



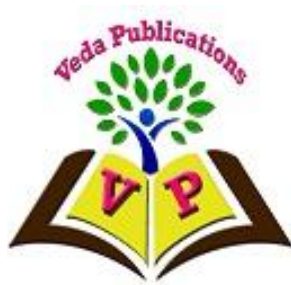
## TEACHER AUTONOMY AND ITS IMPACT ON TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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### ABSTRACT



Teacher autonomy is an area often ignored, but if granted can add substantially to the betterment of the education system. Teacher autonomy is not restricted to the freedom given to a teacher to explore areas and methods of learning she deems beneficial to her students, but also as Inden (1986) says it is the 'right of the teacher to represent himself/herself.' For academicians, autonomy allows the individuals to be true to themselves and thereby true to the work they do. If they have autonomy not within the walls of the classroom alone, but feel that the culture of the institution allows freedom to explore and engage creatively with the concept, over time they will become active, reflective practitioners, who through continuous engagement will become experts in their own right and thus true professionals. Granting teacher autonomy will not only help the quality of the system, but also the confidence of the teachers and their morale to be more committed professionals. A professional, according to Calderhead's criteria, is someone who is skillful, reflective, goal-oriented, keeping in mind the audience they are catering to, has specialized knowledge, and is an expert in their field so as to do justice to the service or work done. A teacher is expected to do all of this but is not given the status of a professional. However, if granted autonomy, teachers may have greater motivation to work in their own space, and also will be willing to be held accountable, for it will be their decisions being realized in class and not those coming from 'above'. This paper attempts to study the impact teacher autonomy has on teacher professional development and also to delve into reasons why teacher autonomy is so rare in educational institutions across the world. The role of culture and societal structure and institutional structure with regard to the above issues will also be analysed.

**INTRODUCTION:**

Teacher autonomy is the freedom the teacher has to explore the learning space in accordance to their perspective, and deliver creatively to the learner's in varied ways so as to enrich the learning experience for the students. It does not mean complete independence from the institution and its ideology and values but it emphasizes equal importance given to the teacher's values and beliefs and that every educational institution should allow for diverse perspectives to exist, however at the same time create a system where these views are discussed and a healthy space is created for dialogue, so each vision is given a voice, and collectively decisions can be arrived at through dialogue and everyone comes together for the betterment of the learning space. Freire (1970) too suggested that dialogue and multiple perceptions are more productive spaces and knowledge oriented than one in accordance with the positivist paradigm. Disagreements and juxtaposing views allow for greater discourse and thus more knowledge and greater clarity. Like society, institutes too should become pluralistic spaces, with participatory, democratic functioning being their core value at the same time not devaluing the individual and what they stand for. This will ensure autonomy as well as maintain standards. Freedom in any setting allows for greater contribution, and in teaching too, autonomy will allow for more motivation for teachers who will be active participants, constantly reflecting so as to better their professional knowledge.

Dyer and Choski (2002) did an action based participatory research study in three DIET's across India, where they studied areas of concern vis-à-vis DIET's, teacher autonomy, democratic processes in teacher education and so on. For this teacher educators and teachers from these three regions were selected, not all having prior research experience. More than the result of the research these teachers will go out and collect and analyze the purpose was to introduce them to a democratic process of functioning, which is collaborative and reflective. The qualitative method was selected so that the teachers have the opportunity to delve deeper into the issue in hand, probe social

complexities and have dialogue and critique and reflect on each other's findings. Each teacher had to write journals where they reflected upon that day's work, all of them had workshops on qualitative research as it was new to most of them, prior to them beginning their respective projects. They were encouraged to move away from the positivist paradigm to problematizing issues and dissecting it so as to create space for dialogue and reflection. Each of them was encouraged to think and express not just what they saw but analyze it as well.

The report by Dyer. C et al (2002) have narratives of teachers and the common underlying feeling in all of them is a sense of liberation after being given the opportunity to delve into something as they deem fit and voice their opinions and analysis of it. The space they were given to explore their thoughts and do things according to their decisions was an empowering process. They also learnt the importance of personal reflection. A lot of them went back to their journals and saw what they could have done differently. This study shows how crucial autonomy is in teacher professional development. The purpose of this study was professional development, to engage the teacher educators with qualitative research so as to ensure they are up-to-date with their knowledge and are constantly growing. For it is the DIET's responsibility to engage in research and develop curricular and pedagogical innovation, and design quality in-service and pre-service programs. However, it served another purpose whereby the teacher educators realized the importance of teacher autonomy and freedom provided to express and be themselves.

