

**The Relationship between Teacher Autonomy and Stress,  
Work Satisfaction, Empowerment, and Professionalism**

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**Abstract**

*The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between teacher autonomy and on-the-job stress, work satisfaction, empowerment, and professionalism. Using a reliable and valid measure of curriculum autonomy and general teaching autonomy (TAS), it was found that as curriculum autonomy increased on-the-job stress decreased, but there was little association between curriculum autonomy and job satisfaction. It was also demonstrated that as general teacher autonomy increased so did empowerment and professionalism. Also, as job satisfaction, perceived empowerment, and professionalism increased on-the-job stress decreased, and greater job satisfaction was associated with a high degree of professionalism and empowerment. The results of this study also indicate that autonomy does not differ across teaching level (elementary, middle, high school).*

A common link that appears when examining teacher motivation, job satisfaction, stress (burnout), professionalism, and empowerment is teacher autonomy (Brunetti, 2001; Kim & Loadman, 1994; Klecker & Loadman, 1996; Ulriksen, 1996). Much of the research that has examined these constructs and their relationships has revealed one thing in common: the need for teachers to have autonomy (Erpelding, 1999; Jones, 2000; Wilson, 1993). Autonomy seems to be emerging as a key variable when examining educational reform initiatives, with some arguing that granting autonomy and empowering teachers is an appropriate place to begin in solving the problems of today's schools (Melenyzer, 1990; Short, 1994).

Recognizing teaching as a profession and developing professional teachers has also been set forth as a possible solution. If teachers are to be empowered and exalted as professionals, then like other professionals, teachers must have the freedom to prescribe the best treatment for their students as doctors/lawyers do for their patients/clients;

and the freedom to do such has been defined by some as teacher autonomy. Although the link to the aforementioned constructs has been repeatedly demonstrated, identifying the underlying theoretical dimensions of teacher autonomy itself has met with varied results as studies directly pertaining to teacher autonomy are few in number, particularly when developing appropriate measures since autonomy is difficult to operationalize (e.g., Pearson & Hall, 1993).

### **Constructs Related to Teacher Autonomy**

There is a plethora of research that has examined the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation of teachers. Intrinsic factors for teachers include the desire to help students achieve, the desire to make a difference in society, and the sense of accomplishment felt when they see a student learn; extrinsic factors for teachers include pay, non-monetary fringe benefits, and recognition of performance (Ashbaugh, 1982; DeJesus, 1991; Dinham & Scott, 1996; Farrar, 1981; Firestone & Pennell, 1993; Picard, 1986; Porter, 1993; Swanson & Koonce, 1986). Overall, “Intrinsic rewards are much more powerful for motivating teachers than are extrinsic rewards, such as merit pay” (NIE, 1981, p.2) and the body of research tend to support this notion. Brown (1996) found three major reasons (all intrinsic) why teachers leave the profession: the need for personal growth, the desire for a philosophy of education, and a lack of respect and recognition for their efforts. In contrast, Sarafoglu (1997) also found intrinsic reasons why teachers stay in the profession: a love of learning, a love of children, resilience, collegiality, and reflectivity. While the majority of research supports the use of intrinsic rewards to motivate teachers, both teachers and principals felt that their greatest need deficiencies were security and autonomy (Nero, 1995).

Autonomy is one facet of teacher motivation (Khmelkov, 2000; Losos, 2000; White, 1992); therefore, a presentation of the related motivational factor of teacher job satisfaction is essential. A 1997 study by the National Center for Education Statistics and several other studies have demonstrated that the degree of autonomy perceived by teachers is indicative of current job satisfaction (Charters, 1976; Franklin, 1988; Gnecco, 1983; Hall, Villeme, & Phillippy, 1989; Pearson & Hall, 1993) and a majority of more recent literature supports this ideology (Brunetti, 2001; Kim & Loadman, 1994; Klecker & Loadman, 1996; Ulriksen, 1996). A more recent report on job satisfaction among American teachers identified more administrative support and leadership, good student

behavior, a positive school climate, and teacher autonomy as working conditions associated with higher teacher satisfaction (Perie & Baker 1997), and working conditions were related to satisfaction more than background variables such as sex, age, and years of experience. Although satisfaction with participatory management has been examined and indicated that teachers differ in their desire to participate in school management (Frase & Sorenson, 1992), more are unanimous in the desire to retain autonomy in the classroom and this factor was highly influential in their decision to remain in teaching (Brunetti, 2001).

