

# Teacher Autonomy: Ensuring Equity and Reinstating Respect

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## ABSTRACT

*This article attempts to provide an account of the impediments that teachers face in the path of creating a teaching-learning atmosphere. It will provide an insight into what teacher autonomy is and the inhibitions that are 'created' or already exist and therefore experienced by a teacher. It analyses the shared principles that should exist on various levels in the educational system and how that can empower teachers in carrying out their her/his responsibilities in the most effective manner.*

**Key words:** Teacher autonomy, teacher freedom, impositions, empowerment

The term autonomy is derived from the Greek word 'autonomos' which literally means self-governing; in the field of education in general, and language education in particular, however, teacher autonomy refers to whether teachers are autonomous and whether they can enable autonomy in their learners. With this link made between teachers and learners, all discussions regarding teacher autonomy automatically gets attached to the end product with the focus staying primarily with students' being able to learn autonomously (Choudhury, 2015). This is a very narrow, outcome based perspective. The problems that teachers face in classrooms, whether, even if they wish to do so, they are able to teach in an autonomous manner and what are the kind of spaces they do have, to exercise such freedom, are issues that are rarely explored.

To understand this better, let us look at an extract from the diary notes of a teacher who wishes to remain anonymous.

*"...I had planned to teach "A Thing of Beauty" by John Keats to my class 12 students and to show a short film to*

*introduce the poem. However, the computer in the classroom malfunctioned. I took the students outside the classroom, into the garden and asked them to look around, observe, and be prepared to talk about what they thought was a thing of beauty. We came back to class, had a lovely discussion and at the end of the class, my students asked me if we could repeat such an activity. I agreed, but I was scolded by my principal, and reprimanded for not planning for such technological failures: what was worse was that the next day, a note was sent to all teachers stating, 'Do not take your students outside the classroom unnecessarily.'"*

This teacher went on to add: "I was taken to task for distracting students and crowding the playgrounds and garden during class hours." Her anguish came through in another statement where she said: "this is something we experience everyday, but we can never talk about it." The 'this' that the teacher referred to is not just one incident, but is representative of the numerous administrative

impositions that exclude her and her autonomous decisions.

What the teacher did to teach the Keats poem, is a clear example of how teachers would like to work in an autonomous manner, but are prevented from doing so for extraneous reasons. This teacher was made to doubt her decisions even though the learning outcomes she had in mind were fulfilled. Her 'sense of plausibility' (Prabhu, 1987) was questioned and this will be a serious blow to her future endeavours as a teacher. It will block her attempts to innovate in classrooms and dampen her enthusiasm to want to make a difference to the lives of her students.

It is a well-known but rarely talked about common practice for school administration to 'force' teachers to submit their original school certificates when they join. This leaves teachers in a state of fear. There is always the tension that they can be questioned by a committee and asked to 'reveal all' about their everyday classroom interactions. When this type of questioning is taken to its extreme, as has happened in some contexts, it will lead to what is now termed 'academic rape' (Deepa, 2022) resulting in the destruction of the teacher's self esteem, and complete loss of teacher autonomy and freedom in the classroom.

Teacher autonomy is when teachers are not questioned on their choice of methodology. Teachers should be able to sync their own beliefs and values keeping in mind their best interests. Lack of freedom of mind and action on the teacher's part will never lead to holistic learning by students because such learning will become mechanical under the pressure of rules and regulations chalked out by a team far removed from ground reality. This will also ensure in a grotesque sense that there is no equity or

inclusion of the teachers' independent thinking mind in deciding her own ways of doing her job. It is rather handed down to her in a manual like fashion to be followed to the hilt and expected to never dare to question the typicality of the discourse or the ideation presented in the manual.

