

Everybody Has Their Own Image: Teacher Autonomy of the University Teachers

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Abstract: Teacher autonomy is defined as teachers' freedom to make their own decisions about the curriculum, their professional development, and their participation in the administrative decision-making processes. The term teacher autonomy is commonly discussed in the context of primary and secondary schools. However, it is also important to understand how faculty members perceive and experience their teacher autonomy to empower them professionally. As a result, the aim of this research is to understand how the university teachers define and experience teacher autonomy. The data of this basic qualitative research were collected through an open-ended survey and semi-structured interviews. The survey data were collected from nine participants and the interview data were collected from four participants. The data were analysed with thematic analysis. The results showed that teacher autonomy means being free to make decisions, taking responsibility, freedom and having the trust in the professionalism of a university teacher. The participants feel autonomous in all three dimensions of teacher autonomy. The approach of the management, collaboration, and professional development foster their teacher autonomy while work schedule, accreditation and inexperience limit their teacher autonomy as university teachers.

Keywords: teacher autonomy, curricular autonomy, professional development, adult education

Introduction

Teacher autonomy is a broad term which has been discussed in many different contexts. During the past decades, different researchers focused on different components or dimension of teacher autonomy. As a result, the research has changed what teacher autonomy means or should mean. L.C. Pearson & B.W. Hall (1993) define teacher autonomy as the teacher's ability to control themselves and their work environment. I.A. Friedman (1999) describes teacher autonomy as the teacher's power to make decisions about the teaching process, and to feel free to participate in the administrative decision-making processes. On the other hand, E.M. Skaalvik & S. Skaalvik (2014) define autonomy as the teacher's freedom to determine their goals, teaching methods and strategies in line with their own educational beliefs and values. Likewise, A. Grant et al. (2020) define teacher autonomy as the degree of freedom, independence, and power a teacher has over the curriculum, teaching, assessment, school practices and professional development. On the other hand, in higher education level, autonomy is generally discussed with the term academic freedom which can be described as freedom in terms of teaching practices as well as the freedom of universities to conduct research and publish the results (UNESCO, 1997). Based on these definitions, teacher autonomy can be described as the teacher's freedom to make curricular decisions, to have a voice in administrative decision-making processes, and to make decisions about their professional development.

Besides the variety of definitions of teacher autonomy, there are also different classifications of teacher autonomy. One of these classifications was presented by P.C. Pearson & B.W. Hall (1993) who discuss teacher autonomy in two dimensions: general autonomy and curricular autonomy. I.A. Friedman (1999) explains teacher autonomy in six domains which are "establishing school identity and praxis, teaching and achievement evaluation, parental involvement, staff development, teaching extracurricular subjects, and curriculum change and development. R. Smith & S. Erdogan (2008) classify teacher autonomy as professional action and professional development. On the other hand, I.H. Öztürk (2011) discusses teacher autonomy in three domains which are "planning and implementation of teaching, participation of teachers in important decisions about education and school management, development of professional knowledge and competence of teachers". J. Ulas & M. Aksu (2015), who developed a teacher autonomy scale for Turkish teachers, state there are three dimensions of teacher autonomy which are "autonomy in instructional planning and implementation, autonomy in professional development, and autonomy in determining the framework of the curriculum".

The literature shows that teachers who have higher levels of autonomy encourage learner autonomy, they are open to help students, and solve problems (Little, 1995; Han, 2020). In addition, autonomous teachers are more eager to have responsibility and control over the teaching practices. Autonomous teachers are also more willing to improve themselves professionally (Lamb, 2000). O.A. Gavriluk et al. (2015) argue that teacher autonomy in higher education contributes to the autonomy of the institution they work for, it also contributes to the development of more democratic and more innovative education systems. When teachers have higher levels of teacher autonomy, they can be empowered professionally. They must be empowered by giving chances to make decisions in classroom level and state level as this will contribute to their self-confidence, self-efficacy, and sense of professionalism.

The studies on autonomy in the literature are concentrated at the primary and secondary education while the studies carried out at the higher education level are very limited. It can be said that the reason for this is that university teachers are independent of any authority due to the autonomous structure of universities (Fin, 2020). However, there are a few studies on teacher autonomy of university teachers that highlight their role as teachers. For example, M. Yasué et al. (2019) found that university teachers feel the pressure of publishing which negatively affects their teacher autonomy. T. Yıldırım (2017) found that instructors of English had low levels of autonomy, and administrators believed instructors should not be autonomous in terms of evaluation and institutional activities. In addition, rules and regulations, the lack of curricular flexibility and knowledge of methodology were found to be factors that negatively affect their teacher autonomy. A.S.Bilgili (2016), on the other hand, argue that curriculum development is a dimension of academic freedom and university teachers should have autonomy to decide the courses that will be taught, the assessment methods and graduation criteria.