Job dissatisfaction leads to stress and ultimately to burnout if allowed to continue unabated. According to Kyriacou (1989) "Teacher stress refers to the experience by teachers of unpleasant emotions such as anger, tension, frustration, anxiety, depression and nervousness, resulting from the aspect of their work as teachers . . . Teacher burnout refers to a state of mental, emotional and attitudinal exhaustion in teachers which results from a prolonged experience of stress" (p. 27). Prior research has revealed that teacher motivation and autonomy is related to both job satisfaction and job stress (Davis & Wilson; 2000; Pearson & Hall, 1993); and the more intrinsically motivated the more satisfied the teachers were in their jobs and the less stress they experienced (Davis & Wilson; 2000). Subsequently, several other studies have found that constraints on autonomy such as perceived lack of control and sense of powerlessness are related to tension, frustration, and anxiety among teachers (Bacharach, Bauer, & Conley, 1986; Blasé & Matthews, 1984; Cedoline, 1982; Dinham & Scott, 1992; Dworkin, Haney, Dworkin, & Telschow, 1990; Evers, 1987; Lortie, 1975; Natale, 1993; Woods, 1989; Yee, 1990).

Some researchers have sought to determine how autonomy is incorporated into professionalism. Part of the findings on teachers in *A Nation at Risk* (1983) was that the professional working life of teachers is on the whole unacceptable and this finding started a long standing argument on teaching as a profession. From *A Nation at Risk* came seven different recommendations intended to improve the preparation of teachers or to make teaching a more rewarding and respected profession (1983). Teacher professionalism – the movement to upgrade the status, training, and working conditions of teachers – has received a great deal of interest ever since (Ingersoll & Alsalam, 1997). Ingersoll (1997) included teacher authority as one of the traditional characteristics used to distinguish professionals from other kinds of occupations. Authority was defined as "the extents to which teachers influence school decisions concerned with key educational issues" (p. x) and later the definition was broadened to

include “the degree of individual autonomy exercised by teachers over planning and teaching within the classroom.” (Ingersoll & Alsalam, 1997, p. vii). The emphasis to address both aspects of teacher authority is best summarized:

Advocates of increases in faculty influence and increases in teacher autonomy argue that teachers will not only make better informed decisions about educational issues than district or state officials, but that top-down decision making often fails precisely because it lacks the support of those whose are responsible for the implementation and success of the decision. (Ingersoll & Alsalam, 1997, p. 7)

Others agree that teachers and principals must have the authority to make key decisions about the services they render, and any top-down imposition of change is counter to the development of professionalism (Firestone & Bader, 1992). Teacher authority has been linked to teacher commitment and teacher professionalism (Ingersoll & Alsalam, 1997), and autonomy is a key factor in novice teachers’ use of professional practices (Khmelkov, 2000). Whether one agrees or disagrees that teaching is a profession, there is little argument that autonomy is a key element of any true profession (Blasé & Kirby, 2000; Ingersoll, 1997; Ingersoll & Alsalam, 1997; Khmelkov, 2000).

