# Teacher Autonomy, Motivation, and Job Satisfaction: Perceptions of Elementary School Teachers According to Self-Determination Theory

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**Abstract**. Research has long established a connection between teacher autonomy and motivation and job satisfaction. Teacher autonomy in the context of motivation and job satisfaction includes making independent choices, having control, and being part of shared decision-making processes. Self-Determination Theory posits that autonomy does not exist by itself, but rather, is inextricably connected with competence and relatedness. Similarly, research on self-efficacy suggests a relationship between the control and capability a person feels to their goals and motivation. These constructs make sense, however, in the context of the United States public-school system, they belie the encouragement of teacher autonomy considering its historically hierarchical, top-down model. Conversely, countries, namely Finland, have instituted models that encourage and support teacher autonomy. Teachers in Finland are encouraged to be creative and autonomous, behaviors that have yielded both a high retention rate among its teachers and high achievement scores among its students. This paper examines teacher autonomy and suggests that its significance may impact school policy, teacher motivation, job satisfaction, and self-efficacy. In a study of 165 elementary teachers, the author administered The Basic Need Satisfaction at Work instrument to assess for teacher autonomy (Self-Determiniation Theory, 2000). Results supported the notion that autonomy is linked to competence and relatedness and job satisfaction. The study also suggests that teacher autonomy may be influenced by the leadership within the school and recommends greater exploration of teacher autonomy within the U.S. public-school system.

## Introduction

In light of the current political and educational debate about vouchers and charter schools, and amid cries for accountability, the debate about Common Core and similar curricula, and disputes about teacher evaluations tied to high stakes student achievement scores, it seems timely to examine teacher autonomy within public education in the United States and its influence within the teaching profession. By understanding how autonomy affects teachers we may better be able to pursue a path toward greater enlightenment and a more autonomous future.

Autonomy is defined as having free will either individually or as a group, and the right to be self-governing (Oxford University Press, 2020). Within the context of schools, teacher autonomy implies the ability to make independent choices. It refers to the control and freedom one perceives in the school environment including collegial relationships within the school setting, shared decision-making, flexibility, and choice as they relate to instructional methods (Pearson & Moomaw, 2006).

## Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness

Deci and Ryan (2005) maintain that autonomy incorporates competence and relatedness and that it is this combination that determines factors in motivation. The combination of autonomy, competence, and relatedness contributes to psychological well-being and is essential for individuals to feel intrinsically motivated (Deci E. L., 2008). Autonomy in this equation is about feeling in control or having a sense of ownership, while competence has to do with how capable a person feels about their ability to complete a task. This premise is founded on the belief that if people feel accomplished, they will tend to exert effort. Conversely, if they perceive themselves to be incapable, incompetent, or unskilled, they may employ avoidance tactics (Hoy, 2008).

Relatedness, according to Self-Determination Theory has to do with the affiliations one feels within an organization (Deci R. M., 2009). It includes forming bonds or attachments with others. Within an organization,

relatedness may manifest itself in the relationships among the stakeholders. In a school, for instance, relatedness may include the associations between the teachers and administrators and teachers and students. The term autonomy may seem elusive since it is predicated on how an individual perceives their own free will (Barfield, 2001). Two people may be given the same latitude within an organization, yet one person may perceive that they have been provided with rein to act independently, while another person may perceive the latitude to be restrictive at best. It is about seeing the world through one's lens to determine one's reality.

At the same time, certain attitudes and behaviors have been associated with feelings of autonomy. When individuals feel autonomous, they may express ideas of professional freedom and exhibit self-directed professional development. "Autonomy is developed through observation, reflection, thoughtful consideration, understanding, and experience"(Barfield, 2001, p. 26). To what extent, do public schools in the United States value or promote teacher autonomy?

## Teacher Autonomy in Colonial Times and Beyond

Teacher autonomy in the United States might best be understood by revisiting the onset of public education in the new world. Modeled upon the archetype of a Protestant, authoritative, and obedient institution, public education advocated the values of the middle class (McManus, 2014). Rooted in a religious context and made available to those of a certain social standing, legislation in 1642 obliged parents to ensure that their children be able to read and write to understand religious and legal ideologies. Three years later, the Old Deluder Satan Act mandated reading and writing teachers for towns over fifty families (Ornstein, 2013).