K.R. Menezes & M.R.C.G. Novaes (2019) state that university teachers define autonomy as the capacity to act in a way that balances the values of the institution and the needs that arise in the learning-teaching process. As teacher autonomy is related to teaching practices, professional development, and participation in administrative decision-making process, it can be said that it is crucial for university teachers to be autonomous to teach effectively, develop themselves professionally, and improve the quality of their institution. Therefore, understanding teacher autonomy in higher education is considered to be important since the results of the study can contribute to competencies of the university teachers and improve their teaching programs. The aim of this research is to understand how the university teachers define and experience teacher autonomy. Four questions that were formed to answer in the research are: 1) How do the university teachers define teacher autonomy?, 2) How do the university teachers explain their teacher autonomy in terms of administrative decision-making process, professional development, and the curriculum?, 3) What are the factors that foster teacher autonomy based on their experiences?, 4) What are the factors that limit teacher autonomy based on their experiences?

Methodology

This study was designed as basic qualitative research which focuses on “understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (Merriam, 2009, 13). Since this research aims to understand teacher autonomy from the participants’ point of view, the most appropriate design was considered to be basic qualitative research.

Participants: The participants are the university teachers who work at an institute of a university in Prague, the Czech Republic. The survey data were collected from nine university teachers while the interview data were collected from four university teachers. The survey participants have teaching experience at university level ranging from three to thirty-five years while the interview participants’ experience ranges from three to twelve years. All the participants have a doctoral degree. Two survey participants and one interview participant have a managerial position. In the article, the survey participants are referred as participants (e.g. Participant 1, Participant 2) while the interview participants are referred by nicknames.

Materials and measures: The data were collected through an open-ended survey and semi-structured interviews. Open-ended surveys are generally used in small study groups when the participants are expected to share their opinions freely and in detail (Bell, 2005). As a result, open-ended survey, which was prepared based on the literature by the researchers, was used in order to collect detailed data. The

survey consists of three likert-type questions about the participants' perceived level of autonomy in the three dimensions of teacher autonomy. The twelve open-ended questions are about how much freedom they have in terms of the dimensions of teacher autonomy and factors affecting their teacher autonomy. After the survey, semi-structured interviews were conducted as they help the researcher to collect detailed data about the opinions, knowledge, and feelings of the participants (Creswell, 1994). The semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand the procedures for administrative decision-making, curriculum development and professional development activities in the institute to develop an in-depth understanding about how they experience teacher autonomy in their own context. The interviews also gave the researchers a chance to clarify some of the participants' answers in the survey and to collect in-depth data through their personal stories, opinions, and feelings. The thirteen interview questions were prepared by the researchers based on the literature and the answers of the survey participants.

Procedure: The survey data were collected online between 4th-31st August 2022. The interviews were conducted between 5th-8th September 2022 by the first author of this study. Both in the survey and the interview, the participation was voluntary and anonymous. Two researchers of the study analysed the data thematically. To make the quantitative findings reader-friendly, the results of the 5-point likert questions were presented in five categories: not autonomous (1), somewhat autonomous (2), autonomous (3), very autonomous (4), and completely autonomous (5).

Results and Discussions

The definitions of Teacher Autonomy

In the survey, the participants were asked how they define teacher autonomy as a university teacher. The categories that emerged from the analysis are *being free to make decisions, freedom, confidence, censorship and taking responsibility*.

Four participants said teacher autonomy is being free to make decisions. For example, one of them draws attention to being free to make their own decisions and plans related to their job. However, they also highlight the importance of taking the rules of the institution into consideration. They express their opinion by saying: "I perceive my autonomy in the way that I am free to make decisions, plan, etc. within my profession, but with regard to the rules of the university/faculty/department - these need to be respected. In the event that I do not identify with them, I at least have the opportunity to talk about it with the relevant bosses/colleagues and be aware that either there will be a change or not." (Participant 1). Iida (2009) suggests that teacher autonomy should not mean isolation or being free from school policies, educational policies of the government. The teacher autonomy should be developed within the framework of the policies, the curriculum, and the students' needs.

