

Autonomy in Teaching: Escaping Control or Taking Control?

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Abstract: *The major objective of this study is to expand the understanding of the phenomenon of teacher autonomy through defining relation between perceived teacher autonomy and control in the context of today's transformation of Russian higher education. Based on the analysis of the scientific literature and modern university teachers' perceptions of their activity, our research results show that a special consideration should be given to a positive type of university teacher autonomy. The paper defines a complex of intrinsic and extrinsic conditions which are able to ensure an optimal correlation between teacher autonomy and administrative control in Russian higher education. The revealed extrinsic conditions form the core of an autonomy-oriented type of administrative control. This allows a teacher to be a self-regulating actor through taking control of his/her professional activity and developing the positive type of perceived teacher autonomy.*

Keywords: *Higher education, Teaching, Positive type of perceived teacher autonomy, Administrative control, Autonomy-oriented type of control*

1. INTRODUCTION

Modern educational documents of the Russian Federation (National Doctrine of Education in the Russian Federation 2000-2025, Federal Law on Autonomous Institutions of 2006, Federal Law on Education in the Russian Federation of 2012) consider institutional autonomy as an important attribute of university policy. They also state that one of the primary goals of the higher education reform is to introduce a new method of teaching focusing on the needs, interests and demands of the students and considering their diversity. This can be done if teachers take the initiative in curriculum development. New responsibilities have been assigned to university teachers who are involved in making various important decisions that include devising course syllabi; choosing forms, methods and materials for promoting learner autonomy, and mastering new forms of learning environment.

It has been proved that teacher autonomy is necessary for a teacher's sense of professionalism (Ingersoll and Alsalam, 1997; Littlewood, 1997). Teacher autonomy has also been identified as a necessary and integral part of the learner autonomy concept (Aoki, 2002; Benson, 2000; Koryakovtseva, 2001; Lamb and Reinders, 2008; Little, 1995; Littlewood, 1997; Shurupova and Makarova, 2009; Smith, 2000). As Castle states, "teacher autonomy will equip teachers to be cur-

riculum creators not just curriculum enactors. Autonomous teachers co-create curriculum with children. They help children become more autonomous through pursuing topics and questions of interest to children themselves” (2004:7). According to Shurupova and Makarova, “a professional can be trained only by a professional, capable of self-education, self-organization and self-control” (2009:169). As Smith has claimed, teachers who themselves are not autonomous may have a negative influence on the development of autonomy in their students (Smith, 2000). This forms objective preconditions for the recognition of teacher autonomy as an important factor of Russian higher education quality improvement.

At the same time, there is a problem in modern science which is associated with the existence of different teacher autonomy definitions. There is quite a variety of them ranging from “right to freedom from control” (Benson, 2000), and “capacity to engage in self-directed teaching” (Little, 1995), to the “state of being when isolated teachers operate a classroom in an independent, non-collaborative manner” (Willner, 1990).

Indeed, being associated in many humanistic theories with freedom and independence, the term autonomy is often interpreted as the opposite of external control. However, considering teacher autonomy from this position does not seem to be relevant in respect of university education development. This problem urges us to focus on solving several issues. Firstly, it is necessary to analyze the existing conceptions of teacher autonomy and establish the basis for the interpretation of the phenomenon of teacher autonomy and for its comparison with the phenomenon of control in education. Secondly, it is important to reveal the specific of the Russian educational context, which may influence the development of university teacher autonomy. Thirdly, our solution to the problem of correlation of teacher autonomy and control in educational environment has to be provided.

2. UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF TEACHER AUTONOMY

The term autonomy is associated in many humanistic theories with freedom and independence. That is why historically it is interpreted as the opposite of external control. Consequently, as Carey stresses, teacher autonomy has often been misinterpreted and limited to “teachers’ control over their work practices” (Carey, 2008). According to Carey, in the USA “the autonomy ideal was extended to resist any kind of meaningful teacher evaluation” and this made teachers unaccountable for learning results (ibid.). Russian university teachers often have similar interpretations of teacher autonomy, due to the tradition of strict educational control and lack of freedom in higher education organization.

Meanwhile, the review of philosophical and psychological literature proves that autonomy does not mean a person’s total independence from any external factors. Being a central value in the Kantian tradition of moral philosophy, autonomy implies that the person is aware of his/her dependence and is able to manage this situation of dependence through making personal choice. This correlates with Fromm’s definition of freedom as an activity based on the awareness of possible alternatives and their consequences. Allwright defines autonomy as “...a constantly changing but at any time optimal state of equilibrium between maximal self-development and human interdependence” (Allwright, 1990:12). Based on these ideas, we may assume that teacher autonomy does not mean the absence of control over teaching practices, but teacher’s managing the training process through a deep understanding of the educational context and responsible professional activity.

