



TEACHER AUTONOMY - MEANING, NEED AND PROBLEMS IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

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Abstract

Autonomy' refers to the condition or situation of being free from any external control and the power to take decisions for one's own interests. Out of the several kinds of autonomy and the variation of its meaning and interpretation evident in the related literature, discussed in detail, the focus of the paper is on teacher autonomy that refers to the ability of the teachers to take decisions pertaining to teaching and learning. Teacher autonomy is the professional autonomy of teachers that endows them to decide and plan the curriculum i.e. the course, syllabus, methods, books and study material, evaluation procedures etc for their students and do what they think is the best for them without any external or administrative interference. It necessitates trust on the capabilities of teachers in understanding the real problems of students since it is only them who have consistent and close interaction with the students and have specialised training into teaching, which many policymakers and administrators often lack and unfortunately seem disconnected with the ground reality. Teacher autonomy also refers to the freedom of teachers in conducting research to solve immediate problems of classrooms (action research) and publish the results and also feel free to share their experiences to all stakeholders. Autonomy has been also often been linked to creativity by many educationists who say that teaching is an art and what is art without having to innovate and act freely without constraints of any kind? Many researches, as have been discussed in the paper reveal how teacher autonomy is linked with having happier, stress-free and motivated teachers and less number of teacher burnout and drop-outs. Some longitudinal studies discussed in the paper have also reported that teacher autonomy is linked with student achievement and as seen over the years, more autonomous teachers have produced more number of students with higher achievement. Some findings also imply that the countries with less autonomy of teachers have lower levels of student achievement and vice-versa. The discussion of the importance of teacher autonomy with respect to the Indian education system in the paper takes us back to the Vedic system of Gurukuls where the teacher was not only a very respected and trusted upon individual, he was also the utmost and an autonomous authority with no external interference even from the rulers of those times. The paper discusses the barriers to teacher autonomy leading to a rigid, controlled and structured patterns of curriculum planning at all levels and lists the plausible reasons

for less participation of the teachers in academic planning. It also attempts to provide with some solutions for creating a more autonomous environment for teachers such as more collaboration and involvement of teachers with other stakeholders of education in curriculum planning and decision making, and creating better feedback systems, with the hope that they would lead to a more trusting and supportive environment so that teacher autonomy can be protected and cherished in its true sense.

Keywords: **Autonomy**, *Teacher autonomy.*

Autonomy, concept and meaning

‘Autonomy’ refers to the condition or situation of being free from any external control or being responsible for one’s own decisions concerning one’s interests, beliefs, values and well-being. The word autonomy has been derived from the Greek words ‘auto’ meaning ‘self’ and ‘logos’ meaning ‘rule’ implying self-rule or self-regulation for any person. According to Deci & Ryan (1985); Erpelding (1999); Jones (2000) & Wilson (1993), autonomy is an innate need and refers to having a sense of one’s own identity. (Bernard . 1995). Not only are several interpretations and applications of autonomy in the related literature, there appear several classifications such as professional autonomy, personal autonomy, academic autonomy (Teacher and Learner autonomy), perceived autonomy, moral autonomy, individual autonomy etc of the same. It can hence be deduced that the experts and educationists from various backgrounds have not only viewed autonomy differently, their use of the term autonomy pertains to their subject domains, perhaps leading to the visible variation in its meaning and application. For example, psychologists such as Piaget and Eric Erickson have talked of autonomy in the context of a child achieving greater autonomy (morally, physically and physiologically) at every stage of development, the academicians talk of two types of autonomy namely teacher and learner autonomy to be the essential components of education system and philosophers like Kant talk of moral, individual or personal autonomy with greater emphasis on liberty, freedom and rights of the individuals and their social context in general.

