

A STUDY OF THE AUTONOMY OF SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS IN CURRICULUM PLANNING IN GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS OF DELHI

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Autonomy is the freedom to make decisions and being free from any external control or interference. When we talk about the autonomy of the teachers in schools we mean their freedom to take decisions related to the designing and planning of curriculum, choosing the most appropriate methods to transact the curriculum and other important aspects of teaching and learning which are strongly related to the achievement of students. The present paper attempts to study the perceptions of the school teachers working at the TGT level in government schools of Delhi in terms of their autonomy in curriculum planning and to know the level of decision making and collaboration they have in the same. A total of 46 teachers teaching in senior secondary and secondary government schools of Delhi were interviewed. The teachers reported that the only aspect where they feel a bit autonomous is curriculum transaction and not curriculum planning as they are apparently free to decide 'how to teach' (methods of teaching) than 'what to teach' (content). However, the teachers have reported that there is no formal procedure for collaboration with the policymakers or authorities to contribute to the process of curriculum planning and designing. Thus, a clear lack and want of autonomy could be inferred by the researchers after interviewing the teachers in government schools covered in this research study.

KEYWORDS: Autonomy, Secondary School Teachers, Curriculum Planning, Decision Making, Collaboration Teachers

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INTRODUCTION

Autonomy refers to the state of an individual to be free from any external control or interference and the right to take decisions pertaining to the interests of one. Autonomy has been interpreted differently by different educationists, and hence the variations in its definition and interpretations are so obvious in the related literature. While psychologists such as Piaget and Erikson relate it to the independence achieved by child physically, psychologically and morally, progressing through various stages of development, philosophers such as Kant have mainly thrown light on what is known as individual or personal autonomy and liberty, that refers to the rights an individual has to make free choices pertaining to anything for his /her well-being, but within limitations of social norms and laws. Some also call this as 'Perceived Autonomy', where the individual is free to make discretionary choices and act on those choices responsibly. (Gonzalez, 1989). 'Academic autonomy', also called as 'Academic Freedom' by some is another kind of autonomy refers to "an individuals right to be free to pursue scholarly profession" (Frinkin, Post & Robert (2009). The stakeholders concerned with academic autonomy include mainly the teachers, researchers, administrators, learners, writers, poets, etc. In short, all those who have participation and a crucial role to play in academics on a consistent basis. In this paper, we talk of the professional autonomy of educators, primarily of the school teachers, considering the important role they play in shaping the future of the learners they teach. Teacher autonomy hence can be considered as the freedom of teachers to take decisions to ensure best ways of learning for their students and high achievement (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Another term that surfaces in the discussion about teacher autonomy is 'Teacher Empowerment', and the two concepts have seen to be often correlated and used interchangeably. Deci and Ryan (1985), Erpelding (1999), Jones (2000) and Wilson (1993) clarify that teacher autonomy is only, but a very important aspect of teacher empowerment, implying the need to trust the teachers and endow them with powers to take academic decisions about students. They also clearly state that teacher autonomy is related to having better standards of learning, a more stress free and healthy work environment for teachers, brings up their motivation and helps them reach learning goals set for the learners faster and more easily. Also, teacher autonomy leads to professional growth (Lamb, Terry, Reindere & Hayo, 2003) and is a requisite for self-awareness, reflection, professional development etc. (Balcikanli, 2009) and making teachers successful leaders for their students (Frinkin, Post and Robert, 2009).

Teachers' autonomy concerns several aspects of school functioning, one major area being curriculum planning that involves the planning activities such as choosing the most appropriate, books, study materials, syllabus for

students, choosing the most suitable methods of teaching, planning the lessons and units, evaluation, deciding the evaluation patterns and procedures, participation in admissions, financial matters of the school etc. In addition to these, teachers autonomy also includes the freedom of teachers to develop materials, conduct researches and publish their own research papers, work in collaboration with the administration and policymakers and also express their concerns, feedback, inputs, suggestions from time to time to the authorities, policymakers and administrators whenever a need for the same is felt.

IMPORTANCE OF TEACHERS' AUTONOMY

Research also indicates that the autonomy of teachers is said to have relationship with many crucial factors such as the psychological well-being of teachers, stress levels, job satisfaction etc (Perie & Baker, 1997). Not only this, the autonomy of teachers in taking decisions about their own students in many studies has been linked with higher student achievements. The curriculum that we receive as teachers has a detailed discussion of what, how and when to teach and a clear reflection of the curbed state of autonomy of teachers to contribute to this process of what, how and when is evident to us specially by prescribing a predetermined curriculum for our students. Kelly (2009) suggests that teachers should have the first say in curriculum planning than the administrators and policymakers, as teachers are the ones who directly and regularly interact with the students they are always in the best position to know their problems, capabilities, and the impact of the successes and failures of various interventions and programs on them etc. He says that the lack of autonomy and less participation in curriculum planning and a requirement to adhere to a prescribed curriculum curbs the enjoyment and job satisfaction of teachers and implies that the authorities and the policymakers have no trust on them, ironically despite of the teachers being specialized and certified into teaching.