One of the participants defined teacher autonomy as "autonomy in the field of pedagogical work, defining and implementing the content and program of teaching." (Participant 3). Another participant defined teacher autonomy as "having the possibility to manage the time for the preparation of the teaching and how it will look independently, having the possibility to decide on the form of the content of the courses, which I guarantee." (Participant 6). One participant also defined teacher autonomy as being free to be creative in teaching. These definitions show that the university teachers define teacher autonomy as being free from control and making their own decisions about their teaching. These findings are in line with the findings of Ramos (2006).

Two participants described teacher autonomy as having freedom. One of them highlighted having freedom in content, teaching, and professional development while the other stressed having "freedom in the preparation and implementation of teaching" (Participant 8). One participant defined teacher autonomy as "confidence in the professionalism of a university teacher." (Participant 4) while another participant described teacher autonomy as being free from the control of authority by stating "absence of censorship" (Participant 5). Another participant defined teacher autonomy as taking responsibility by stating "It primarily means professional and personal responsibility for me." (Participant 9).

During the interviews the participants were asked about the characteristics of an autonomous teacher. Petra said an autonomous teacher is someone who wants to improve themselves while Alena said an autonomous teacher can choose their methods of teaching, forms of examination by themselves. She also said an autonomous teacher has the responsibility to choose how they want to teach. Jakub said an

autonomous teacher is someone who feels free to make decisions. However, he stated an autonomous teacher is not completely free, they should also respect the rules and requirements of the institution.

Experienced Teacher Autonomy

The level of teacher autonomy that the participants experience in their institution in terms of the three dimensions of teacher autonomy are presented in this section.

Teacher Autonomy in Administrative Decision-making Process

In the survey, the participants were asked to rate their level of autonomy in terms of participating the decision-making process such as budget planning, class timetable, student selection, rules, and regulations in their institution. Then, they were asked to explain the reasons for the rate they have chosen for their level of autonomy. The quantitative data show that one participant perceives themselves completely autonomous in terms of their participation in the administrative decision-making process because they can express their opinion on everything in the institution. One survey participant rated their teacher autonomy in terms of decision-making process as very autonomous especially due to their managerial position in the institution. The findings of J.U.Wilches (2007) support this research as they suggest that teacher autonomy in decision-making highly depends on their position at work, and school directors have higher levels of autonomy in decision-making process. During the interview, Jakub, who has a managerial position, stated that there are times he does not feel very autonomous in the meetings held with the higher authorities because sometimes politics and diplomacy limit him to share his opinion.

In the survey, six participants rated their level of autonomy as autonomous in terms of participating the decision-making process. One participant said they will not influence the decisions much because they do not have a managerial position while one participant said administrative decisions are made by the management, but they have the freedom to explain their opinions. Another participant said they are autonomous “within the framework of established rules and regulations” (Participant 3). Two participants highlighted the importance of cooperation with the management. Likewise, J. Hunzicker (2011) found that when teachers are given the space to participate in decision-making process, it creates trust among them, and they are more eager to improve themselves professionally.

In the interviews, the participants were asked about the factors that affect their autonomy in terms of the decision-making process. Communication, cooperation, positive atmosphere, and positive messages from the management foster teacher autonomy while publication pressure limits it.

Four of the participants said communication among the employees is an important factor that contributes to their autonomy. For example, Petra said they know each other well, they spend time outside, they are close and open, so these help her to share her opinions freely. Alena stressed that the management gives the employees the space to make their own decisions and they care about the satisfaction of the employees. Likewise, Jakub, who is in the management, stated that they discuss ideas with the colleagues, and they take the requirements and recommendations of the colleagues into consideration.

Michal said the cooperation among the colleagues in the institute contributes to his autonomy. He also stated that they receive positive emails and phone calls about their work which helps him to feel free to share his opinions. Likewise, N.M.Garvin (2007) found that the cooperation among the teachers was a factor that supports teacher autonomy. In addition, Alena said the positive atmosphere in their workplace is a contributing factor to her autonomy because they could share opinions and solve the problems easily. In his research, A.Tadić (2015) found out that teachers feel free to express their opinions about decision-making process when there is a positive atmosphere at work. Two participants stated the publication requirement is a limiting factor to their autonomy because they feel pressured. For example, Alena said the pressure for publications from the higher authorities interfere with the teaching activities.