Autonomy in education is often associated with freedom and there are some philosophical and psychological conceptions of positive freedom (or freedom “to”), which contain the ideas of autonomy (Arseniev, 1999; Leontiev, 2006). According to these conceptions, such kind of freedom, contrasting with freedom “from”, means neither the absence of external constraints nor presence of motivation to avoid failure and concerns one’s independent creative activity, based on authenticity of one’s motives and values. These authentic motives and values make the core of the need for autonomy, considered by Ryan and Deci as “the universal need to feel like an agent or an initiator”. The authors suggest satisfaction of this need to determine “psychological well-being, optimal functioning and healthy development of a personality” (Ryan and Deci, 2006).

Understanding of the correlation between control and autonomy is impossible without investigating such aspects of autonomy as provided autonomy and perceived autonomy. In the context of higher education the former involves academic freedoms of teachers and students as well as decentralization of responsibility to individual universities, teachers and students. The latter (perceived

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autonomy) may be represented as an attribute of university policy, as well as a teacher or student personality attribute.

It should not be forgotten that both autonomy and control in modern Russian education are determined by social and economic transformations as well as global tendency to democratization and humanization. But decentralization of responsibility to individual universities and, subsequently, to university teachers does not mean absence of control. While teachers have been given new rights through several Federal Acts of the Russian Federation, central government continues to control higher education, in particular, through the Federal State Educational Standards.

This situation has led to the problem in Russian higher education, which is connected not with the introduction of the Federal State Educational Standards, but with understanding and interpretation of the content of these standards in Russian universities. Due to traditional top-down approach to higher education management, several risks appear for Russian universities, which are now trying to perform to the required standards.

An increased level of provided autonomy in Russian higher education is accompanied by new requirements to university teachers. Surrounded by a wide range of challenges, they are expected to have an increased level of perceived autonomy in making various important decisions. Due to the development of academic mobility and international collaboration in Russian universities, the new roles of university teachers are much diversified and include not only teaching, but also mastering new educational environments, working in international projects; tutorial, scientific, grant-writing, and other types of activities.

On the one hand, the increased level of provided autonomy involves the increase of teacher empowerment, and, consequently, contributes to the development of perceived autonomy in teachers. On the other hand, the new required administrative tasks and procedures as well as the necessity to prepare new classroom planning and assessment documents seem to increase teachers' workload, making teachers feel under pressure and experience burnout, which, in its turn, affects the quality of teachers' professional performance and demotivates students.

The situation becomes more complicated due to the transformation of the Russian university community's perceptions about higher education. Universities are now perceived by most of educational managers as business corporations where every teacher's activity is evaluated according to existing educational standards. From the point of view of students universities are often considered as supermarkets where education can be bought. This situation seems to be in contrast not only with traditionally accepted perception of universities as temples of science, but also with the principles of autonomy and democratization which form the basis of the Federal State Educational Standards, Federal Laws of the Russian Federation as well as international laws and educational initiatives.

Understanding of the ideas of autonomy by all members of the university community is able to prevent such risks, in particular through making transformation in students' and teacher's personalities from the operational to axiological aspects of their activity. It means that perceived teacher autonomy has a specific educational potential and may become the basis for a new type of educational culture.

3. STUDYING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN UNIVERSITY TEACHER AUTONOMY AND CONTROL OVER TEACHER'S WORK

Control in education may be represented in a variety of forms. Among them there is bureaucratic control of teaching practice, teacher performance management, teacher's self-control, and teacher's control over students' learning results. It's crucially important to see the difference between the various types of autonomy and kinds of control, for some of autonomy types mean escaping control while the others are based on control.

Bureaucratic control of teaching practice involves low levels of provided autonomy, imposing a lot of paperwork and standardizing every step of the training process. This decreases teacher responsibility and leads to the development of extrinsic motivation to teach. Consequently, this impedes perceived teacher autonomy, which is reported to be based on teacher's intrinsic motivation to professional achievement, comprising "desire to assist students to accomplish goals and desire to make a difference in society and sense of achievement when students learn" (Pearson and Moomaw, 2005:39)

Thus, bureaucratic type of teaching practice control seems to stimulate the development of a negative type of perceived teacher autonomy. Drawing on Leontiev’s psychological theory of personal autonomy, this type of teacher autonomy can be regarded as freedom “from” (Leontiev, 2006). It means that teachers develop negative types of teaching motivation (as, for instance, motivation to avoid failure), resist any kind of teacher control, avoid responsibility and work in isolation. Therefore it is important to investigate in more details the content and the potential of positive type of perceived teacher autonomy and to reveal positive forms of teaching control and teacher performance management, capable to promote this type of teacher autonomy.

