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## **Professional Autonomy of a University Teacher in the USA and Russia: Freedom from Control or Freedom for Development?**

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*The present study aims to investigate the phenomenon of teacher autonomy, which has mostly been explored in the U.S. and is now attracting attention of educational researchers in other countries including Russia. Due to its complexity, the phenomenon of teacher autonomy is still not strictly defined and remains accepted in a variety of forms. Meanwhile, the meaning attributed to the concept of teacher autonomy has great significance in the context of both American and Russian systems of higher education. Analysis of the educational context in both countries and study of research works on the problem under investigation in the context of general concepts of humanistic and cognitive psychology, democratization of education and life-long learning allowed us to define the concept of university teacher professional autonomy as well as to determine special intrinsic and extrinsic conditions which can insure development of professional autonomy skills in young university teachers.*

*Keywords: higher education, teacher professional autonomy, free choice, critical reflection, pedagogical freedom, decision-making, professional self-development, independence, empowerment, personal agency, responsibility.*

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### **Introduction**

Modern educational system, following the world tendency for society democratization and humanization, is aimed at introduction of the ideas of changeable, multilevel, differentiated education. Due to ongoing globalization and subsequent growing interdependence of education research across geographical boundaries developing learner autonomy (which is generally defined as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (Holec, 1981, p. 3) has become one of the major educational goals in many countries.

This causes higher education institutions’ faculty to be involved in making various important decisions that include devising course syllabi; choosing teaching forms, methods and materials; mastering new forms of learning environment (e.g. virtual learning environment), coming up with new classroom ideas for promoting learner autonomy. Modern educational documents state that one of the primary goals of the higher education reform is to introduce a new method of teaching focusing on the students’ needs, interests and demands

and considering their diversities. This can be done if teachers take initiative in curriculum development.

Therefore, new responsibilities have been assigned to university teachers. This forms objective preconditions for the recognition of a teacher's leading role in providing quality education. Indeed, "from the point of view of acmeological science a professional can be trained only by a professional, who is capable of self-education, self-organization and self-control" (Shurupova, 2009, p. 169). As Tort-Moloney, Little, McGrath and Smith have claimed, teachers who are not autonomous themselves may have a negative influence on the development of their students' autonomy (Tort-Moloney, 1997; McGrath, 2000; Smith, 2000).

In relation to this, teacher autonomy has been actively encouraged for more than ten years in the United States and many European countries and is becoming an issue in Russia, especially in the field of foreign language education (Allwright, 1990; Little, 1994, 1995, 2001; Voller, 1997; Benson, 2000; Smith, 2000; Aoki 2002; Tambovkina, 2000; Koriakovtseva, 2001; Nosacheva, 2010; et al.).

There is a growing body of literature demonstrating that the notion of teacher autonomy is a necessary and complementary part of the learner autonomy concept. Over the last decade several foreign authors have emphasized the fact that the promotion of learner autonomy depends on the promotion of teacher autonomy (Little, 1995, 2001; Smith, 2000; Benson, 2000; Aoki, 2002). As K. Castle states, "teacher autonomy will equip teachers to be curriculum 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" (Castle, 2004, p. 7). It is also suggested that more autonomous teachers feel greater job satisfaction (Davis & Wilson, 2000; Pearson & Moomaw, 2006), experience better outcomes in teaching (Little, 2001), and are more likely to avoid stress, professional demotivation and attrition or burnout (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005). Autonomy has also been identified as necessary for a teacher's sense of professionalism (Ingersoll & Alsalam, 1997; Hanson, 2003; Pearson & Moomaw, 2006).

With all the efforts to investigate this relatively new concept embracing both professional and teaching components, there is a teacher autonomy paradox: being widely discussed, teacher autonomy still does not have a strict definition. Today it remains accepted in a variety of forms: from "right to freedom from control" (Pearson & Hall, 1993) and "capacity to engage in self-directed teaching" (Little, 1995) to the "state of being when isolated teachers operate a classroom in an independent, noncollaborative manner" (Willner, 1990). Several attempts were made to define the concept (Little, 1994, 1995; Tort-Moloney, 1997; McGrath, 2000; Smith, 2000; Benson, 2000; Aoki, 2002; Atsushi, 2009, et al.), but the questions of what particular competences and conditions are required for teachers to be autonomous and what influences the level of autonomy felt by teachers remain open.