Teacher Autonomy in Professional Development

In the survey, the participants were asked to rate their level of autonomy in terms of their professional development. They were also asked to explain their reasons for the rate they have chosen for their level of autonomy in professional development. Five participants rated their level of teacher autonomy in terms of professional development as completely autonomous. Three participants rated their level of

autonomy as very autonomous. One of them said they can decide on the professional development activities they want to attend. On the other hand, they stated “I have to be in line with the development of the workplace and its needs” (Participant 6). One of the participants rated their level of autonomy as autonomous. They explained the importance of being autonomous in professional development by stating “Autonomy is the basis of the professional development of academic staff” (Participant 8).

During the interviews, the participants were also asked about the factors that affect their teacher autonomy in terms of professional development. Management support and positive atmosphere were found to foster teacher autonomy in terms of professional development while time and financial resources limit it.

Three of the interview participants said the support of the management is an important factor that fosters their teacher autonomy. For example, Alena said the management was very supportive during her PhD and she did not have any problems with taking the classes and work in the institute at the same time. During the interview, Jakub also said the management of the institute supports the professional development of the teachers. Michal stated the positive atmosphere among the colleagues contributes to his professional development because they attend trainings together and he does not feel any pressure.

During the interviews, three participants said time is a factor that limits their professional development. For example, Michal said because of his workload, sometimes he does not have enough time for professional development. In addition, Jakub said sometimes financial resources are a limit for professional development as the institution cannot always support them financially due to the lack of financial resources. In line with this research, P.B. Kadel (2020) found that the university did not support the teachers financially; as a result, teachers were not able to attend professional development activities.

Teacher Autonomy in the Curriculum

In the survey, the participants were asked to rate their level of autonomy in terms of curriculum. Then, they were asked to explain their reasons for the rate they have chosen for their level of autonomy. Three participants rated their level of teacher autonomy in terms of the curriculum as completely autonomous. For example, one participant said, “In terms of curriculum development, I am completely autonomous and have the opportunity to express myself, propose, support, contradict everything related to it, discuss with my colleagues, find meaningful solutions” (Participant 1). Two participants rated their curricular autonomy as very autonomous while four participants rated themselves as autonomous. Two of them said they are autonomous within the framework of accreditation. Another participant said the curriculum is developed in cooperation, they said “When creating the curriculum, cooperation with the team of colleagues is necessary, it is not a completely independent activity” (Participant 9). The findings show that the participants have autonomy in terms of the curriculum. In his research, P.A. Marshall (2019) found that the university teachers had a high level of curricular autonomy regardless of their position.

In terms of determining goals and learning objectives, four participants said the accreditation gives them a framework and they can make individual decisions around the framework. In terms of the content, four participants said they make their decisions around the accreditation framework, too. Another participant stated they make their decisions about the learning objectives and the content by taking professionalism, labour market and the student need into consideration. They stated, “I am really allowed to make my own decisions in this respect, of course with regard to professionalism, expertise, quality, labour market requirements, needs of the students and society etc” (Participant 1).

In terms of the teaching-learning process, two participants said it depends on the approach of the teacher while two participants said they think about the needs of the students. In terms of assessment and evaluation, two participants said they make their independent decisions by following the rules and regulations of the university. During the interview, Petra shared a similar opinion by saying “There’s a regulation, I know that this course is finished by exam but if it’s an oral exam or just a test or quiz or something it’s up to me” (Interview 2). She also said the examination rules of the institution are not a limit to her autonomy because she can choose her assessment techniques freely.

During the interviews, the participants were asked about the factors that affect their teacher autonomy in terms of the curriculum. Collaboration and management support are factors that foster teacher autonomy in terms of the curriculum while teacher competency and accreditation are factors limiting it.

Four interview participants said the collaboration among the colleagues is important. For example, Petra said they talk about the teaching activities they do in their classes. Alena said they collaborate to develop the curriculum so that students can reach the competencies of the program. Likewise, Jakub said “There is a collaboration based on discussions usually, but you are the specialist of your course so you are let's say the developer, but you can be influenced or advised by the colleagues... to be honest as for the pedagogy I, I cannot know everything, but I have my colleagues and we discuss what's needed and advise the colleagues as a team for example” (Interview 4).