They were taught to not collect but generate data. Through the frequent peer meetings, they realized the weightage of their reflections and how valuable their contributions and inputs are. This encouraged them to take on more responsibility for which they realized they required the freedom or autonomy to do so. One teacher educator expressed that the DIET's are an attempt at decentralization and handing over power to the local authorities, but there is no point in this for the DIET is controlled by the "chair" and "DIET works according to Chair (RAJ, Udaipur, June 1999)." And like in many Institutions, be it public or private, the "chair" while is supposed



to be the leader and must ideally take his team along and consult them frequently, most often they take on the role of the sole decider and “instructional leader (Anderson. L, 1987)”. The same respondent as above commented that “we have become so used to the idea of a leader that everyone is looking up and no one wants to use their brains (Raj, Udaipur, June 1999).” There are two issues raised here one where the powerful do not allow others to make decisions and the other where the subordinates have become comfortable with not having to make decisions. It is also possible that one led to the other. This study by Dyer et al shows how crucial autonomy is for teacher professional development and what it does to professionalism as well.

#### **TEACHER AUTONOMY AND WHAT INFLUENCES IT.**

The reason teacher autonomy is an issue being raised now is because teachers are beginning to become more vocal about their demand for it. Why weren't teachers earlier on more vocal about it? Does it have to do with society and its structure? Or is it our culture to be submissive and accept norms without questioning? Or can the teacher education programs be blamed for they play a crucial role in shaping and influencing the future teacher and the way they execute their role? I believe all of these reasons are equally responsible and they affect the individual as a social being and as a teacher, and thus to a great extent have not allowed for teacher autonomy to exist or teacher's to raise their voice in demand for it.

Society in most countries is highly hierarchical and power and decisions are top-down processes. In most organization those on the lower rungs of the ladder rarely question decisions sent from above. In families too the father is the head and his decisions are considered the final and what the adults say is rarely contended.

We being a collectivistic society independence or free thought is looked at as a taboo and individualism devalued. Psychologist Sudhir Kakkar says that in India “independent decision making is disobedience.” In a system where the self is never thought of and first the community or family is put first, a culture where standing up for yourself, or thinking along one's own perspective and belief's is

treated as being selfish, these values seep into professional spheres as well. A subordinate never stops to question his boss or their decisions, or critique it to see if the work they have been assigned is fruitful and will help towards attaining the goal. It is simply done, and if the goal is not achieved the subordinate is targeted even if the fault was in the decision made from above. The same takes place in the education system as well. The teacher is always targeted for the poor quality of education, lack of attendance, and the downfall of the system itself of occurs will be the teacher's fault. However we fail to stop and notice that the problems could be at the policy level, or the curriculum and textbooks and other such program related or managerial areas, all of which the teachers are not involved in.

The teachers are often blamed for faulty results of decisions they did not make, thus by them having autonomy over their learning space inside and outside the classroom, the teacher's will be making their own decisions and thus will be accountable for the same. And rightly so, for it will be their responsibility to put in their best and prove their decisions were in the best interest of the learners. Every professional engagement has an aim and for the teacher, it is to do with their learner. It is to cater to the learner's needs and ensure the aims of education are met. Let us for the moment consider the goal of every teacher; if the individual has no control over deciding the means to this goal and has to follow the vision of someone else while doing so, how are they to achieve it? A crude metaphor for the same would be handcuffing a carpenter and expecting him to make a chair. The lack of autonomy restricts the teacher's potential and capacity to achieve, and in turn does not allow them to grow professionally. This restriction is also the reasons they all become so result oriented for they have little control over the process, and are even made to believe the process does not matter and it is the results that are crucial.

However this change is possible when the reigns of the learning space and how and what happens in it, is handed over to the teacher and is not held onto by the administration or management alone, who often have no educational background, and are making decisions from a very