Those who resided in more sparsely populated areas could hire tutors to teach their children. However, the option to attend a school or be tutored was not available to all citizens. Black children were legally banned from learning to read and write, while poor white families who could not afford tutors went without formal schooling (Ornstein, 2013). Hence, the stage was set for a dogmatic system in which status, class, and religion determined membership (Levin, 2012).

Teachers, most of whom were male and who were referred to as schoolmasters, typically lacked education beyond the level at which they taught. Rare was the individual who intended to teach as a career. Instead, teaching was viewed as a temporary role within the larger process, especially by better-educated males who intended a more prestigious career in law or the church (Levin, 2012). The role of women within the school system was consigned to a subservient one. To men, the presence of women in the schools was strictly out of necessity.

Reform measures for both students and schoolmasters would emerge in the 1830s when Horace Mann sought to establish educational priorities for a "nonsectarian form of Christianity for the public"(Rury, 2016, p.74). His Common School philosophy promoted democracy and free education for all (Goldstein, The Teachers' Wars; A History of America's Most Embattled Profession, 2014). Believers in the Common School equated an educated populace with positive judgment. Education for the masses, however, meant increased costs. As such, women, who were deemed inferior to men, and therefore paid only half the salaries of their male counterparts, assumed teaching roles with greater representation than ever before (Goldstein, The Chicago Strike and the History of American Teachers' Unions, 2012). Ensuing decades and centuries would establish and permeate a system in which women would dominate the teaching roles while educational leadership roles would remain male-dominated (Levin, 2012).

In 1800, ninety percent of teachers in the United States were male, yet one hundred years later, three-fourths of the teaching workforce would be comprised of women. Many of the same problems that resonated across the centuries continue to be problems today, primarily those focused on "low school budgets to testing to debates over classroom autonomy" (Goldstein, The Chicago Strike and the History of American Teachers' Unions, 2012).

Public education continued to be an organization driven by low pay and a lack of respect for teachers. Fueled by the dissent, teacher unions, as early as the mid-1800s gave rise to a voice for teachers and a call for autonomy (The Labor and Working Class History Association, 2014). They fought for higher pay, greater teacher autonomy in the classroom, and educational policy input (Mertz, n.d.). Nearly one hundred years later, in a poignant speech given at the 1904 National Education Association (NEA) convention, Margaret Haley, Chicago public teacher, proclaimed that if students were to be "free, democratic thinkers," then so too should their teachers (Mertz, n.d.). She demanded improved working conditions, greater respect, and a prominent place in designing educational policy for teachers (Mertz, n.d.). Some may argue that similar demands are needed in the twenty-first century.

## Teacher Autonomy, Self-Efficacy, and Motivation

While teacher autonomy has long been associated with job satisfaction and teacher retention, it has also been associated with teacher efficacy. Self-efficacy, defined as a person's perception of their control over and capability to complete a task, has also been connected with individual goals and motivation (Cambridge University Press, 2020). In a study by Skaalvik & Skaalvik (2009), the researchers determined that teacher autonomy relates to teacher self-efficacy and that both teacher autonomy and self-efficacy have a positive impact on the motivation and emotional well-being of teachers. The authors further suggest that teacher self-efficacy and teacher autonomy are independently associated with, and are "predictors of engagement, job satisfaction, and emotional exhaustion" (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009, p. 523).

Self-efficacy, like autonomy, is largely determined by the perception one has of oneself within an organization (Bandura A. , 1982) The judgments made in consort with self-efficacy tend to be "task and situation-specific" (Pajares, 1996, p. 56). Like the relatedness and competence factors of Self-Determination Theory, self-efficacy requires both a belief that one is capable and a sense of being valued within the organization.

This does not presuppose, however, that autonomous teachers who exemplify self-efficacy characteristics are without doubt or feelings of failure. As Bandura maintained, it is not about how people react, but rather "the speed of recovery of perceived self-efficacy from difficulties" (Bandura, 1989, p.1118). Ultimately, by establishing an organization that affords the individual the autonomy to make choices and feel respected and valued, their level of competence and relatedness will bolster their self-efficacy. These interrelated facets lend themselves toward a greater propensity for motivation and satisfaction.