Two participants said the support of the management is a factor that fosters their teacher autonomy in terms of curriculum. For example, Jakub said he has the trust of the management by stating, “I am given the responsibility and I am given the trust by the management of the university and of course if needed we discuss the matters during the sessions of the management of the university” (Interview 4). Likewise, Michal stated he can discuss ideas with the management by saying, “...they know my, it's my it's my presentation that's my image” (Interview 1). Based on these, it can be said that the positive communication between the teachers and management increase teachers' autonomy in the curriculum.

In the interview, Alena said the teacher competency is an important factor that limit her teacher autonomy by giving a personal experience. To be the guarantor of a course, the accreditation office requires having a PhD. When she started working in the institution, she did not have a PhD, but she was the only teacher with thirteen years of experience. However, her experience was less important than having a degree. Likewise, M.Yavuz (2016) states that teacher autonomy and teacher competency are intertwined. The level of autonomy increases as the level of teacher competency increases. Another limiting factor that the participants mentioned is the accreditation. However, they also said it is necessary. For example, Petra said the curriculum was done before she started working in the institute, so she followed what she was given by the accreditation. However, she said she is not bothered by the situation. Jakub, on the other hand, said he feels happy to follow the rules because he is given the space to make changes. He also said accreditation is important to create an order and prevent chaos.

Factors that foster teacher autonomy

Both in the survey and in the interviews, the participants were asked about the factors that foster their teacher autonomy. The factors that emerged from the data analysis are *management support*, *collaboration*, and *professional development*.

Five survey participants and two interview participants said management support is a factor that promotes their teacher autonomy. For example, one survey participant and two interview participants said the trust from the management that they are doing their job well is a factor that fosters their teacher autonomy. Two survey participants and one interview participants said collaboration among colleagues is a factor that fosters their teacher autonomy. Another survey participant said what fosters their teacher autonomy is “openness in communication with colleagues and mutual support and help also within the framework of teaching and preparation for it” (Participant 6). Two survey participants and one interview participant said professional development is a factor that fosters their teacher autonomy. For example, two survey participants said further education, learning new things and professional development increase their teacher autonomy.

Factors that limit teacher autonomy

Both in the survey and in the interviews, the participants were asked about the factors that limit their teacher autonomy. The factors that emerged from the data analysis are *work schedule*, *accreditation*, and *inexperience*.

Two survey participants said their work schedule is sometimes a factor that limits their teacher autonomy. For example, one of them said because of the work schedule, they cannot organize everything related to teaching as the way they want. Likewise, Yasué et al. (2019) found teaching load of the university teachers decreases their autonomy. Another participant said they need to respect the need of all colleagues, so their work schedule is not always satisfactory, and this is a factor that limits their teacher autonomy. One survey participant said accreditation is a limiting factor for the content of the teaching. In the interview, Michal said the teacher with less experience feel less autonomous.

Conclusions

For the university teachers in this research, teacher autonomy means being free to make their own decisions related to teaching. Teacher autonomy also means taking responsibility, being free from the control of the authority, and having the trust in the professionalism of a university teacher. The participants describe an autonomous teacher as someone who is open to improve themselves, who has the responsibility of their own teaching practices, who is free to make decisions by respecting rules, and who is open to help their students and colleagues.

The participants feel free to share their opinions and participate in the administrative decision-making processes. The cooperation between the management and the academic staff is an important factor that support their teacher autonomy in terms of their participation in the administrative decision-making process. Communication among the employees, the positive atmosphere, and the positive messages from the management are the factors that encourage them to participate in the decision-making process. On the other hand, the publication is a factor that limits their autonomy. The participants feel free to make their own decisions about their professional development. The support from the management and the positive atmosphere in the institute foster their teacher autonomy. Not having enough time and financial resources is a limit to their professional development.

The participants feel free to make their decisions about the curriculum. However, they make their decisions around the accreditation framework. The cooperation among the colleagues and the support from the management are factors that foster their teacher autonomy. Not having the competencies that the accreditation office requires and the accreditation itself are factors that limit their autonomy. The support from the management, collaboration, and professional development foster teacher autonomy of the university teachers. On the other hand, work schedule, accreditation, and inexperience limit their teacher autonomy.

Further research with a broader research sample from different universities would be beneficial to understand teacher autonomy of university teachers in depth. The role of the management approach is a key factor to teacher autonomy and further research can be done to find out what managers do and should do to foster teacher autonomy of university teachers.

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