An informal interaction using a questionnaire and telephonic interview of teachers (n=28) across the country, teaching secondary and higher secondary classes was conducted to understand what this ground reality is and how it functions. This was set up in the humanist, constructivist paradigm of research (Adom et al, 2016), where the discussions were on a one-to-one basis and the teachers were kept anonymous to one another too by design to protect their identity. This discussion aimed to understand the perspectives of teachers regarding their rights and freedom. The questions dealt with the hierarchy of the teacher in the system, the nature of choice that the teacher had and what she felt about empowerment. Teachers answered questions, regarding how they exercised their autonomy in classrooms, what the areas of 'freedom' were and where they felt restricted. Their answers ranged from all aspects of education, from curriculum methodology to assessment. At this point, however, it is important to state that every single teacher who participated in the survey insisted that they be 'quoted' only anonymously and that neither their names nor their institutions should be mentioned. When asked why, they said that this area (teacher autonomy and the rights of the teacher) is one they are not permitted to talk about or express their views in any public forum. This 'request' or rather plea, was enough reason for the authors to write this article to open up the area and start a dialogue. With the **reassurance of**

**anonymity**, they permitted us to use their responses as data. An analysis of some of their statements, and some self reflection led to the identification of certain problem areas which will help to bridge the gap between the ideals spouted in teacher education programmes and their realisations in actual practice. This area has not been researched in the Indian contexts so parallel studies are not available.

### **PLACING THE TEACHER IN THE HIERARCHY**

There is a hierarchy in most working atmospheres and the education system is not exempt. The hierarchy begins with the legislature, moves on to the concerned department, and then to the agency, that is the school. Next in the line of ‘impositions on the teacher’ is the head of the institution (both administrative and academic) with the teacher, who is actually the most important person to bring about change in any learner, at the bottom of the totem pole. If put in a pyramid format, the legislature is at the apex and teachers are at the broad base. Figuratively, this implies that the teacher is the foundation of the education system. In this entire hierarchy, it is the teacher alone who directly interacts with the students. Unfortunately, the teacher is often considered as a mere agent who only needs to implement education policies, an instrument of a larger design, a cog in a wheel. An equitable, equal playing field is too far-fetched an idea in many-a-teacher’s life. In reality, teachers are the most instrumental in a student’s life; they have a direct influence on the learner’s mind. The teacher indeed is responsible to others, the society at large, and therefore answerable for implementing the vision of education commissions that very carefully lay out a plan but the commission itself is not in a position to direct the teachers to act in

a singular pattern. Every teacher is different and their mind is limitless. This realization on the part of the government is what prompted them to include the concept of statements of teaching philosophy (STP) in the monthly Summary for the Cabinet for January 2021 by the Ministry of School Education under Autonomous Bodies Activities for KVS where they encouraged teachers to write their **statements of teaching philosophy** emphasizing teachers’ autonomy. This is the task assigned by MoE: Task no. 85 NEP Para 4.23 – 4.29 ([https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload\\_files/mhrd/files/5-1.PDF](https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/5-1.PDF)). The sole purpose of this task is to denote that for the same goal, two teachers can take up two different paths according to their own beliefs and value systems and yet be successful in achieving their aim. NEP 2020 reiterates this when it states: “Teachers will be given more autonomy in choosing aspects of pedagogy, so that they may teach in the manner they find most effective for the students in their classrooms. Teachers will also focus on socio-emotional learning - a critical aspect of any student’s holistic development. Teachers will be recognized for novel approaches to teaching that improve learning outcomes in their classrooms.” (NEP 2020 : 5.14).

These higher level decisions do not filter down to reach the grassroots level: there is very little focus on teacher autonomy and a lack of awareness on the part of the authorities. There is a disparity between policy statements and actual implementation. This was reflected in many statements made by the teachers. One teacher vehemently stated: “*teacher autonomy is essential for the all-round development of students because it is only the teacher who knows what is required for his students*”. Several teachers expressed their dissatisfaction

with the fact that they do not have a say when it comes to deciding the syllabus, they feel under-represented. As one of them succinctly put it:<sup>1</sup> *“In designing syllabus, more participation from the teachers is required. We can improvise according to the level of students and environment in which s/he resides.”* Teachers have no say in choosing lessons, they begin a school year with the syllabus which has been decided by the higher authorities. Over the years they have seen a few things working as well as failing. Experienced teachers need to be given a voice in the framing of the syllabus as they have witnessed the action, and the successes and failures in their own classrooms. They should be given the opportunity of reviewing the syllabus and suggesting revisions, modifications, additions etc.