## Teacher Autonomy Perceptions in Modern Times

More than a hundred years have passed since Margaret Haley's impassioned pleas for autonomous, "free-thinking" teachers and today, the same calls for dignity and autonomy continue to ring out across the nation (Mertz, n.d.). Calls for action address the need for shared decision-making as well as for the autonomy of teachers to choose how to teach, when to teach, with what materials and methods to employ, and the autonomy to choose the assessment to best meet the needs of the students (Sandoval, 2018).

As teacher autonomy continued to be a rallying point for teacher organizations, the National Center for Education Statistics conducted a poll of more than 37,000 American public-school teachers to assess their level of job satisfaction and perceived autonomy. The study spanned two-year intervals, namely 2003 - 2004, 2007 - 2008, and 2011 - 2012. The study, under the presumption that teacher autonomy is associated with job satisfaction and teacher retention, sought to measure and compare autonomy across each of the two-year time spans. Teachers were asked questions about how much control they felt they had in the selection of class books and materials, content to be taught, teaching methods, evaluation and grading practices, discipline, and homework policies. Although results revealed a moderate level of teacher autonomy across the total nine-year span, data did indicate that teacher autonomy had progressively waned over the years, with the greatest levels of autonomy reported from 2003-2004 and the least autonomous levels during the most recent 2011-2012 timespan (Malkus, 2015). These findings suggest that teachers perceive their autonomy in the classroom to be decreasing.

## Autonomy, Professionalism, and Long-Term Implications

The conundrum within public education in the United States is that while teacher autonomy is recognized as a factor of motivation and job satisfaction, the system is a hierarchical one, rooted in authoritative control. Educational reform advocates assert that greater teacher autonomy and decision-making input will result in more informed decisions than those made by a district or state supervisors, however, they acknowledge an organization that is deeply rooted in a top-down model (Smith, 2003). "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 school" (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005, p.38).

Given this construct, the autonomy of teachers may be dissected into two main entities: the first is how much control the individual feels relevant to tasks, decision-making, and interpersonal relationships, while the second addresses how the community in which the organization exists affects the freedom of choice. The implicit nature of the American public education system is that of a bureaucratic organization steeped in prescribed procedures and directives (Smith, 2003). Districts often dictate the curriculum, the resources, the schedule, and the forms and protocol each teacher is to follow. Aside from the constraints of being told what to teach, how to teach, and when to teach, these mandates eliminate any sense of teacher autonomy in these areas.

Some suggest "that top-down decision making often fails precisely because it lacks the support of those whose (sic) are responsible for the implementation and success of the decision" (Pearson & Moomaw, 2006, p. 173). While autonomy has been associated with self-efficacy and motivation, it has also emerged as a component of professional standing. It has long been debated whether teaching, particularly in the United States, constitutes a career or a profession. Some suggest that "to strengthen teacher autonomy is to enhance the professionalization of teaching" while others equate autonomy as a key characteristic of professions in modern-day society (Sears, 2010).

Fisher and Rubenson (2007b) assert that "a central and defining characteristic of professions in modern society has traditionally been their high level of relative autonomy" (p. 2).

If professional autonomy means having control over one's work environment, and teacher autonomy is related to collegial relationships within the school setting, shared decision-making, flexibility, and choice as they relate to instructional method; then how can top-down decisions succeed if they lack the support and buy-in of those who are expected to successfully implement these decisions (Pearson & Moomaw 2006)?

Herein lies the polarization of teacher autonomy within public education in the United States in contrast to education in other developed nations. As Sahlberg (2011) explains, to allow one to maintain control implies and is predicated upon the premise that one can be afforded the trust inherent within an autonomous role. This necessitates that one be adequately trained, educated, and prepared for the task. It is therefore essential to ensure that teachers are highly qualified before they enter the profession and to support them throughout the teacher preparation program.

When Finland successfully revamped its educational system, one of its defining features focused on teacher autonomy. Beginning with the recruitment and training of teacher candidates, entry into a Finnish teacher preparation program is competitive, with only one in ten applicants accepted (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2011). Not only are candidates chosen because of their academic prowess but are also selected based on characteristics aligned with independent thinking.