Teacher empowerment is another panacea that many educational reformers consider essential in school restructuring and for optimum teacher development. Teacher autonomy has been empirically derived as one dimension of teacher empowerment (Klecker & Loadman, 1996; Short & Rinehart, 1992) yet empowered teachers are not generally found in American public schools as they are structured today (Corwin & Borman, 1988; Hanson 1991), and this fact continues to hold true despite research reflecting the importance of teacher empowerment and autonomy (Fay, 1990; Klecker, 1998). A survey conducted by the National Center for Educational Statistics of the U.S. Department of Education asked a nationally representative sample of teachers to rate their influence on a variety of classroom and school wide issues, which indicated that they perceived their own influence to have remained stable over the past few years (Ingersoll & Alsalam, 1997; Shen, 1998). Teachers perceived their influence to primarily be confined to the classroom on issues such as textbook selection and selecting teaching strategies, yet collaborative autonomy is easily observed in schools where teachers have the opportunity to work with administrators in making decisions pertaining to curriculum, instruction, and scheduling (Willner, 1990).

### Teacher Autonomy

The definition of *teacher autonomy* is ambiguous in the literature, but has been defined in the past as the perception that teachers have regarding whether they control themselves and their work environment (Pearson & Hall, 1993). What seems like autonomy to one teacher may seem like isolation to another. One teacher may view autonomy as a means to gain substantial freedom from interference or supervision, another may view it as the freedom to develop collegial relationships and accomplish tasks that extend beyond the classroom. Some teachers thrive on autonomy, while others perceive it as a means for principals to avoid their duties (Fraser & Sorenson, 1992). Throughout the literature related to teachers and autonomy, however, there is considerable evidence to support the fact that the concept of teacher autonomy has changed considerably over the years and continues to evolve.

Willner (1990) identifies an older concept of teacher autonomy, based on independence through isolationism and alienation, and a newer concept of teacher autonomy, based on collaborative decision-making and the freedom to make prescriptive professional choices concerning the services rendered to students. Other studies concur with Willner's notion of a 'new' sense of teacher autonomy in that "alienation is not autonomy" (Franklin, 1988, p. 13), and "to be isolated in a classroom without collegial interaction or meaningful feedback is not the intended spirit of autonomy" (Fraser & Sorenson, 1992, p. 40). Many would agree that for teachers to realize a new sense of professional autonomy traditional bureaucratic governance models can no longer exist and teachers must have authority in the 'substance' of school (Fay, 1990). The most pertinent 'substance' is how the instructional process is manifested and is viewed by teachers in the following ways (Franklin, 1988; Hanson, 1991): teachers feel that they are qualified authorities in the instructional process because they have considerable expertise in specialized fields; they have a right to organize the learning process according to their own choosing; and that the network of impersonal school rules stops at the classroom door because teachers formulate their own, personalized, flexible rules, which allow them to operate within their classrooms as they see fit.

Although teachers have various reasons for leaving the teaching profession, they most often leave the classroom because of the lack of professionalism, lack of recognition, or lack of autonomy afforded them (Natale, 1993; Pearson & Hall, 1993). Teacher autonomy or the lack thereof, seems to be a critical component in the motivation of teachers to

stay or leave the teaching profession. The degree of autonomy perceived by new teachers is indicative of current job satisfaction and a positive reaction to teaching, and teachers who had higher autonomy scores expressed a willingness to enter teaching again if faced with that decision (Pearson & Hall, 1993). Perceptions of autonomy have been found to be related to various factors already discussed; which are mainly factors within the work environment, but not factors such as academic ability, quality of prior training, or years of experience.

### **Purpose**

Although the link between teacher autonomy and several aforementioned constructs are well established, a stable and well-defined measure of teacher autonomy needed to be developed to aid researchers who examine various school reform initiatives and teacher attitudes and perceptions. A prior reliable and valid measure was developed that yielded curriculum autonomy and general teaching autonomy dimensions, underlying theoretical aspects of teacher autonomy that have been supported by the literature (Pearson & Hall, 1993). A more recent examination of the instrument revealed that the same two dimensions emerged; thus, indicating the instrument was reliable and valid for research purposes (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005). The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between teacher autonomy and on-the-job stress, work satisfaction, empowerment, and professionalism. It was hypothesized that autonomous teachers would demonstrate less on-the-job stress, greater work satisfaction, perceived empowerment, and a high degree of professionalism.