This problem compels 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. Secondly, it is important to reveal the specifics of educational contexts and personal factors, which may influence the development of university teacher autonomy in the USA and Russia. Thirdly, our solution to the university teacher autonomy problem in Russia has to be provided.

### **Conceptions of teacher autonomy in American and Russian contexts**

It should be pointed out that conceptions of teacher autonomy employed by American researchers were often limited to teachers' control over their work practices. Based on this conception are Kevin Carey's views, according to which "the real problem in public education isn't too little teacher autonomy – it's too much" (Carey, 2008). In his opinion, due to American tradition of local educational control with thousands of districts and tens of thousands of schools, each deciding on their own what students need to learn, teacher autonomy historically has been misinterpreted as "not just how to teach but what to teach and how to assess the results". He blames American teachers' unions that became influential in the 1960s and 1970s and considered teachers' rights and classroom autonomy as key elements of elevating teaching into the realm of respected, well-paid professions. According to Kevin Carey, this resulted in several issues:

1. The autonomy ideal was extended to resist any kind of meaningful teacher evaluation (in 2008 the United Federation of Teachers in New York created a moratorium on basing tenure decisions on "student performance data" of any kind), which led to the fact that really good teachers become harder to find.

2. American teachers had no common expectations or accountability for how much a student learned by the end of the year and this has led to calls for the education reform, including common standards for all students.

3. Instead of balancing policies focused on increasing both teacher quality and quantity, the focus has been on quantity alone (in 1965 the national student/teacher ratio was 25 to one, today it's 15 to one, the lowest in history). At the same time training provided to novice teachers prior to their entering a classroom is insufficient as well as the mentoring they are given after

starting the job. Also, teachers are not held accountable for learning results, which degrades the accomplishments of the best among them. As a result, the term "autonomy" very often conceals the lack of support teachers receive in schools.

On this basis Kevin Carey argues for relinquishing the existing kind of autonomy and promoting a newer, better kind of autonomy based on teachers' collaboration and evaluation. He further claims that teachers shouldn't define what success means, but they should have freedom to achieve it and be recognized for doing so (Carey, 2008).

The difficulties in defining teacher autonomy can be explained by the fact that the term "autonomy" is used in a wide variety of meanings and in numerous philosophical, psychological and pedagogical settings. Let's refer to some of the most often used definitions of personal autonomy and teacher autonomy, given by foreign researchers.

G. Dworkin describes autonomy as a global property referring to a person as a whole, not to particular acts (Dworkin, 1988, p. 16). Thus, personal autonomy is meant as a trait that individuals can exhibit relative to any aspects of their lives, not limited to questions of moral obligation (Dworkin, 1988, p. 34). D. Allwright defines autonomy as "...a constantly changing but at any time optimal state of equilibrium between maximal self-development and human interdependence" (Allwright, 1990, p. 12).

As for teacher autonomy, R.G. Willner regards it as teacher's work in isolation (Willner, 1990). However, this viewpoint is disputed in the more current research (Littlewood, 1999; Smith, 2003 et al.). Teacher autonomy is also viewed as a teacher's capacity to engage in self-directed teaching, including detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action (Little, 1994) or the extent to which a teacher makes independent