This leads us to think ‘Who is an autonomous person?’ The answer to this question requires a look into our context, intent and applications. Wall (2003) clarifies that “if a person can chart his own course of life, he/she is an autonomous person.” A classification has been provided by Littlewood (1999) who says autonomy is either Pro-active (when one has full control over the direction, control and activities of any process) and Reactive autonomy (when only the direction is pre-determined for us and we only freely decide the methods for achieving our goals while moving in that direction). As people concerned with Education, we find this classification more related to education than other professions, However, the fact that



autonomy is essential for growth in any profession remains. Autonomy has often been linked with terms such as ‘accountability’, ‘empowerment’, responsibility ‘independence’ and in some places, these terms have been interchangeably used. While autonomy in general refers to the freedom from any external control as discussed earlier, sense, it doesn’t imply pursuing one’s own whims and fancies, as the moral, ethical and legal aspects have always to be considered by all, be it any profession or activity. Another term that is said to have a strong link with autonomy is ‘Accountability’. Accountability refers to being responsible for one’s own decisions, actions and behaviors and being answerable to the consequences of the same (Gonzalez 1989) and a lack of which is said to lead to organizational chaos, ambiguity and inefficiencies. (Mankins, M & Garton, E. (2017). Greater autonomy provisions are said to demand in for greater accountability measures (Bansal, P). Thus wherever we talk of autonomy in a profession such as teaching, it becomes essential to also have accountability procedures to keep a check and prevent any misuse of autonomy.

Yet another term with relation to autonomy is ‘Empowerment’. Autonomy is said to be a requisite for empowerment (Short & Rinehart (1992); Klecker & Loadman (1996) say in this regard that out of the many aspects of empowerment, autonomy remains the most crucial part. We can infer from the definitions and meanings, that an empowered professional has to be autonomous, has to have freedom or power to take decisions in his interests or for his professional growth and this can be the reason why we see that all the theories that talk about empowerment of individuals in society never skip a discussion about the very concept of autonomy in the first place.

Teacher Autonomy:

Teacher autonomy refers particularly to the academic freedom of teachers with respect to their power in taking decisions about teaching and learning processes and planning the goals, content, methods and study materials in order to improve the academic achievement of students. It also includes the freedom to pursue research and publish their work, without any administrative or external interference. It requires the administrators and policymakers to trust the teachers and their capabilities to let them do what they think is the best for their students. A teacher has multiple roles to play and one such has been quite often compared to an artist and teaching to an art, thus calling for creativity and innovation on the part of the teachers. Such demands of creativity can be catered to only in an environment of autonomy so that the teacher can experiment, reflect and develop specialized teaching/lesson or unit plans according to the diverse needs of a classroom, something which most policymakers and administrative

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people, often disconnected with the ground reality and often with less real school teaching experience are incapable of doing in comparison to a regular teacher. As a part of the processes of curriculum planning and any activity related to the achievement or development of students the teachers teach is what can be considered as an essential element of teacher autonomy.

Importance of Teacher Autonomy:

As discussed earlier, teacher autonomy is crucial for a democratic and a trusting environment (Badrinath (2011)), specially for teachers to think, plan and act freely and make full use of their capacities as leaders. The teachers can make the best use of the resources only when they are free to do so, and not bound in the chains of rules, plans and rigid structure for everything. A controlling environment for teachers with pre-determined procedures and fixed standardized plans for everything curbs the motivation of the teachers (Kelly, A(2009)) and also leads to more stress and teacher burnout (Huggins , A.(2012)). Nevertheless, good teachers can never be retained in schools with controlling environments that threaten their academic freedom and lack trust and support for them.(Dale , A.(2012)).

Time and again, educationists have pointed out that for factors such as leadership, productivity (achievement), creativity etc , autonomy is essentially required and that autonomy also ensures a long term quality education for the students.(Kelly, A).

Another very important aspect in this regard has been brought into focus by Lamb and Terry in their book 'Learner and Teacher Autonomy , Concepts, realities and Responses' , where they describe the relationship between teacher and learner autonomy concluding that teacher autonomy (which they say is a 'Process') as a pre-requisite for learner autonomy (which according to them is a 'Product') . They say that autonomous learners (something that has been a focus of most constructivists and educationists emphasizing on theories of discovery learning etc since years) can grow only if they have autonomous teachers to teach them. Thus it can be inferred that the ultimate benefit of teacher autonomy reaches the learners and reflects in terms of their academic achievements. No doubt, several studies like the one by Bedard , M. (2015) reveal a positive correlation between teacher autonomy and student academic achievement. They report that countries like Turkey and Greece that have less teacher autonomy have less student achievement whereas countries like Japan, Hongkong, Thailand , UK have more autonomy for teachers and also high student achievement, as studied longitudinally over the years, hence indicating a strong relationship between the two factors.

