surprised (sometimes astounded!) when asked to extend their thinking. You will notice blank stares and hear “I don’t know.” Do not accept “I don’t know.” (p. 73)

Udall and Daniels give advice for how to address the “I don’t know” statement. They encourage teachers to use one of these responses:

- “If you did know, what would you say?”
- “Ask me a question that would help you understand.”
- “Pretend you do know and make something up.”
- “*I don’t know* means you need more time to think—listen to others and I’ll come back to you.” (Then make sure you do.)

Respected educator and psychologist, Haim Ginott, pioneered many techniques for conversing with children. He points out that the effective teacher is one who makes himself increasingly *dispensable* to children (1965). He encourages teachers (and parents) to lead children to make their own choices and use their own powers. He points out how our conversations

## 12 Fostering Learner Independence

**Figure 1.4** Comparison of Thinking: The Dependent Versus the Independent Learner

	<b>Dependent Learners</b>	<b>Independent Learners</b>
<b>Questions to Others</b>	<p>Ask functional questions that require someone else to do the thinking.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Am I done?</li> <li>• What do I do now?</li> <li>• What resources will I need to do this?</li> <li>• Can I go to the bathroom?</li> </ul>	<p>Ask questions that promote reflection and require thinking.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Will you provide me some feedback?</li> <li>• This part was tricky for me. Here's what I tried. What do you suggest?</li> <li>• Reading my essay, what do you think is the main idea?</li> </ul>
<b>Self-Talk</b>	<p>Think questions belong to others to answer or ask.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• After reading aloud to a teacher, the teacher asks some comprehension questions. The student remarks, "I didn't know you were going to ask me questions about what I read. I don't know what this story is about."</li> </ul>	<p>Unthreatened by others' or their own questions; persistent in finding answers.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As the student reads aloud to the teacher, the student makes comments like "That title makes me wonder if someone is going to tell a lie . . .", "Oh, it's the mom who lies; I thought it was going to be the kid . . ."</li> </ul>
<b>Motivation</b>	<p>Think learning is extrinsic or "outside" of themselves.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When asked why they are revising a piece of writing, the student replies, "Because my teacher says that I am supposed to do it."</li> </ul>	<p>Think learning is intrinsically rewarding.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When asked why they are revising a piece of writing, the student replies, "Because I want to capture my audience's attention."</li> </ul>
<b>Resources</b>	<p>Appear unaware of or disinterested in the variety of resources available to seek answers to questions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>I can't find the answer.</i></li> <li>• <i>What's the answer to this one?</i></li> </ul>	<p>Know and use a variety of resources to answer questions and solve problems (Internet, other people, inside self, books, magazines, experiences, museums, libraries).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Hmmm, the answer isn't here. I wonder if an atlas would help.</i></li> </ul>
<b>Feedback</b>	<p>Wait for others to judge and evaluate their performance.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Am I done?</i></li> <li>• <i>Is this good enough?</i></li> </ul>	<p>Identify their own challenges and strengths; seek and value feedback from others.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>I solved the problem accurately and used the work backwards strategy for the first time.</i></li> <li>• <i>My classmate recommended that I add more details so I'm working on that.</i></li> </ul>
<b>Problem Solving</b>	<p>Rely on others for direction in learning, problem solving; wait for others to do the work.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When the teacher notices that a student has not started an assignment that the class has been working on for 15 minutes, the student responds with "I didn't know what to do . . ." or "Sarah keeps interrupting me."</li> </ul>	<p>Act to solve problems appropriately, do the work needed to support themselves, see themselves as "do-ers."</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When a student is confused by a task, the student asks specific questions to peers or adults. If no one is available to help, the student tries a variety of solutions while waiting.</li> </ul>

with students indicate our belief in their capacity to make wise decisions for themselves. Ginott challenges us to avoid our inner “yes” responses when a child makes a request. Instead of giving a simple “yes” to a request, think how these statements (which Ginott refers to as *freedom phrases*) foster student independence:

- “If you want to.”
- “If that is really what you would like.”
- “You decide about that.”
- “It is really up to you.”
- “It is entirely your choice.”
- “Whatever you decide is fine with me.”

Ginott writes that a “yes” answer may be gratifying to children, but these *freedom phrases* give children a sense of satisfaction of making a decision and shows them that their teacher has faith in them.

Just as Ginott helped us realize how our “yes” responses can undermine student independence, author and educational consultant Barbara Coloroso has helped many teachers realize that our “no” answers can negatively affect student independence and motivation. Coloroso gives three alternatives to “no” responses (1994):

- “Yes, later.”
- “Yes” with conditions as in “Yes, you may work on the computer after your math assignment is complete.”
- “Give me a minute.” (This gives you and the student a moment to think about the decision/problem.)
- “Convince me.” (You can keep responding with “I’m not convinced” until either you are convinced, you say “yes,” or the student has run out of ideas.)