educational decisions (Pearson & Hall, 1993). W. Littlewood considers an autonomous person as “one who has an independent capacity to make and carry out choices which govern his or her actions. This capacity depends on two main components: ability and willingness...” (Littlewood, 1997, p. 428). Some authors refer to it as “the teacher’s ability and willingness to help learners take responsibility for their own learning” (Thavenius, 1999, p. 160). Teacher autonomy is also defined as “control of one’s own work environment” (Pearson & Hall, 1993, p. 173), “freedom to make certain decisions” (Short, 1994, p. 490-491), teachers’ capacity to engage in self-directed teaching (Little, 1995, Tort-Moloney, 1997); the capacity, freedom, and/or responsibility to make choices concerning one’s own teaching (Aoki, 2000) or teachers’ autonomy as learners (Smith, 2000, Savage, 2001). Friedman’s paper suggests that teacher autonomy involves “encouraging and strengthening the power of teachers” (Friedman, 1999, p. 60). J. Everitt in his paper, presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, measures autonomy as a latent variable that combines teachers’ influence on the policies of their schools with their control over classroom activities, thus allowing to compare teachers who experience different combinations of classroom control and policy influence (Everitt, 2005).

Generally, a review of the professional literature in American education reveals that, firstly, teacher professional autonomy is not strictly defined and may be presented in a variety of forms, which can be arranged into two types: “provided autonomy” and “possessed autonomy” by analogy with “freedom from” and “freedom for” defined by A.S. Arsen’ev (Arsen’ev, 1999). Secondly, it should be pointed out that in the American language teaching literature there is a much greater emphasis on the relation

between teacher autonomy and learner autonomy (Allwright, 1990; Little, 1995; Thavenius, 1999; McGrath, 2000; Smith 2000; Martinez, 2001; Aoki, 2002). Consequently, teacher autonomy is often suggested to be defined by the analogy with learner autonomy: “If learner autonomy is the capacity, freedom, and/or responsibility to make choices concerning one’s own learning ... teacher autonomy, by analogy, can be defined as the capacity, freedom, and/or responsibility to make choices concerning one’s own teaching” (Aoki, 2002, p. 11). Thirdly, most of the existing definitions point to one common aspect, which stresses that teacher autonomy requires being self-directed, self-governed and is based on the recognition of greater power and freedom to the teachers in their professional activities and capacity for self-directed professional development.

In this research teacher autonomy is defined in terms suggested by Kamii (Kamii & Hooousman, 2000) who has referred to the fact that autonomy is the ability, not the right to be self-governing. It means that the case of “provided autonomy” does not necessarily mean that a person is autonomous.

Indeed, today it is obvious that provided freedom doesn’t necessarily lead to professional development and manifestation of professional autonomy by university teachers. It can be proved by the fact that despite active promotion of autonomy in the USA, there is the deficit of highly qualified teachers. This means that teacher professional autonomy should be developed intentionally.

Therefore, caused by the objective need in special additional teacher training, a lot of so-called “teaching and learning centers” have been opened in the USA universities, where they hold special seminars, devoted to methodology of teaching and ways of working with students (Kuz’minov, 2007).

The problem of teachers' professionalism is not new for Russia as well, where it is probably even more urgent. It is explained by a number of factors, which include widely accepted practice when universities hire their graduates to teach there. This excludes specialists' going through external labor market and deprives them of external quality evaluation and control.

Professional competition is one of the most important factors which influence a teacher's motivation for professional development and professional autonomy.

This is clearly demonstrated in the US universities, where students have maximum freedom in choosing courses within the curriculum; programs at the first and second levels of college education; a university to continue education (after obtaining a Bachelor's Degree). Besides, one of the significant features of the US college education is universities' competition for the most promising students at the second level of higher education, who would take part in university research and classes organization, thus serving as key factors of curricula development.

Russian educational system has been under the influence of centralist tendencies throughout the process of its historical development. Consequently, Russian traditions of college education are characterized by less freedom in determining the contents of the curricula; group education domination, scarcity of elective courses. This does not encourage creation of competitive environment for the teachers, who do not feel the need to improve the courses (Kuz'minov, 2007).

Today, university autonomy and academic freedom, which are closely connected with university teacher autonomy, are emphasized in many national education documents and initiatives, such as 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,

and even in the third generation State Educational Standards.

Due to such initiatives, modern Russian researchers started investigating the concept of autonomy which had been viewed in our country for a long time as a negative thing associated with individualism.