### **Participants and Procedure**

The target population for this study consisted of 300 teachers who worked in three neighboring school districts/counties in Florida. To ensure full geographic and grade-level representation, two elementary, middle, and high schools were selected from each of the three counties ( $n = 67, 52, 52$ , respectively). A cover letter explaining the study and the instruments were sent to the random sample of teachers. Of the 300 teachers sampled, complete data were obtained from 171 for a response rate of 57%. Of the 171 respondents, 37 (21%) were elementary teachers, 88 (52%) were middle school teachers, and 46 (27%) were high school teachers. The mean for years of teaching experience was 14 years, and

ranged from 1 to 37. The majority held a bachelors degree ( $n = 111$ ) and all represented a variety of both academic and non-academic subjects.

#### Instrumentation

In order to adequately describe the sample, demographic variables of interest were included on the cover sheet of the Teaching Autonomy Scale (TAS). The 18 items on the scale were originally designed to elicit the degree to which teachers perceive they have autonomy in the following areas: (a) selection of activities and materials, (b) classroom standards of conduct, (c) instructional planning and sequencing, and (d) personal on-the-job decision making. Eleven of the items reflect high autonomy (e.g., I am free to be creative in my teaching approach), and the remainder reflect low autonomy (e.g., In my situation I have little say over the content and skills that are selected for teaching). The 4-point Likert-type scale ranged from 1 (definitely false) to 4 (definitely true) and was selected to eliminate a neutral response, and items that were stated positively were recoded to reflect high scores on the attribute.

A prior study of the TAS (Pearson & Hall) which utilized exploratory factor analysis yielded an instrument that had good internal consistency reliability ( $r = .80$ ) with two factors: curriculum autonomy and general teaching autonomy. Curriculum autonomy was defined by the items that measured selection of activities and materials and instructional planning and sequencing (scores range from 7 to 28), and general teaching autonomy was defined by the items that measured classroom standards of conduct and personal on-the-job decision making (scores range from 13 to 52). A recent study (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005) of the TAS which utilized confirmatory factor analysis yielded a stable factor structure with improved internal consistency reliability ( $r = .83$ ).

For the purpose of this study, another section of the instrument inquired into on-the-job stress, work satisfaction, empowerment, and professionalism. On-the-job stress was measured by three items that inquired into teachers' perceptions of their current instructional load, paper work load, and the stress of the work environment (scores range 3 to 15). Work satisfaction was measured by two items that inquired into teachers' perceptions of their satisfaction with their current salary and employment (scores range 2 to 10). Empowerment was measured by three items that inquired into teachers' perceptions of the administration in considering their opinions on matters that directly affect them, involving them in the development of school policies that affect their work, and how

often their concerns were taken into account in administrative decisions (scores range from 3 to 15). Professionalism was measured by three items that inquired into teachers' perceptions of recognition for high performance, openness and accessibility of the administration, and activity on school-level committees (scores range from 3 to 12). Reliability of each of the scales was determined using the Cronbach alpha internal consistency coefficient.

#### Data Analysis

Since it was hypothesized that autonomous teachers would demonstrate less on-the-job stress, greater work satisfaction, perceived empowerment, and a high degree of professionalism; relationships were examined using the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. Specifically, it was hypothesized that curriculum autonomy would demonstrate stronger relationships with on-the-job stress and work satisfaction since these variables relate directly to the instructional process; and it was hypothesized that general teaching autonomy would demonstrate stronger relationships with perceived empowerment and professionalism since these variables relate more to personal on-the-job decision-making. Since perceptions of autonomy have been found to be related to the various factors already discussed but not factors such as academic ability or quality of prior training, the only demographic variable examined was level of teaching (elementary, middle, high school) using the aforementioned variables as dependent variables and teaching level as the independent variable using multivariate analysis of variance, and effect sizes were determined using  $\eta^2$  (the strength of the association between the teaching level variable and the scores).