The present paper explores the status of autonomy of teachers with respect to curriculum planning in schools. The paper highlights the status of autonomy in areas of curriculum planning in schools by teachers and doesn't include the other areas such as administration, finance, research, etc.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS OF THE STUDY

Following are the research questions of the study:

- What is the status of teachers participation in procedures of curriculum planning for the students in schools at the secondary level?

- How are the teachers' involved in the decision-making with respect to various aspects of curriculum planning for students like goals, methods, materials content and evaluation procedures?
- What is the level of collaboration done with teachers when the curriculum is planned for the students at the secondary stage?

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Following are the objectives of the study:

- To know the status of autonomy of teachers with respect to curriculum planning.
- To know the extent and nature of participation of school teachers in decision making with respect to curriculum planning in schools.
- To know the areas of curriculum planning in which the teachers have and do not have any say.
- To know the nature and level of collaboration done with teachers in curriculum planning.

DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study was limited to only the senior secondary and secondary school teachers teaching in the government schools of Delhi with a teaching experience of at least one year.

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

The review of literature for the present paper was done in four stages:

- i. The concept of autonomy and its importance in the teaching profession
- ii. The concept of curriculum planning
- iii. The parameters of curriculum planning with respect to an Indian classroom.
- iv. The role of teacher autonomy in curriculum planning.

Kelly (2009) highlighted the status of autonomy of teachers in the process of curriculum planning, some reviews to find out the most suitable parameters were done. It was not out of place to include the four objectives of curriculum planning as prescribed by Tyler (1949): objectives, content, subject matter, methods/Procedure and evaluation

National Curriculum Framework (2005) emphasized considering the

conditions, processes and procedures in the Indian schools and to apply the concepts of autonomy in the Indian context, there was a need to review some literature. National Curriculum Framework (2005) was reviewed to understand the main areas of curriculum planning in schools. The main areas of curriculum planning included language, mathematics, science, social science, habitat learning, value education, work education, health and peace education, pedagogy and art education. The separately discussed subjects could be clubbed under the Tyler's category of Content and what it referred to as pedagogy was inferred as to include the methods and procedures.

Huggins (2012) conducted a study employing Self-determination theory or SDT to see the relationship between autonomy in curriculum design and psychological well-being of law students. It was concluded that more autonomy, acknowledgement of feelings, perspectives etc, use of non-controlling language, provision of a meaningful rationale etc lead to higher academic achievement in law students and also maintains their psychological good health. Likewise, Ratnam (2007) discussed the relationship between autonomous teachers and autonomous learners. They say that the several constraints such as crowded class, demands of standardized, rigid syllabus, pressures of the examination system, time constraints etc. are a threat to teacher autonomy.

In their book, Lamb, Reindere and Hayo (2003) explained the relationship between teacher and learner autonomy and discusses that to have autonomous learning, it is essential to have autonomous teachers. While creating autonomous learners is a product (what we aim for through our constructivist theories and learning by doing and discovery learning approaches), teacher autonomy according to the authors is more of a process that brings about the former. Thus, creating environments conducive to autonomy is a must to have autonomous learning as a final product.

Bedard (2015) conducted a study in 65 countries and it was found that in countries like Japan, UK, Thailand and Hongkong where teachers practiced more autonomy, academic achievement was considerably high whereas it was low in countries like Turkey and Greece where autonomy of teachers was restricted. Autonomy of teachers was linked with happiness and better performance. In 2002, Meo talked about the four areas of curriculum planning – goals, materials, methods and assessments and applies the principles of Universal Design Learning (UDL) considering catering to the three universal needs – Autonomy, Competence and Relatedness. It discusses the importance to provide choices, acknowledge perspectives and feelings and provide rationale in case a choice isn't provided to teachers while designing and

transacting the curriculum.

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

The study is Qualitative and Descriptive in nature and the population of the study comprised of all the teachers teaching at the TGT level in government schools of Delhi.

SAMPLE

A total 46 teachers teaching in senior secondary and secondary government schools of Delhi were interviewed for which convenience sampling was adopted for the selection of teachers for interviews. First, permission was sought from the Principals of the government schools where the desired sample was to be drawn from. After obtaining permission from them, the researchers began the process of data collection. The teachers were assured that their identity will be kept confidential. Convenience sampling was adopted for the interviews. On the request of the principals and teachers of the schools included in the sample, the names of the schools and teachers who responded to the tools for the present research have not been revealed and kept confidential.