managerial perspective, unfortunately today even a business mindset. Even those few interactions the management may have with the teachers are “aimed at gaining converts rather than insights (Licata.J et al, 1990)”. As a culture too we pay a lot of importance towards loyalty to family, institution, group and teachers towards their school, and often put their beliefs second to that of the school or the vision laid by the founder or management. Licata.J et al (1990) refer to these autocratic principals or people of the management’s/ civic authorities like the Block education officer (vis-à-vis public schools) ways as “emotional toxicity” which does not allow the teachers to function to the best of their ability and in turn affects the ethos of the education institution too. Professional norms must emphasize on teacher autonomy and the program designed and ethos created advance the values of a democratic society. Students can imbibe values of democracy, active participative citizenry, critical reflective thinkers, only if they experience it happening in their surroundings. And students are keen observers and sensitive, thus very often realize when teachers are not comfortable with what they are doing, talking on behalf of someone else, or frustration and so on. Thus is it important that a learning space is built where students are exposed to values we wish for them to learn and value, and if their school lacks teachers who have the freedom, will, are happy, comfortable and satisfied with their work, learning will be affected. Control over resources and the power game regarding this is another way authority is shown and autonomy taken away (Kumar.A, 1987). If the administrative decisions undermine the teacher’s morale and motivation a certain “disenchantment (Mc. Laughlin et al, 1986)” sets in with regard to teaching. Here, by disenchantment Mc. Laughlin means ‘a certain degree to which an individual feels powerless to achieve the role that they have determined to be rightfully theirs.’

Anderson. L (1987) in his paper on “The Decline of Teacher Autonomy: Tears or Cheers?” interestingly argues that Teacher autonomy has demerits. He says complete autonomy should not be granted and a “midpoint of the autonomy continuum must be arrived at”. However, I believe that either teacher autonomy is granted or not and a midpoint

to it is a farce for it will always lean towards those who have always held the reigns. He provides reasons such as when teacher autonomy is granted will foster ‘isolation, limit feedback about performance and promote staleness’. It will also create a disconnect with the organization. But I believe that teacher autonomy does not amount to each teacher going their separate ways but simply working under the same banner. As in the Research lesson in Jjapan, teachers should work collaboratively to better each other’s teaching and learning experience. During the designing of the research lessons, teachers consult other colleagues and incorporate suggestions however the idea is still the individuals. Post the class where the demonstration is done a panel sits down to discuss and provide feedback, prior to which the teachers themselves are allowed to reflect out loud. A system of this kind must be followed, and here the teacher does have autonomy at the same time is connected is a very strong and productive way to the organization and its members.

#### **TEACHER’S WITH ‘AUTONOMY’ AND A ‘PROFESSION’.- A BEGINNING.**

*The following are case studies taken from Parton. J (1970) “Movement towards Teacher Autonomy in Canada.”*

Myron Leiberman lists five criteria for professionalising education in America, and one of them which is most crucial he says is “a strong professional organization that represents the entire profession.” The Canadian teachers have one- ‘The Canadian Teachers Federation.’ The federation had fought for teacher autonomy in places where the management or provincial authorities were unwilling to let go. After years of battle, the civic authorities gave in and handed over to The Teachers Federation the duty of enforcing code of ethics and other norms, and policing themselves and maintaining standards of the profession.

The Ontario Secondary School Teacher’s Federation after elaborate screening process grants “documents of approval” which then allows teachers to begin practice. The Federation through this has the onus of maintaining the integrity of profession and quality of service and the professional development of the members too. School cannot hire



teachers who have not cleared the screening and do not have a document of approval. The Ontario Teachers Federation together developed a system of formative continuous assessment as against the previous summative assessment system and competitive tests system that the state had assigned. They also did away with Provincial prescribed textbooks and developed their own resources wherever needed. In the search for the development of the necessary conditions to help teachers adapt to the ever-increasing demands of society and a diversified body of students, teacher educators ought to investigate whatever tools and methodologies should be employed in this difficult task. Having that in mind, we probably should pursue the notion that teacher autonomy is indeed closely tied to the concept of a critically reflective teacher (Bartlett 1990), which might be achieved through teacher research, exploratory practice, reflective practice and action research. Yet another issue we should deal with is that teacher autonomy is not solely centered on the acquisition of further cognitive and methodological abilities. Many are the continued education programs that fail in their well intended goals due to a lack of understanding that teachers are psycho-social beings and in order to aggregate new knowledge and new practices they need to perform a change in social representations and culture. That can only be achieved if teachers do not feel pressured to do things they do not fully comprehend or accept. In that sense, reflective practice and other closely linked types of research are enticing options for teacher educators to foster in their programs since these will help teachers understand their work environment and the social practices there adopted better. Additionally, according to Allwright (2003) in his explanation of Exploratory Practice, teacher educators should be concerned above all with the "quality of life in the language classroom". This will guarantee gains to all involved in the process.