Some up-to-date definitions of teacher autonomy, however few in number, are based on the foreign concept of learner autonomy and autonomous/self-directed learning and consider teacher autonomy to be a precondition for autonomization of educational process. Such aspects of professional autonomy as strategic competence and pedagogical consulting are studied in the works of E.A. Nosacheva (Nosacheva, 2009, 2010).

L.N. Makarova believes autonomy to be a teachers' personality trait, which allows them "to determine the frameworks for creating their own character and style subject to their own domestic rules and resisting to external destabilizing pressure" (Makarova, 2000, p. 14).

N.Iu. Tambovkina explains teacher autonomy as "the ability to think and act in one's profession independently from foreign will, circumstances, one's own fears; to make one's own choice and important decisions through creating one's own goals and working out individual strategies for meeting these goals' objectives" (Tambovkina, 2000, p. 63).

Responsibility and reflection are often described by Russian researchers as key elements of teacher autonomy (Nosacheva, 2009; Tambovkina 2000, et al.).

It should be pointed out that most of domestic works on teacher autonomy consider the phenomenon in a larger context of professional self-development. For example, N.F. Koriakovtseva views teacher professional autonomy as "a requirement for effective personal development and self-actualization in

a broad socio-cultural context” (Koriakovtseva, 2001, p. 12). G.P. Sharapkina considers autonomy to be “the basis for professional socialization” and states that “its development is one of the top targets of teacher training process” (Sharapkina, 2004, p. 148). According to M.R. Kuznetsova, “pedagogical freedom is an important part of civil democratic development” (Kuznetsova, 2009, p. 109).

Based on the above mentioned, this study defines teacher professional autonomy as “freedom for” which implies social interaction, personal development and self-actualization. This approach allows us to broaden understanding of teacher autonomy through considering it as an important factor in prevention of teacher attrition.

A review of the professional literature allowed us to propose the following definition of teacher professional autonomy. **Teacher professional autonomy is based on the responsibility and relative independence from external factors. It involves teacher capacity to intensify one’s own professional activity and personal development, making intellectual and moral decisions by considering various perspectives, creating one’s own professional goals, making free choices of educational forms, means, methods and content, and self-monitoring one’s own professional experience.**

#### **Factors affecting teacher autonomy development**

Taking into account the abovementioned arguments which prove the existing lack of autonomy in modern university teachers in spite of provided freedom, we believe that teacher professional autonomy should be developed intentionally. That is why it is essential that we identify intrinsic and extrinsic factors able to promote and impede this capacity.

Defining teacher autonomy as “a common link that appears when examining teacher motivation, job satisfaction, stress (burnout), professionalism, and empowerment”, Pearson and Moomaw state that its “intrinsic factors consist of individual satisfaction such as desire to assist students to accomplish goals, desire to make a difference in society and sense of achievement when students learn”, whereas extrinsic factors are considered to be “comprised of external elements including wage, nonmonetary fringe benefits and recognition of performance” (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005, p. 39).

In the context of teaching the complex of the abovementioned teacher desires and sense of achievement may be considered as **teaching achievement motivation**.

Taking into consideration the data described above, we suggest the readiness to engage in lifelong autonomous learning (including the capacity to become self-directed in improving one’s own teaching and other professional skills and to learn from colleagues at the University and those outside the University) to be another important intrinsic factor promoting teacher autonomy. From this viewpoint, a foreign language teacher can be regarded as autonomous not only by being a professional teacher but also by being a lifelong language learner. Otherwise, job dissatisfaction including stress or pressure results in negative outcomes for teacher autonomy.

According to Little, Hawley, Henrich, and Marsland (Little et al., 2002), the development of teacher autonomy entails a process of internalization or **personal agency** defined as the sense of personal empowerment (or self-empowerment), which implies self-belief, trust, and self-leadership and involves both knowing one’s goals and having what it takes to achieve them. Thus, being self-empowered, teachers will know they have an active role in educational

process. Self-empowerment/personal agency is also considered one of the requisites for personal growth and success. Dictionary.com's 21st Century Lexicon defines a self-empowered person as a person deriving the strength to do something through one's own thoughts and based on the belief that one knows what is best for oneself.