Barriers to teacher autonomy:

- **Pre-determined curriculum:** The need to adhere to a curriculum set by others is not a new trend and is a practice common almost all across the world. A standardized



curriculum with a pre-defined structure limits the teacher's scope to experiment in terms of choosing the content, text books, activities etc and thus leads to a monotonous and repetitive way of teaching in classroom, year after year, with no changes and no room for accommodating the teacher-felt modifications required to meet the diverse needs of a classroom. A teacher often feels like a robot merely to act as a remote in the hands of the administrators.

- **Lack of participation of teachers in curriculum planning:** Not involving the teachers in the process of curriculum planning is a clear indication of not trusting their potentials and also ignoring the importance of the richness of their direct experience with students for whom the curriculum is actually about. With growing emphasis on the all-round development of students beyond the academics, as envisaged in NCF 2005 as well as 2009, it becomes important to allow for the suggestions, feedback and opinions of teachers to acquaint the policymakers and curriculum designers with various issues, problems and concerns regarding the curriculum. Without any systems of feedback, these issues and problems fail to reach the policymakers and the result can be seen as the repetition of the same curriculum with same flaws year after year.
- **Top-down administrative structure:** A top-down administrative structure with well-defined powers and functions at each level curbs the power of teachers to take major decisions pertaining to student learning and also to take quick actions when required, as immense paperwork for every little thing and a ton of formalities with needs to have an extreme organized, structure with no flexibility lead to restrictions on teacher autonomy and unnecessary delays in the smooth functioning of classroom activities. With the teachers having to run constantly to authorities for getting every single thing approved by them before implementing them, is not only frustrating and time taking, but also at times demotivates the teachers to do anything innovative ultimately leading to hopelessly resort to sticking to the old ways of following orders (to avoid trouble) and repeat robotically the same curriculum every year as told to them.
- **Lack of teacher support systems/trusting environment(Deficit model):** Inadequate support systems for teachers, especially for the novice teachers and a lack of an environment conducive to their well-being and happiness leading to stress and burnout in teachers can be detrimental to teacher autonomy as well. The lack of trust bestowed upon the teachers to decide the best for their students leads to encouragement of adherence to a prescribed and rigid curriculum for teachers. The fear of failure, of not being able to meet

the expectations of the administrators can be the reasons why teachers choose not to take their own decisions , ironically curbing their own autonomy.

- **Pressures of syllabus:** The need to finish a structured syllabus provided to the teacher by the school authorities in a specified time period, and with some schools even deciding the time to be allotted by teacher for every activity and lessons, is a clear threat to the academic autonomy, creativity and leadership skills of the teachers , as it shifts the focus of the teachers to completing the syllabus rather than ensuring better learning for students and also kills their motivation to teach effectively.
- **Parental interference:** In schools where parent's opinions are given more importance than the teachers , teacher autonomy suffers a setback as they are required to teach and act exactly according to the way the parents want , despite of the fact that teachers have specialized training in educating their children and most parents don't. Interference of parents into the teaching styles and ways of teaching curbs teacher creativity, especially if it all this is backed by the administration and the authorities.
- **Administrative interference:** One of the main reasons for curbing the autonomy of the teachers is administrative interference at all levels of teaching and deciding everything for them such as content, methods, evaluation procedures etc. While the teachers have no say in the decision making into various matters in their schools, this reduces the teacher to the status of a puppet in the hands of the administration. Seeking for administrative approval for the trivial reasons is frustrating and time consuming for the teachers.
- **Lack of feedback:** A lack of well-defined procedures for collecting feedback from teachers after the implementation of curriculum in a session and hearing from them about their problems, failures, successes, and experiences is a clear indication of the lack of teacher autonomy. Also, not many teachers are allowed or encouraged to conduct action researches and publish their research work or voice their opinions and sometimes they are so overburdened, that finding time for that gets difficult for them.