TOOLS USED

A self-made open-ended interview schedule with 10 items was developed to collect detailed and in-depth data from the teachers after long and detailed discussions and question-answer rounds. Reliability of the interview schedule was found out by calculation of Cronbach alpha that was around 0.64. Furthermore, content validity of the interview schedule was ensured by sending it across to 3 experts in the field of Education.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

1. A majority of teachers interviewed said that suggestions with respect to curriculum planning were never taken from them. A few teachers (senior teachers) said they were only asked about which portions they wanted to add or delete, but this was done only once or twice in a year and was not a formal or a properly structured process. Few teachers also reported that although their suggestions and inputs were only taken and discussed during the workshops and seminars they attended but they were not sure if they were taken seriously or not and one teacher also reported that she could never see them implemented.

2. A large majority of teachers (86.4%) said that the learning goals are pre-determined (both general and specific objectives) and although they keep changing from time to time, their participation with respect to setting them or changing them (according to the need) remained nil.
3. With respect to the freedom to decide the content for the learners, a majority (69.5%) of teachers said that the content was pre-determined and already prescribed by the NCERT and they had no choice but to adhere to it strictly. A lot of teachers reported that they were happy with the requirement to adhere to the NCERT books in teaching as most of the students they teach were from poor backgrounds, hence teaching them anything extra was not possible.
4. Almost all the teachers (99.2%) reported that they had full autonomy to decide the teaching methods for their students and that there was no interference from the administration as far as taking decisions with respect to this was concerned. A few teachers said, there were occasional suggestions from the faculty heads during meetings of the subject teachers, but those suggestions were general and given informally, and was not a frequent affair but done as per the need and issues were mutually discussed occasionally for improvement whenever the need was felt.
5. A majority of teachers (67%) reported that they had full autonomy to develop their own teaching aids and materials and the teachers were also given a sum of Rs.500/- month to develop teaching aids.
6. A large majority (87.3%) of teachers reported that they were more autonomous in curriculum transaction than curriculum planning. A majority of teachers said that despite of being more qualified than the teachers working in the private schools, they felt unfortunate that their opinions and suggestions were not incorporated while planning the curriculum.
7. A majority of teachers (94.3%) felt that the curriculum was not need based. A lot of teachers reported that they did not get to plan the curriculum in accordance to the needs of the students.
8. A majority of teachers (77.6%) reported that they had no role to play as far as engaging in the process of evaluation of the curriculum is concerned. A few teachers said that occasionally their suggestions were taken verbally by the authorities.
9. A majority of teachers (71.2%) reported that the feedback and inputs were very rarely taken from them and only taken during the seminars and workshops etc. and still were not incorporated in the curriculum in the next session.

10. A majority of teachers (65.3%) said they did see collaboration in their schools as the atmosphere was very good within the schools. Most of the teachers reported they often took decisions in collaboration with other teachers and felt free to discuss anything with them as they were approachable and ready to discuss their issues anytime. Very few teachers pointed that collaboration was not seen with the authorities and most of the curriculum was pre-planned and hence there was no interaction with the other authorities or officers and the principals were the only ones they could approach or interact with.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

Teachers Autonomy is just not a philosophical concept but a necessity and an essential need or right of teachers, as has been put by many philosophers in their writings. When autonomy of teachers is threatened by the processes of standardization, rules and regulations and non-involvement of teachers in planning and decision making, it leads to a rigid hierarchical, mechanical structure that is not only largely top-down but also meddles with the efficient, free and innovative ways of teaching of the teachers. As most of the teachers (government school teachers) have reported in this paper, that they have less autonomy when it comes to planning the curriculum they transact year after year and have experienced problems in modifying content or portions of the curriculum they find inappropriate or lacking in something for their requirements to adhere to the prescribed curriculum.

CONCLUSION

It is clear from the above findings that the majority of the teachers have expressed their disappointment on the present state of less autonomy and with their 'almost nil' participation in curriculum planning in schools. A majority of them report that since the content is pre-determined, it is required for them to adhere strictly to NCERT books only and they hardly feel the free to plan or decide curriculum for their own students (who mostly hail from the rural and poor home that are not conducive for studies), thus curriculum appearing to becoming totally irrelevant and unsuitable at times. The teachers say even if they feel something has to or should be added or deleted, nothing can be done as their suggestions are never asked for and if ever asked (informally on platforms such as workshops or conferences), they never see them being incorporated anywhere. The teachers say that the only aspect where they feel a bit autonomous is curriculum transaction and not curriculum planning as they are apparently free to decide 'how to teach' (methods of teaching) than 'what to teach' (content). However, the teachers have reported that there is no formal

procedure for collaboration with the policymakers or authorities to contribute to the process of curriculum planning and designing. Thus, a clear lack and want of autonomy could be inferred by the researchers after interviewing the teachers in government schools covered in this research study.

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