### **POWER OF CHOOSING**

Teachers do not have the freedom to choose how they teach something. They are forced to follow Schemes of Work, which “lie at the heart of a system of constraints on teacher autonomy in schools that is held together by the authority of Principals and Panel Chairs and the fear of inspection and complaint (Benson, 2010: 268). This phrase, ‘schemes of work’ refers to the established and ready-made framework at work in any school. It includes not just elements such as the academic calendar and the syllabus, but also the monthly and period-wise split-up of the syllabus which also specifies the order in which topics are to be dealt with, along with a host of other guidelines. Teachers benefit from a general framework because they get a head start and save a lot of time, but they also function as

constraints and restrictions because of many other elements which stipulate and statute teacher actions.

Two teachers’ responses to the question about the limitations they faced in school sums this up: One teacher spoke about *“the rush to complete the syllabus whether the students understood or not”* and went on to add *“more emphasis is laid on syllabus completion than learning itself.”* Another teacher stated: *“Syllabus is completed sometimes just mechanically.”* In teacher parlance the term ‘split-up’ specifies the number of periods that have to be used for a particular chapter as well as the order in which she/he will take up those lessons. This is a problem, as stated by a teacher who said: *“following monthly syllabus is a limitation”*. Such a stipulation curbs the freedom of teachers to use methods and activities according to their choice. It creates a fear of experimentation as the teacher is bound to stick to the time limit decided by an external body. There are regular inspections to keep track of this. In reality, the teacher needs the flexibility to execute innovative pedagogies, plan, and modify as required. Teachers will have the same amount of time for the school year but needs to have the authority to make one’s own split-up. The pivotal point here is the power and the freedom that teachers have that enables them to create the best learning atmosphere for the students. It should be up to the teacher to decide the time distribution along with the pedagogy. The order in which the teacher decides to take up lessons should be completely her/his discretion instead of being dictated by an inaccessible authority. As one teacher put it,

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<sup>1</sup> Due to the sensitive nature of the issue being discussed, the identity of all teachers who took part in this survey is withheld and considered confidential. Every teacher who took part in this study, agreed to do so, only after ensuring that they will be quoted anonymously.

*“selection of study material as per student needs is autonomy for me”*. We can infer that teachers do not have this kind of freedom.

The majority of the teachers who submitted their responses also opine that the assessment strategies framed are far removed from the actual picture. The one-size-fits-all strategy doesn't work in their classrooms as there are learners of varied capabilities as well as difficulties. Teachers deal with 'multiple intelligences' (Gardner, 1983) in the classroom and sometimes each child is fit for a different kind of assessment. One of the survey respondent teachers questioned, *“How can we assess students of different capabilities, interests, and backgrounds using the same question paper?”* She went on to ask with anguish: *“The writing speed also varies from one person to another, yet there is no flexibility in the exam pattern?”* The board exams especially become challenging with the extremely meager role of internal assessments. In addition to this is the pressure of 'performance index' (PI). The PI is calculated based on the marks scored by the students; this, however, doesn't really reflect their performance but the teacher's. A lower PI is directly proportional to humiliation at school and by the authorities. Such a harassed teacher drops all ideas of innovation, works for the PI and in that rat-race she/he is not able to cater to different abilities and applies a one-size-fits-all pedagogy for the entire class. Such result-oriented teaching makes them compromise on quality. Many teachers are seen concentrating on parts of the syllabus that will fetch high marks, what is known as 'scoring parts' trying to work out a portion to ensure that the student passes the exam. With the student, the teacher also 'passes' the exam. Such rigid rules that link pass percentage to PI are not just detrimental to

creating a favourable learning atmosphere but will reduce teachers to robots who will just 'finish' the syllabus.