Indian schools and teacher autonomy: The concept of autonomy of teachers is not alien to the Indian Education system. Going back to the Gurukul system of education in the Vedic period, reminds of the centrality of the 'Guru' or the teacher , who was the utmost authority and had the autonomy to take all decisions about all his students, not just academic but related to all aspects of their lives. The curriculum, teaching methods, values to be imparted etc all were the Guru's prerogative and not even the influential kings (who also trusted them and sent their children in their custody) would interfere in their activities and decisions or even question them. Thus the Gurus were more trusted and respected teachers in the Vedic period



than what we witness as teachers today. The conditions in our Indian schools are much different now. Prescription of a rigid, structured curriculum for teachers, lack of autonomy in curriculum planning leading to a lack of trust on a teacher's capabilities and constant interference by administrators, parents etc. has led to the infringement in the space needed by teachers to teach creatively and freely and has also led to the appreciation of fixed patterns for everything academic in the name of systematic ways of working. The rigid administrative hierarchy, the controlling attitude of the authorities, central planning of curriculum are the biggest enemies of teacher autonomy in our country. (Badrinath (2011)). Thus it becomes important that more autonomy be given to the teachers in Indian schools so that we have an environment of democracy in schools. Also, what we teach eventually percolates down to the level of the students and hence the students learn to appreciate democracy, equality and respect for teachers. (Sarangapani, (2000)).

Suggestions for fostering /protecting teacher autonomy:

- **Collaboration:** In order to have a more democratic environment on schools, for all stakeholders, it is important to ensure equal participation of all in all the processes and work in collaboration. In the words of Smith and Mac Gregor , 'Collaboration is a way of searching for solutions of a problem together'. Thus, involving teachers along with other stakeholders at various stages of curriculum planning would lead to a more sharing and engaging environment with everyone feeling more informed and confident. The cooperative way of working in groups or teams will let the teachers autonomously express their views and construct knowledge. Strategies such as peer coaching and mentoring can also be implemented to bring about this kind of collaboration with teachers. Research indicates that teachers feel more empowered and secure when they work in collaboration.
- **Shared goal setting:** It is a common phenomenon to have pre-determined and clearly stated goals and objectives and an expectation to meet them the way prescribed by the various curriculum frameworks and administration, but without the involvement of teachers, the goals often remain unrealizable and impractical. For example, if a text requires the students to be able to understand Indian values, and a teacher sees that the students have problems comprehending language, the immediate goal of the teacher should be to improve comprehension of students and not exactly as what has been prescribed for them. This flexibility of setting and fulfilling need based goals can be achieved only when these are decided in collaboration with the teachers at all levels and are situational and contextual. The teacher should have autonomy to do so.

- **Increased powers of teachers:** Since power has a direct relationship with autonomy and as has been already discussed in the earlier section of this paper, more autonomy certainly empowers the teacher to take academic decisions, and voice his/her opinions on crucial matters. A powerful teacher doesn't mean a dictator who imposes her own choices on the students, but a leader who does what is the best for the students.
- **Trusting environment /support system for teachers:** Support for teachers to ensure that they are stress free and not overloaded with workload, having counseling cells for teachers, having recreational centers for teachers and opportunities for pursuing of leisure activities would ensure that teachers enjoy coming to their workplace and feel supported.
- **Feedback:** To ensure teacher autonomy and also high quality teaching, having proper format for feedback from all the teachers is very necessary to understand the real problems and issues related to teaching. ICT can be made use of for this purpose and several applications and soft wares can be easily developed to collect feedback from teachers and also stored in a database for future references. Also, equally important is to monitor the feedback and act on it.
- **Expression, publication for teachers (voicing opinions):** A teacher has the right to express his/her feelings, concerns, problems and share experiences with other colleagues and also to conduct action research, whenever required and share the results with other teachers. Enough space in terms of time and resources should be provided to teachers to pursue and publish their research work. Research by teachers can provide very valuable data from the grassroots, that can be very useful for the policy makers. Teacher-organized meetings, conferences should also be conducted to provide a platform for such activities.

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