The basic premise in the initiatives mentioned above is that teachers are best placed to develop their own teaching in order to better the learning experiences of their students. Teacher autonomy seems to be an umbrella term for these innovations in teacher education and on-going teacher development. Rather than accepting the

received wisdom, the autonomous teacher interprets ideas about teaching and learning for her/himself probably in collaboration with others making the meaning more real for her/himself. Crucially, the autonomous teacher goes beyond this to search for new answers to new problems, which inevitably occur to us as individuals in our own unique teaching/learning situations. In order for teachers to come out of their education as "autonomous professionals" Johnson (2006: 235) argues that we need to provide for "a teaching force of transformative intellectuals who can navigate their professional worlds in ways that enable them to create educationally sound, contextually appropriate, and socially equitable learning opportunities for the students they teach".

There are several possible research initiatives that are adept to help teachers become more autonomous in their practice. Among them, we can highlight teacher research, exploratory practice, reflective practice and action research. (Downhower, Melvin & Sizemore 1990; Williamson 1992). The common aspect among these possibilities is the active role teachers have in the production of knowledge. Action research in particular makes it possible for teachers to research a theme of their choice, which is focused on their language classroom problems. This very aspect eventually offers teachers the possibility to improve their classroom practice and students' learning. The central features of Action research are systematic inquiry, reflection and focus on practice. Basically, Action research searches for questions and their answers, which emerge from the day to day activities and processes that occur in the language classroom, so that answers are immediately turned into action for the resolution of the detected problems. Action research might be undertaken individually or in groups as a collaborative action. In the Continuing Education Program under focus in this paper, action research was carried as a collaborative initiative, which involved, for each research group, four school teachers, a senior member from the project staff, one or more undergraduate students. The rationale for the action research undertaken followed a six step plan: (1) identification of problem/question to be investigated, (2) grouping of information related to the question under focus, (3)





development of an action plan, (4) plan implementation, (5) results evaluation, and (6) repetition of the cycle, adjusting the formulation of the basic questions or strategies to solve them, up to the point of finding satisfactory results.

The Faculty at School of Social Work, Roshni Nilaya design and create their own syllabus with the help of the Board of Studies Committee that meets twice a year. The syllabus that we have designed for the B.A. students and B.S.W. students is based on a plethora of subjects ranging from the works of Kuvempu ( Graveyard of Kurukshetra, Throat for a Thumb and Sudra Tapasvi) and topics that are socially relevant to issues such as Global warming and Child labour. Speeches and biographies of Achievers around the World ( Malala Yousufzai, Steeve Jobs, Mother Teresa and Medha Patkar).

When it comes to Literature and Linguistics, the Teacher makes students come up with projects and research articles related to their paper. Lots of classroom activities, quiz, presentations, group discussions and theatre shows based on the plays that are a part of their syllabus is showcased in the college.

As previously mentioned the faculty meet regularly to discuss what has been done, evaluate the results and plan the classes accordingly.

The Faculty takes turns to visit each other's classes to understand and comprehend the methodologies and styles adopted by the teacher and healthy criticism, observations and feedback are given to the Teacher.

### CONCLUSION

Education today is following the neo-liberal, open market framework where standardized outcomes are expected, thus teachers are output focused. Their aim is to make children job ready. We need to shift to the Academical framework from the programmatic level to the bureaucracy and teachers. A framework that encourages critical thinking, enquiry and allows the teacher to be creative agents with autonomy. The aim here is not good citizens but active citizens, who work for the betterment of society and social transformation. It is fascinating how so much depends on the autonomy a teacher is granted which in turn depend on the mindsets of those in power. Thus a shift from the former to the

latter will guarantee teacher autonomy and a system of quality education and a society that is democratic and consists of active participatory citizens working towards a common good.

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I began my teaching career in Bishop Cotton Women's Christian College, Bangalore for seven years and have been working in the present institution for the past three years. I have conducted English Language learning workshops and enjoy creative writings which have been published in a few online portals. Working with the youth provides learning opportunities and I find plenty of this as the Student Welfare Officer of the institution. I have published a few articles in literary journals.

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I joined the teaching profession in the year 1984 and have been engaged in teaching English as a Language and English Literature. Soft Skills and Spoken English is another area of interest. Drama to me is a means of interacting with the students as well as the community. I have completed my M.Phil and am presently working on my doctoral programme, registered under Dravidian University, Kuppam. I have published a few articles and papers related to research in literary journals.