The learning environment is conducive to creative, constructive, and responsible activity; all of which have a big impact on student independence. Coloroso points out that teachers should save their “no” answers for the big issues, when there is no bend, when they mean it, and when they intend to follow through with it. Coloroso writes:

With the no they give an explanation that is meaningful. Children can then begin to develop their own internal moral structure that enables them to function responsibly and creatively in society. (p. 61)

So, consider a simple request made by a student such as “Can I use markers on this assignment?” Your inclination might be to say “yes”

but consider how things change when you say, “It is really up to you.” Maybe the request to use markers on a particular assignment would likely lead to you replying with “No,” because you worry that the student won’t make revisions on the poster she is creating because the markers are not erasable. But what if instead of quickly replying “No,” you said “Yes, you may use markers after you. . . .” or maybe you would say, “Convince me why using markers is a good idea for this project.”

When dealing with discipline issues, we recommend using what Jim Fay and David Funk (1995) call thinking words as demonstrated in Figure 1.5. They also recommend enforceable statements that tell students what the teacher will do or allow rather than telling students what to do. An unenforceable statement of “Stop yelling at me!” becomes an enforceable statement by saying, “I’ll listen to you as soon as your voice is as calm and quiet as mine.” Enforceable statements acknowledge the shared control in a classroom setting—in reality, no one can really control another person’s behavior—we can only influence behavior. Enforceable statements model for students how we can care for ourselves when interacting with others. These statements set high expectations but do not require compliance of students. Enforceable statements and thinking words encourage cooperation and independence. Peter Johnston (2004) points out how the things teachers say, and don’t say, have huge consequences for what their students learn and how their students think:

Talk is the central tool of their trade. With it they mediate children’s activity and experience, and help them make sense of learning, literacy, life and themselves. (p. 4)

**Figure 1.5** “Thinking Words” Using Love and Logic Principles

When you ____ then you ____.	When you have your book, then you will be ready for literature circle.
Yes, you can ____ when you ____.	Yes, you can go on the computer when you have cleaned up your publishing materials.
Feel free to ____ when you ____.	Feel free to sit next to your friends during writing time when you are able to focus on your writing.
I’ll know ____ when you ____.	I’ll know you are ready to have me check your spelling words when you put your spelling log on top of your desk before lunch.

SOURCE: Fay and Funk, 1995.

## CONCLUSION

While it is likely that our working definition of independent learners will be altered by experiences and research over time, human behaviors will not change. Independent learners will continue to be internally motivated, and they will work toward goals alone or with others. They will be reflective, resourceful, and effective as they work to accomplish particular tasks and challenge themselves to think beyond one specific assignment. Independent learners will continue to be motivated for the pure sake of learning, and students' self-esteem will be enhanced as a result of their proficiency, feeling of importance, and sense of command in their environment. It is the teacher's job to construct an environment that will develop learners who are eager to contribute to humanity beyond the classroom. In turn it will be our privilege to live in a world that is enhanced by their efforts.

As a result of challenging your beliefs and understandings about learner independence, what are you thinking now? Take some time to review the questions that we addressed at the start of the chapter.

---

## A TIME TO REFLECT

One of the benefits of highly independent students is that responsibility is shifted from the adult to the student who is internally driven. Sometimes it is helpful to analyze particular tasks for levels of student independence and the impact this has on the teacher or other adults involved. As you are thinking about this concept, turn to Resource A where you will find a chart depicting three levels of student independence: highly independent, somewhat independent, and dependent. We encourage you to use this tool as you consider the impact learner independence has on you as the teacher.

To guide you through this activity, we have provided an example of the impact student independence has on homework. As we were completing the chart we thought of one question in particular: *How does the level of student independence impact the adults who support them?* As you apply your understandings to this chart, consider the behaviors you might encounter for a highly independent student, a somewhat independent learner, and a student who is dependent. How does each student function with respect to problem solving in math, independent reading, independent writing, and peer interactions? Perhaps you could select another aspect of the curriculum or class procedures that will help you focus on habits of independence with your learners. Take some time to analyze how instructional time and student learning is impacted by each behavior. Evaluate student performance and reflect on your role as the teacher. What did you notice about your learners? As a result of your new understandings what do you plan to do differently the next time you work with students?