Analysis of psychological works on self-empowerment/personal agency allowed us to argue that teachers can develop their self-empowerment/personal agency by trying to be more open, questioning, actively looking for solutions and developing their self-esteem (self confidence and great trust in one's own abilities). The latter, however, doesn't mean that a teacher has to be always right. It means a teacher is inwardly prepared to face whatever professional context serves up.

Therefore, we believe that teachers can cultivate their professional autonomy by giving themselves a fertile and stable internal environment, which translates to an attitude that is highly motivated, open, confident, questioning and actively looking for solutions, relatively independent from external factors and based on positive thinking.

As we can see, a variety of factors affect the teacher autonomy development. The study of these factors allowed us to elaborate the pedagogical conditions and the technology of teacher autonomy development in the course of their professional activity. As Berezina has considered, "it is important to create special pedagogical conditions necessary for the development of teacher autonomy which will make a teacher capable of acting at his/her ease for assuring students autonomy" (Berezina, 2001, p. 3).

According to H. Martinez, becoming aware of teachers' interpretation of learner autonomy and of their beliefs of language teaching is the

essence of nurturing teacher autonomy (Martinez, 2001).

Critical reflective inquiry, empowerment and dialogue are often seen by American researchers as three principles for teacher autonomy which can allow teachers to develop institutional knowledge and flexibility within their individual teaching contexts (Barfield et al., 2002; Smith, 2003). Arguing for teacher autonomy, M. Jiménez Raya correctly highlights that it is not about working in isolation and defines both teacher and learner autonomy as "the competence to develop as a self determined, socially responsible and critically aware participant in (and beyond) educational environments, within a vision of education as (inter)personal empowerment and social transformation" (Jiménez Raya, 2007, p. 33). This interpretation, linking to the social dimension of autonomy which is, according to the researcher, "about voice, respect for others, negotiation, cooperation, and interdependence" (Jiménez Raya, 2007, p. 33) conditioned our attention towards interaction in a university context as an important factor promoting teacher autonomy. According to C.S. LaCoe, teacher autonomy is directly related to decision-making (LaCoe, 2008).

Analyzing the factors affecting the teacher autonomy development as well as the processes involved in autonomous activity allowed us to determine special pedagogical conditions, which are able to make university teachers develop their professional autonomy. Among these conditions we should point out intrinsic and extrinsic ones.

**Intrinsic conditions** include **self-empowerment (or personal agency), readiness to engage in lifelong autonomous learning, achievement motivation** (desire to assist students in accomplishing goals, desire to make a difference in society and sense of achievement when students learn), as well as **relative independence from external factors**.

The revealed **extrinsic conditions** are:

- **Providing information** on characteristics and components of autonomous activity as well as on particular pedagogical goals, content and strategies of teaching a subject in accordance with general educational and university context. Together with teacher's involvement in observation and monitoring, based on his/her critical standpoint, this condition will ensure **critical awareness**.
- **Providing opportunities to make decisions** within university educational area (e.g. providing freedom of choice). Based on teacher self-empowerment, this condition will lead to teacher **empowerment** (from teacher control over classroom activities to teacher influence on university policies) and development of teacher **professional responsibility**.
- **Offering** the teachers plenty of **opportunities to continuously develop themselves as professionals** (e.g. by giving teachers more opportunities to take courses or visit symposia where new developments in the educational field are being discussed).
- **Providing monetary and nonmonetary fringe benefits for pedagogical research** (involving teachers in action research, in selecting their own goals from a range of alternatives on offer, in modifying and adapting the goals and content of the subject's program in accordance with professional situational problems they are to deal with).
- **Providing professional challenges** which may take the form of exploration into new educational areas, of teacher's decisions to undertake research, to transform his/her role in the classroom, to improve his/

her educational practice, professional knowledge or skills, etc.