### **Results**

Internal consistency reliability was determined on the variables general teaching autonomy, curriculum autonomy, stress, satisfaction, empowerment, and professionalism ( $r = .80, .80, .72, .34, .91, .61$ ; respectively) and was deemed adequate for investigative purposes with the exception of the satisfaction scale, with very low reliability probably due to this variable being measured by only two items. As indicated by the means in Table 1, the teachers reported high levels of curriculum and general teaching autonomy, high levels of stress, were generally satisfied with their current employment, perceived empowerment, and a high degree of professionalism.



**Table 1**  
**Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations of Variables with Autonomy**

	Curriculum Autonomy	General Autonomy	Stress	Satisfaction	Empowerment	Professionalism
<b>Curriculum Autonomy</b>	--					
<b>General Autonomy</b>	.60	--				
<b>Stress</b>	-.30	-.28	--			
<b>Satisfaction</b>	.18	.18	-.25	--		
<b>Empowerment</b>	.16	.31	-.31	.30	--	
<b>Professionalism</b>	.15	.34	-.27	.33	.77	--
<b>Means</b>	18.84	41.64	12.54	6.72	11.14	9.48
<b>SD</b>	4.21	5.05	1.93	1.59	2.66	1.98

All of the correlations between the variables were significantly different from zero ( $p < .05$ ). As hypothesized, curriculum autonomy demonstrated a stronger relationship with on-the-job stress, and as curriculum autonomy increased on-the-job stress decreased; however, the strength of the relationship between curriculum autonomy and job satisfaction was not supported. Also hypothesized, general teaching autonomy demonstrated stronger relationships with perceived empowerment and professionalism, and as general teaching autonomy increased so did empowerment and professionalism. It was also revealed that as job satisfaction, perceived empowerment, and professionalism increased on-the-job stress decreased, and greater job satisfaction was associated with a high degree of professionalism and empowerment. Surprisingly, the highest correlation was between perceived empowerment and professionalism; teachers who felt empowered perceived a higher degree of professionalism.

The results of the multivariate analysis of variance using curriculum autonomy, general autonomy, stress, satisfaction, empowerment, and professionalism as correlated dependent variables and teaching level as the independent variable, yielded significant differences between the three teaching levels on the omnibus multivariate test [ $F(12,322) = 2.72, p < .001$ ]. Follow-up univariate  $F$  - tests revealed that significant teaching level differences were found on the variables curriculum autonomy [ $F(2,166) = 7.95, p < .001$ ], general teaching autonomy [ $F(2,166) = 5.87, p < .001$ ], and professionalism [ $F(2,166) = 3.39, p < .05$ ].

Tukey post hoc comparisons were performed between the mean scores of the teaching levels on the three significant variables detected ( $p < .05$ ), and although significant differences were found, the effect sizes were weak ( $\eta^2 = .09, .07, .04$  for curriculum autonomy, general teaching autonomy, and professionalism; respectively). For curriculum autonomy, there was a statistically significant difference between elementary and high school teachers, middle and high school teachers, but not between elementary and middle school teachers. For general teaching autonomy, there was a statistically significant difference between elementary and middle school teachers, elementary and high school teachers, but not between middle and high school teachers. For professionalism, there was a statistically significant difference between elementary and middle school teachers only (See Table 2).

**Table 2**  
**Means and Standard Deviations of Dependent Variables by Teaching Level**

	<u>Elementary</u>		<u>Middle</u>		<u>High</u>	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
<b>Curriculum Autonomy</b>	17.01a	4.45	20.58a	3.45	18.71	4.16
<b>General Autonomy</b>	39.25b	4.51	42.79	4.53	41.97	5.22
<b>Stress</b>	13.11	1.78	12.13	1.95	12.52	1.95
<b>Satisfaction</b>	6.84	1.48	6.67	1.76	6.70	1.56
<b>Empowerment</b>	10.84	2.39	10.89	2.74	11.37	2.73
<b>Professionalism</b>	8.81c	1.68	9.42	2.05	9.80	2.01

Note. a significantly different from high at  $p < .05$ .

b significantly different from middle and high at  $p < .05$ .

c significantly different from middle at  $p < .05$ .