A lot of modern conceptions of teacher autonomy emphasize teacher’s capacity to take control of his own teaching through planning, making choices and responsible decisions (Benson, 2000; Koryakovtseva, 2001; Lamb and Reinders, 2008; Shurupova and Makarova, 2009; Smith, 2000). Drawing on these conceptions, positive kind of perceived teacher autonomy may be defined as a high-level competence, which allows teachers to take control of their work and to develop as self-determined and socially responsible educational actors.

Taking into account that in the context of modern higher education in Russia being autonomous often requires teacher’s mastering new skills and competences to deal with new challengers, an autonomous teacher should also be a lifelong learner. On this basis, motivation to autonomy in teaching should involve not only intrinsic motivation to professional achievement, but intrinsic motivation to teacher personal development. This approach allows regarding positive perceived teacher autonomy as a factor, ensuring teacher’s mastering new skills and competences to deal with new challengers of the educational environment. Specifically, positive perceived teacher autonomy allows teachers to transform educational environment challenges into the factors of their own self-development.

As shown below in Figure 1, teachers with a positive type of perceived professional autonomy are intrinsically motivated to professional achievement and personal development.

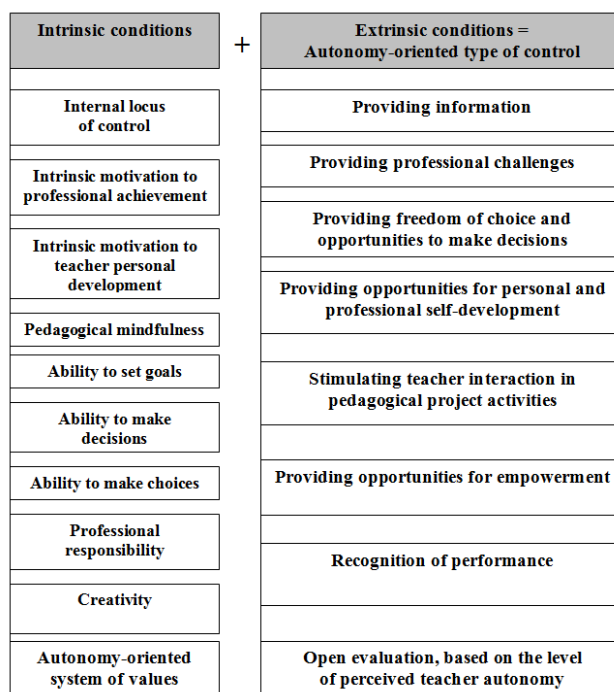


Figure 1. Correlation between teacher autonomy and administrative control

To develop a positive type of perceived professional autonomy, teachers should also have autonomy-oriented system of values, a complex of personality attributes (internal locus of control, professional responsibility, creativity) and competences (ability to set goals, ability to make decisions, ability to make choices, and pedagogical mindfulness). All these characteristics may be considered as the intrinsic conditions for creating an optimal correlation between teacher autonomy and administrative control.

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Based on the fact that critical reflective inquiry, empowerment and dialogue are often seen by modern researchers as three principles for teacher autonomy (Smith, 2003), we suggest that *extrinsic conditions* which can stimulate the creation of an optimal correlation between teacher autonomy and administrative control include:

1. Assessment of teaching should involve teachers' critical awareness of the situation. It means that teachers should be provided with as more information as possible (concerning general educational and university context, teaching assessment criteria, opportunities for professional self-development, etc.). It also includes open evaluation which is necessary for making teachers self-monitor their teaching in order to observe and reflect upon the teaching strategies they use and the nature of the interactions they set up and participate in.
2. University educational context should provide professional challenges, opportunities to make decisions (e.g. providing freedom of choice through developing a flexible system of teacher portfolio) as well as offer teachers plenty of opportunities for empowerment and personal and professional self-development.
3. Any teacher evaluation should be based on the level of perceived teacher professional autonomy and followed by recognition of performance (including monetary and nonmonetary fringe benefits for pedagogical research, etc.). This factor involves teachers into competition, pedagogical self-monitoring and reflection.
4. The system of administrative control should stimulate teacher interaction in pedagogical project activities. This will prevent teacher isolation, individualism and self-sufficiency and create the situation of cooperation, co-learning, negotiation and sharing.