- **Stimulating teacher interaction** in pedagogical project activities which will prevent teacher isolation, individualism and self-sufficiency and create the situation of cooperation, co-learning, negotiation and sharing.
- **Open evaluation and recognition of performance** which will make 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. This condition involves teachers into **competition, pedagogical self-monitoring and reflection**. Provided that there are no evaluation uncertainties this condition will lead to job satisfaction.

The complex of the described conditions will ensure the involvement of the three critical principles of action in the development of autonomy proposed by Barfield et al. participants of the Shizuoka Conference in 2001: critical reflective inquiry, empowerment and dialogue.

### Conclusion

Recent Russian higher education reform initiatives resulting from the world tendency for higher education democratization and humanization force us to study special teachers' capacities, which allow them to promote learner autonomy. Among these capacities teacher autonomy plays a crucial role in providing a new type of higher education through allowing pedagogical research, teacher influence on school policies, effective implementation of new educational technology, teacher development and self-actualization in a broad socio-cultural context and retaining teachers in their jobs. Based on this, we tried to study the concept of teacher autonomy



a bit more closely in the context of American and Russian higher education institutions.

The findings of this paper offer several contributions to the pedagogical literature on teacher autonomy. Continuing the efforts to define and describe teacher autonomy as an essential factor of teacher professionalism and self-development, this study expands our understanding of teacher autonomy in the context of today's transformation of Russian educational system. It means that teacher autonomy should be considered as a key variable when examining higher education reform initiatives and granting autonomy could be a way to begin solving some of today's problems of higher education institutions (including lack of professionalism, teaching stereotypes, professional demotivation and attrition) by ensuring teachers personal development and self-actualization in a broad socio-cultural context.

At the conceptual level of our research it means that a teacher him/herself, his/her desires, his/her process for forming the desires and the resulting actions are all the sorts of things that could be regarded as autonomous.

The conditions for promoting teacher autonomy identified in this paper certainly call for increased attention to modern university policies that may enhance or decrease teacher autonomy.

In the context of today's transformation of educational system, there are several practices Russian universities should initiate. Firstly, teachers should be involved more actively when it comes to decision-making. Secondly, more opportunities to teacher professional self-development should be offered. Thirdly, evaluation and recognition of teacher performance should be implemented alongside with provision of monetary and nonmonetary fringe benefits for pedagogical research. Developing management structures that are able to provide conditions, identified in this paper, and stimulate teacher autonomy, university administrators can increase job satisfaction and prevent professional demotivation and attrition amongst university teachers.

Implications for future research are based on the conclusion that teacher autonomy cannot be understood without studying the characteristics of a teacher's workplace and teacher personality. The revealed special intrinsic and extrinsic conditions for teacher professional autonomy development can become the foundation for elaborating a special program, representing a system of proceedings stimulating teacher interaction in a university context and ensuring the formation of a complex of qualities, mindsets and skills for autonomous professional activity in teachers.

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## **Профессиональная автономность преподавателя университета в США и России: свобода от контроля или свобода для развития?**

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*Статья направлена на исследование профессиональной автономности преподавателя, которая, в основном, изучалась в США и в настоящее время привлекает внимание исследователей в области образования и в других странах, включая Россию.*

*В силу своей сложности феномен профессиональной автономности преподавателя до сих пор не имеет четкого определения и рассматривается по-разному. Между тем, смысл,*

*вкладываемый в понятие «автономность преподавателя», имеет большое значение в контексте как американской, так и российской систем высшего образования. Анализ образовательного контекста в этих странах и изучение научно-исследовательских работ по рассматриваемой проблеме в контексте общей концепции гуманистической и когнитивной психологии, демократизации образования и принципа обучения на протяжении всей жизни позволили нам дать определение феномену профессиональной автономности преподавателя, а также выявить специальные внутренние и внешние условия, которые способны обеспечить развитие навыков профессиональной автономности у молодых преподавателей университета.*

*Ключевые слова: высшее образование, профессиональная автономность преподавателя, свободный выбор, критическая рефлексия, свобода преподавания, принятие решений, профессиональное саморазвитие, независимость, расширение прав и возможностей, личная вовлеченность, ответственность.*

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