### Conclusions

It was hypothesized that autonomous teachers would demonstrate less on-the-job stress, greater work satisfaction, perceived empowerment, and a high degree of professionalism. As demonstrated in this study, as curriculum autonomy increased on-the-job stress decreased, but there was little association between curriculum autonomy and job satisfaction. It was also demonstrated that as general teacher autonomy increased so did empowerment and professionalism. Also, as job satisfaction, perceived empowerment, and professionalism increased on-the-job stress decreased, and greater job satisfaction was associated with a high degree of professionalism and empowerment. The strongest relationship was found between perceived empowerment and professionalism, which would suggest that teachers who perceive themselves as empowered also view their occupation as a true profession.

The link between several constructs and teacher autonomy has been demonstrated (e.g., motivation, job satisfaction, stress/burnout, professionalism, and empowerment) (Brunetti, 2001; Kim & Loadman, 1994; Klecker & Loadman, 1996; Ulriksen, 1996), and several of the relationships were supported in this study. The results of this study, however, did not provide strong support for the relationship between both curriculum and general teacher autonomy and job satisfaction; although previous research found that teacher autonomy was one of the working conditions associated with higher teacher satisfaction (Perie & Baker 1997). Prior research also indicated that teacher autonomy has been found to be related to the various factors already discussed; but not factors such as academic ability, quality of prior training, or years of experience (Pearson & Hall, 1993). The results of this study also indicate that autonomy does not differ across teaching level (although statistically significant differences were found effect sizes were small), further support that the aforementioned constructs are stronger than various background variables, and autonomy seems to generalize across these characteristics.

The general teaching autonomy factor is logically consistent with the need for teachers to have control over their work environment and to have personal on-the-job decision making authority, especially if they are to stay committed to the profession. In this study empowerment was measured by items that inquired into teachers' perceptions of the administration in considering their opinions on matters that directly affect them, involving them in the development of school policies that affect their work, and how often their concerns were taken into account in

administrative decisions. Professionalism was measured by items that inquired into teachers' perceptions of recognition for high performance, openness and accessibility of the administration, and activity on school-level committees; thus, it was not surprising that general teacher autonomy related more strongly to empowerment and professionalism. A measure of general teacher autonomy could provide those who hire teachers with insight into identifying those who are satisfied with their jobs and professional identify, and who will stay (Blasé & Kirby, 2000; Ingersoll, 1997; Ingersoll & Alsalam, 1997; Khmelkov, 2000).

The curriculum autonomy factor is logically consistent with teachers' identifying themselves with the profession (Blasé & Kirby, 2000; Ingersoll, 1997; Ingersoll & Alsalam, 1997; Khmelkov, 2000), particularly in having authority when making decisions regarding selection of activities/materials and instructional planning and sequencing, and in relieving on-the-job stress. On-the-job stress was measured by items that inquired into teachers' perceptions of their current instructional load, paper work load, and the stress of the work environment; thus, again it was not surprising that these types of stress would be perceived to be lower in teachers who perceive they have control over their curriculum. Flexibility in such activities is critical when elevating teaching to professional status; and autonomy is a determinant of novice teachers' use of such practices (Khmelkov, 2000). Curriculum autonomy is also logically consistent with the examination of educational reform initiatives (Melenyzer, 1990; Short, 1994); especially since many argue that the autonomy of teachers, one dimension of empowerment (Klecker & Loadman, 1996; Short & Rinehart); is critical to any initiative's implementation and success (Ingersoll, 1997).

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