---

## A VISIT TO OUR CLASSROOMS

### Grades K–3: A Primary Perspective by Karin Ramer

During my first few years of teaching I felt that students needed to be held accountable for the time I spent reading from a chapter book. I viewed reading aloud from *Charlotte's Web*, for example, as pleasurable and because of that I had a nagging sense that I was responsible to provide evidence of learning as a result of our time in the text. I adopted the practice of asking questions following the last chapter of the book and then assigning students a task that I felt would indicate their level of comprehension. Evaluating student understanding in this manner left me frustrated and wondering if reading aloud was worth students' time because I was not seeing the levels of engagement and comprehension I had hoped for. It wasn't until a few years later that I had the answer to my question: reading aloud was not only worth students' time; it was essential to their development as proficient readers.

My shift in understanding came as a result of a schoolwide focus on reading instruction. We analyzed and evaluated student data in reading, read professional literature, dialogued about explicit reading instruction, and participated in workshops and conferences aimed at improving students' reading strategies and comprehension. As I challenged my understandings and practices, I began to implement teaching practices that supported student growth and development toward skillful reading. Ellin Keene's (2008) research regarding monitoring for meaning and reading comprehension greatly influenced my thinking and in turn my instructional practices. She wrote:

Readers must *learn* how to pause, consider the meanings in text, reflect on their understandings, and use different strategies to enhance their understanding. This process is best learned by watching proficient models 'think aloud' and gradually taking responsibility for monitoring their own comprehension as they read independently. (p. 3)

A major shift in my instruction came as I experimented with 'thinking aloud' while reading. I found that when I took time to consider the meaning of text, reflected on my understandings, and modeled a variety of reading strategies, student reading was impacted. As opposed to asking questions about character development following reading, I articulated my purpose for reading prior to opening the book each day: "*As I read today, I am searching for ways the author describes the main character.*" Once this expectation was in place, I read until I had evidence of character development. At this point I paused to reflect on my understandings: "*After reading about Harvey, I think the author wants me to believe that he is a nervous dog because she wrote about his body shaking, and the way his eyes darted around the room. Instead of just telling us that he was nervous, she showed us by the way he acted.*" This explicit focus on the craft of writing as seen through the eyes of a reader, supports students as they develop thinking skills that will help them comprehend text.

I no longer question the value of reading aloud nor feel that I have something to prove when I share a chapter book with students. As a result of consistent modeling and 'thinking aloud' students implement skills and strategies that enhance their comprehension of the texts they read



independently. And as we stated earlier in this chapter, learner independence is not about staying busy or completing work to prove that learning has occurred: it is about the thinking behind the decisions we make such as the comprehension skills and strategies students will independently employ as a result of explicit modeling.

### **Grades 4–6: An Intermediate Perspective by Roxann Rose-Duckworth**

For many years, I created a weekly newsletter for my students' families. I spent at least an hour each week writing about what we had accomplished as a class and what our goals were for the near future. I would remind parents of upcoming events and approaching deadlines. As I began to focus on acknowledging students' worth, competence, and control, I began to hand over this writing responsibility to my students. Each day, we would take a few moments and brainstorm anything that needed to be addressed in our classroom newsletter. For example, my students might suggest that we should include information about an upcoming field trip and a guest speaker we just had in the classroom. I could also suggest a topic such as an invitation to next week's PTA meeting. Then students could volunteer to take responsibility for that part of the newsletter. Their name would be written on the whiteboard next to the topic and they knew their deadline was Thursday so that copies could be made for Friday's newsletter. All of a sudden, my students were becoming passionate writers! Students weren't forgetting to hand the newsletter to their families, and it was obvious that parent readership grew dramatically! Supply requests that had once went unnoticed were now being responded to immediately by my students' families. And when students wrote about the need for parent volunteers, parents eagerly stepped up in a way they rarely had before. Students were proud of their newsletters, and they saw themselves as competent writers. They had control over what information was shared with their families and how it was shared. Our classroom newsletter now helped students feel competent, gave them a sense of worth, and helped them exercise a high degree of control.

This small change had a huge impact on our classroom and tremendous influence on student learning. Now the time I used to spend on creating the newsletter could be spent doing something else that had more impact on student learning. I could spend the time looking over student writing and planning writing conferences. I had to let go of perfection and be willing to have the students truly have ownership with our newsletter. This meant there were some article topics that I would not choose, some writing that wasn't as polished as I would hope, and some organization that wasn't done the way I would prefer. But I had to come to the realization that parents were buzzing about this newsletter—they were obviously reading the newsletter—which is more than I could say when I wrote and published this weekly written correspondence. It was at this time that I came to the realization that it was not only my students who benefited from becoming independent learners; I benefited as well. The more independent my students became, I noticed that my teaching energy increased and my planning, instruction, and assessment time became even more productive.