Teachers in Finland are highly revered and afforded much the same respect given to physicians in the United States (Sahlberg, 2011). Teachers are encouraged to think outside of the box intellectually and to trust their judgments (Sahlberg, 2011). Sahlberg uses the acronym G.E.R.M., or the Global Educational Reform Movement to contrast the differences between how the United States and Finland view education and teaching. G.E.R.M. is representative of a system focused on core subjects, a prescribed curriculum, standardization, test-based accountability, and control. By contrast, the Finnish educational system encourages a relaxed, creative environment where collaboration, shared responsibility, and autonomy is encouraged. The curriculum in Finland is creative, cutting-edge, and deeply thoughtful (Sahlberg, 2011). These practices have not only resulted in high achieving students, but also the retention of teachers.

According to the National Education Association, more than 40 percent of teachers in the United States leave their positions during the first five years of their career and nearly 68 percent of them cite lack of respect, lack of autonomy, and low pay as fundamental reasons for leaving (NEA, 2019). Concurrently, a declining number of applicants to teacher preparation programs in the United States has resulted in high turnover, and inexperience of new teachers, both of which have contributed to the detriment of remaining teachers and a decline in student achievement (Weiss, 2019). By comparison, only 3 to 4 percent of teachers in Finland leave the profession, with morale and working conditions ranking high (Schembari, 2017).

If teacher autonomy in the United States continues to lag its counterparts in countries such as Finland, teachers will continue to feel unfulfilled and will continue to leave the field in record numbers (Sahlberg, 2011). And if the United States public education policymakers fail to recognize and support the importance of teacher autonomy, then motivation and job satisfaction may be in a perilous position.

**Hypotheses**
Based on the current research on teacher autonomy and the premise of its relationship to efficacy and job satisfaction ( Skaalvik & Skaalvik 2014), the following hypotheses were posed at the onset of a field experiment:

- H1: Motivation levels correlate with levels of perceived autonomy.
- H2: Levels of autonomy are linked to the school setting.

**Method**
Central to self-determination theory is the concept of basic psychological needs that are assumed to be innate and universal. As such, The Basic Need Satisfaction at Work (Deci & Ryan, 2000) was administered. Comprised

of three subscales, it measures for autonomy, competence, and relatedness; necessary assessments to measure for satisfaction.

*Participants*

The experiment included one hundred sixty-five full-time elementary teachers. Teachers from each of the five elementary schools within a southeastern United States district were represented.

## Procedure

Each of the 165 participants was handed a questionnaire to complete individually. Participation was voluntary and confidential. The subjects were instructed to answer all items, not to leave any queries blank, and to complete the survey to the best of their ability and with their greatest effort toward honest responses.

## Results

The data for all five schools were collectively coded. The first subset of the scale, autonomy, was then averaged by the school (Table 1-1). Subsequently, competency was measured (Table 1-2). Finally, relatedness was assessed (Table 1-3). The One-way ANOVA was carried out to look for significance among the 21 questionnaire items and the three subscales. No significance was found; however, the means were remarkably similar among the subjects at all five schools and similarly among the mean of all three subscales. The mean for autonomy was 19.97, while the mean for competence and relatedness were 21.31 and 32.25 respectively.

A correlation analysis was then run for the 21 questionnaire items and the three subscales. These items did produce significant findings. With a mean of .237, autonomy showed a moderate significance, while the areas of competence and relatedness revealed a highly significant relationship. These findings support the premise of Self-Determination Theory and support the hypothesis that when individuals perceive themselves to be an integral part of the organization, they exhibit a higher level of competency and relatedness. When the organization promotes engagement and involvement, the worker feels valued and thus experiences a sense of worth. These motivations lead to a perception of competency and of being an integral and worthy member of the organization.

