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# *Preface*

*The late educational researcher John Nicholls once remarked to me that he had met a lot of administrators who “don’t want to hear a buzz of excitement in classrooms—they want to hear nothing.” His implication was that some teachers strive to keep tight control over students less because of their principles than because of their principals.*

—Alfie Kohn (2003, *Educational Leadership*)

Several years ago, we sat around a table of educators analyzing our classrooms for evidence of learner independence. Our collective journey to uncover the role and significance of learner independence began as we dialogued with our colleagues and reflected on our practices. For three years, we met as a group of five educators once a month to discuss habits of independence and the consequences of dependent behaviors. Over time we debated the role of the learner and the educator in fostering habits of independence. Through research, reflection, and classroom experience we drew conclusions about fostering independence and formed common understandings about developing these behaviors in learners. Recognizing the power of learner independence, we decided to share our understandings with other educators. As you spend time reading and reflecting on your own practices, it is our hope that you experience a journey that melds together your current understandings with new insight found in the pages of this book.

As we researched learner independence, we found ample information on how to effectively teach learners. We also uncovered many books that claim their model will systematically train students to participate in various structures intended to develop independent learning habits. This book goes beyond a text that lays out a detailed plan or step-by-step formula of how you can develop independence in the classroom. We believe that independence is not about training students, nor is it about controlling students in more palatable ways. Independent learning is not keeping students occupied, busy, and quiet, nor does it have to do with following

set routines and procedures with precision. Classrooms where management structures are used can certainly be positive learning environments where independence is valued—but we believe that it is not these models in themselves that create the lasting habits of independence. So whether you are currently using a management model such as *The Daily Five* (Boushey & Moser, 2006) in order to promote independence or if you are not using any particular management model, this book will challenge you to reflect on your philosophy of teaching and learning.

In *The Energy to Teach*, Donald Graves (2001) notes what many educators want for their students:

... to be better readers, writers, mathematicians, historians, and artists. [They] also want them to learn to be responsible participants in a democratic society and care about justice for all people, not just themselves. The school is often the first place children learn to participate in a society beyond the home. (p. 134)

The approximations learners make toward what it means to be independent start early, and school is an ideal place to carry on this important work. Consider the impact of a teacher's efforts when the focus is on preparing students for life, not solely for classroom experiences. Dorothy Rich writes in her book, *MegaSkills* (1988):

In the workplace, employers are alarmed. Today's graduates, they say, are only marginally prepared for job success. The problem is not just literacy. Students have trouble giving their best to their work and in having disciplined work habits. (p. 4)

We aim to help you reflect on why you do what you do by focusing on why you do things a certain way, rather than how to do them. We challenge you to make decisions that reflect your principles and choices that are manageable for you and your students. It is our goal to illustrate the impact teacher decisions can have when we focus on why we make the choices we do and stop looking for cookie-cutter approaches where we aim to duplicate procedures that are promised to encourage independence.

The chapter features of this book are designed to aid you in reflecting on what you have read. Each chapter introduction includes several questions to prompt you to reflect on your current understandings about fostering learner independence. We encourage you to revisit these questions at the end of each chapter as a way of reflecting on how your thinking may have changed as a result of what you read. Documenting your thoughts may be helpful as you sift and sort through challenges you encounter and work to formulate new understandings. In the sections titled "A Time to Reflect," we have presented activities that are intended to promote conversations and professional growth. In the final portion of each chapter, we have included a section called "A Visit to Our Classrooms" that

provides a snapshot into our classrooms and reflective practice. This feature is designed to show some of the changes we have made over time and to illustrate how we continually strive to refine our practices. However you choose to utilize these chapter features, it is our desire that you access this text in a way that leads you to optimum personal learning and reflection in regards to fostering independence in your students.

In this book, we will not provide a cookbook approach where you simply follow our recipe to create independent learners. But we will help you identify key ingredients, necessary tools, and helpful tips that will assist you in creating your own process for creating student success and independence. Each classroom has a set of variables influencing the way children learn, and we recognize that your classroom is no different. We are excited to be part of your journey. We are honored to help you delve into the “whys” so that you can choose the appropriate “hows.” Some of these hows we will provide as examples and some of the hows will come to you as you reflect on your understandings about what it means to be a lifelong and independent learner, both as a student and as a teacher. Alfie Kohn (1999) advocates that teachers need to move away from “doing things to” students and instead, focus on “doing things with” students. It is our hope that as you read our text, you will consider a variety of things that you can do *with* your students to help them develop as independent learners. No matter what grade level you work with, or what special needs your students have, all of your students have the potential to grow in their independence. This is the greatest gift you can give your students, and it is the greatest gift you will ever give yourself as a teacher.