Taken together, the above-mentioned internal and external conditions are proposed to stimulate the development of autonomy-oriented type of educational control.

The results of the literature review were compared with the data collected from a qualitative, descriptive type multiple-choice questionnaire on autonomy and control in University teacher professional activity. The questionnaire was distributed among 91 teachers working in Krasnoyarsk State Medical University, Russia, with the purpose to elicit their responses and views on the level of perceived autonomy they have / would like to have. This questionnaire contained a set of statements for the assessment of the level of perceived teacher autonomy and type of control in university educational environment.

The questionnaire was duly validated by experts in the field of higher education. In this questionnaire, the level of autonomy was measured by estimating the type of teacher's motivation, system of values, personality traits (internal locus of control, professional responsibility, creativity) and competences (ability to set goals, ability to make decisions, ability to make choices, pedagogical mindfulness).

The type of administrative control was revealed through analyzing specific work incentives and disincentives existing in the university educational environment. The data collected was summarized and analyzed in order to reveal possible conditions ensuring an optimal correlation between teacher autonomy and administrative control in the context of today's transformation of Russian higher education.

4. RESULTS

Our research results have shown that in the context of today's transformations in Russian higher education a special consideration should be given to a positive type of autonomy perceived by university teachers. This type of teacher autonomy: a) implies professional interaction, personal development, self-empowerment and work engagement; b) is ensured by intrinsic motivations to professional achievement and personal development, autonomy-oriented system of values, a complex of personality attributes (internal locus of control, professional responsibility, creativity) and competences (ability to set goals, ability to make decisions, ability to make choices, pedagogical mindfulness); c) leads to better performance, job satisfaction, increase of self-esteem, work-related self-efficacy and is able to prevent teacher burnout.

The results of the literature review and the analysis of our findings received from the questionnaire allow us to suggest several conditions which are able to ensure an optimal correlation between

teacher autonomy and administrative control. Among these conditions we should point out intrinsic and extrinsic ones.

Intrinsic conditions include intrinsic motivation together with autonomy-oriented system of values, teacher personality attributes and work-related competences. The *extrinsic conditions* for creating autonomy-oriented type of control represent a set of specific work incentives existing in the university educational environment.

The above-mentioned intrinsic and extrinsic conditions are capable to ensure the development of positive type of perceived teacher autonomy through developing autonomy-oriented type of control in higher education by stimulating:

- teachers' self-empowerment and professional interaction;
- teachers' awareness of the exterior constraints they are surrounded by;
- teachers' abilities to perceive a lot of opportunities for making professional choice;
- teachers' abilities to deal with any educational environment challenges positively through transforming them into the factors of their own self-development.

Consequently, this type of educational control leads to better performance and the increase of teachers' self-esteem and professional self-efficacy.

5. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

In Russia today, major transformations and innovations are having an effect on higher education which is characterized by both the increase of provided autonomy and growing external control. In this context a positive type of autonomy perceived by university teachers has an important educational potential. This potential includes ensuring development of student autonomy, teacher personal and professional self-development, prevention of teacher burnout, and development of university autonomy.

There is a paradox of relations between teacher autonomy and control. It implies that various constraints and control are necessary conditions for teacher' perception of autonomy. Specifically, most of challengers in teaching appear due to external control. Teachers will perceive their autonomy only if the educational environment provides some challenges. But the presence of challenges doesn't ensure the development of a positive type of perceived teacher autonomy.

Consequently, it seems essential to introduce new approaches to university educational quality assurance. These new approaches should be based not only on taking control over training process but also on promoting positive type of university teacher autonomy as an important factor of teacher performance quality improvement. This involves implementing new forms of teaching control and teacher performance management.

Our research allowed us to suggest a complex of intrinsic and extrinsic conditions which are able to ensure an optimal correlation between teacher autonomy and administrative control in the Russian higher educational environment. These conditions make the core of autonomy-oriented type of control in higher education which allows teacher's being a self-regulating actor through taking control of his professional activity and developing positive type of perceived teacher autonomy.

The proposed approach to investigate correlation between perceived teacher autonomy and educational control reveals a high potential of autonomy-oriented type of control. It appears that autonomy-oriented type of control stimulates pedagogical research, effective implementation of new educational technologies, teacher professional development and self-actualization. Therefore, autonomy-oriented type of control seems to be a mainspring of higher education reform.

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Authors' photos.

Top row: Left to Right

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Bottom row: Left to Right

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