## **EMPOWERING A TEACHER**

A sense of belonging creates a happier working atmosphere and brings job satisfaction. The teachers stated that they are not involved in any major decisions concerning the school. For instance, the basic framework for the school should be made in consultancy with all the teachers. The infrastructural challenges also sometimes have crippling effects on the teacher. Times are changing bringing along with it a plethora of technological innovations. Yet, there are numerous schools in India where there are no computers, projectors, or even the internet. A teacher expressed her misery saying, *“In many schools, especially in rural areas, access to technology is limited. Sometimes teachers do not have resources to make lessons more interesting using the internet, showing videos, PowerPoint etc.”* The teachers who want to bring the entire world to their children feel miserable. Many teachers are not in a position to sponsor such large-scale changes. She/he is an innovator, but not having a conducive atmosphere inhibits her autonomy. This issue needs to be addressed immediately by the authorities as every child in the country deserves equality. The school administration should invite suggestions and ideas from the teachers for at least these matters where the teachers are directly involved.

Self-development is also a predominant aspect of a teacher's autonomy. Teachers need to upgrade themselves to keep pace with the changing times and refrain from becoming monotonous with their pedagogy. It will also help them to grow professionally. Teachers are

usually nominated for training by the school, but in this context, the teacher seeks and needs a little more freedom in choosing the topics they would like to learn more about. They should also have the freedom of refusing such a training programme, considering they might have personal or familial problems that need their complete attention. If they don't have any say in such matters, they will take training as a formal and forceful obligation and nothing fruitful will come out of it. Scope should be provided for self-directed development and action. Teachers are also subjected to frequent reprimands by the authorities; as one dejected teacher said, "*Punishment is a limitation. Compromising with self-respect is the solution.*"

The existence of personal lives of the teachers should be acknowledged by the authorities as well as guardians. A basic problem that has been fuelled by the pandemic (COVID 19) is the merging of the professional and personal space of a teacher. With the pandemic opening arenas for online classes, the responsibility of being available 24x7 has been imposed on all teachers. One teacher was asked to continue taking classes during the child care leave she availed during this period, with the argument that anyway she is working from home!. This is not acceptable. Teachers find taking leaves a very troublesome job when the authorities proclaim that even a casual leave is not a teacher's right. This intrusion into personal space destroys job satisfaction for them and also creates a kind of isolation from the rest of society. With such an arrangement the continuous professional development that NEP 2020 emphasizes also seems like a joke. The basic rights of privacy and expression are intruded upon. Teachers should be free to be inaccessible after working hours and while on

leave. Their means of livelihood should not disrupt their personal lives. A healthy space is required for healthy growth. This issue is applicable not just to school teachers but concerns teachers at all levels including those who teach in 'autonomous' universities.

All is not, however, lost in the area of teacher autonomy. There are a few positive experiences that are, unfortunately, the exception and not the rule. A class 11 teacher who also wishes to remain anonymous, had this to say. "*I wanted to take up research in the area of school education itself. I got permission from the authorities and asked for study leave. I chose to work with enriching the vocabulary of my students: I began by identifying the lacunae. I discovered that my students have ideas but lacked words in English. I devised many ways to develop their vocabulary, and did many activities with them. I carried out a pre and a post test; I kept a diary and encouraged my students to also keep a learner's diary. I was able to document my work and write it up. In this way, it is not just my students who were enabled, but also the community as a whole.*" Such work, should be encouraged so that it will create a sustainable environment for the development of both teachers and students. Teacher autonomy should be valued and respected by the education system in order to achieve a holistic and positive academic environment. Ensuring equity and reinstating respect into teachers as very important stakeholders by infusing back the trust in their capacities and autonomy will payback in the form of better teaching/ learning process.

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