The data also showed significant findings in correlations between self-determination theory and competency and relatedness and moderate findings between self-determination theory and autonomy. The correlations analyses revealed a moderate level of significance between the degree of autonomy and relatedness with a Pearson Correlation coefficient of .237, and a significant factor of .003. The correlation between competence and relatedness was significant, with a Pearson Correlation coefficient of .187 and a significant factor of .018. Hence, the data supports the notion that the level of perceived autonomy and competence correlate to the impact and value one feels within the organization. The findings support the premise of Self-Determination Theory, that autonomy, competency, and relatedness are interrelated, and that this interrelatedness impacts both how the employee views themselves within the organization and their level of job satisfaction. Therefore, it can further be argued that the greater the level of job satisfaction, the greater the motivation. The findings also support the premise of Self-Determination Theory that autonomy is a factor of competency and relatedness.

| Schools | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error | 95% Confidence Interval for Mean Lower Bound | 95% Confidence Interval for Mean Upper Bound |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| OK | 55 | 20.2 | 3.291 | .444 | 19.31 | 21.09 |
| R | 35 | 19.63 | 3. 291 | .556 | 18.50 | 20.76 |
| B | 31 | 20.16 | 3.680 | .661 | 18.81 | 21.51 |
| BT | 31 | 20.16 | 2.888 | .519 | 19.10 | 21.22 |
| W | 7 | 18.29 | 4.386 | 1.658 | 14.23 | 22.34 |
| Total | 159 | 19.97 | 3.332 | .264 | 19.45 | 20.50 |

Table 1-1. Average autonomy levels by school

| Schools | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error | 95% Confidence Interval for Mean Lower Bound | 95% Confidence Interval for Mean Upper Bound |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

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| | | | | | 95% Confidence Interval for Mean Lower Bound | 95% Confidence Interval for Mean Upper Bound |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| OK | 55 | 21.76 | 2.227 | .300 | 21.16 | 22.37 |
| R | 35 | 21.46 | 1.990 | .336 | 20.77 | 22.14 |
| B | 31 | 21.23 | 2.109 | .379 | 20.45 | 22.00 |
| BT | 31 | 20.77 | 2.753 | .495 | 19.76 | 21.78 |
| W | 7 | 19.86 | 1.464 | .553 | 18.50 | 21.21 |
| Total | 159 | 21.31 | 2.267 | .180 | 20.96 | 21.67 |

Table 1-2. Average perception of teaching competence by school

| Schools | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error | 95% Confidence Interval for Mean Lower Bound | 95% Confidence Interval for Mean Upper Bound |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| OK | 55 | 31.95 | 4.908 | .662 | 30.62 | 32.27 |
| R | 35 | 32.31 | 3. 818 | .645 | 31.00 | 33.63 |
| B | 31 | 32.42 | 4.653 | ,836 | 30.71 | 34.13 |
| BT | 31 | 33.10 | 3.544 | .636 | 31.80 | 34.40 |
| W | 7 | 29.86 | 3.716 | 1.405 | 26.42 | 33.29 |
| Total | 159 | 32.25 | 4.338 | .344 | 31.57 | 32.93 |

Table 1-3. Average perception of relatedness by school

## Discussion

The research indicates a correlation between perceptions of worth and value within an organization and motivation and job satisfaction (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014). The research also supports a correlation between the sense of autonomy that teachers perceive within the school environment and their perception of autonomy (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005).

The data from this study revealed significant findings to support a relationship between autonomy and self-determination theory. There were no significant findings or differences among the teachers at the five elementary schools. Considering the diversity of the schools, this may support the perception that autonomy, competence, and relatedness have been found to transcend demographic or cultural differences among populations (Levesque, 2004).

## Limitations and future studies

Limitations of this study may be due in part to the small and homogeneous make-up of the county. Another limitation was the volunteerism factor of the participants. It can be argued that the teachers who volunteered to complete the survey were either highly satisfied or highly dissatisfied at work and thus wanted to voice their level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

Future studies might randomly select the subjects; leading perhaps, to a more balanced subject set.

## Conclusion

The study reveals and supports the need for greater investigation into the realm of teacher
autonomy and its implications for organizational policy within the United States public education system. It also lends itself to an examination of leadership at the school, district, and state levels.

If the Ministry of Education in Finland was able to dramatically increase both the autonomy of its teachers and the achievement levels of its students within a three-decade period, then perhaps the same possibilities present themselves to America. As Sahlberg explained, "…we have been working on this situation systematically now for the past 20 years, where we have given the authority and autonomy also to the schools from the central administration, and I think this is, frankly, speaking, one of the keys also to this favourable situation that we have internationally (Alberici, 2012)."

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