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PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS' VIEWS ON THEIR AUTONOMY

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Abstract

In the paper we discuss primary school teachers' views of their own autonomy. In the introduction we present the theoretical premises and the views of different authors. In spite of the different views on understanding teacher's autonomy, it can be summed up it is a complex, multi-layered and important factor of teacher's activities. It appears at different levels and relations in the education process. Here we highlight the significance of decentralisation of school that influences teacher's authority and tasks, as with decentralisation the power and responsibility of decision-making is transferred from the national to the school level, which means the significance of school autonomy—and thus also of teachers' autonomy—is strengthened. In the second part the results of an empirical study carried out on the sample of 104 primary school teachers from 30 randomly selected basic schools in Slovenia are presented. We found primary school teachers estimate they are autonomous in their work. To the largest extent teacher's autonomy is influenced by regulation in education, by the curriculum, and by professional qualifications, and the least by parents. They link their own autonomy to independence in making decisions about choosing the methods of teaching and the selection of teaching resources they use at the performance level of teaching. According to the estimate of surveyed teachers they have less autonomy in selecting textbooks, which can be attributed to enforcing the policy of joint procurement and to the decisions of school authorities regarding the introduction of the latter into school practice.

Key words: Autonomy, teacher, forms, methods, teaching

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Introduction

Autonomy can be discussed from different points of view. In the school field it is often linked to the decentralisation of school systems and with the level of freedom, responsibility, and control. The findings stated by Caldwell-Harris (2008) confirm the assumption decentralised school systems assure better efficiency in schools. According to Euridyce (2008) the basic starting points for the reform of introducing autonomy into systems are: freedom of choice of teaching methods, democratic participation, decentralisation, and improving the quality of teaching. As Sardoč (2005) finds in modern democratic societies the principle “autonomy of schools” is one of the most important principles in the organisation of public education systems. This principle guarantees schools the right to independent decision-making in many areas of administration, in planning, and in organising the operation of the school, as well as deciding in the framework of educational processes. At the same time requirements, responsibility, limitations in making decisions and in organisation, and several other restrictions have been imposed on them (the school, the teachers, the school head). Koren (2006) argues the autonomy of school can be related to the autonomy of teachers and Kramar (2002) adds autonomous teachers decide freely on the conceptualisation, articulation, designing, preparing, performing, and evaluating the education process.

Theoretical background

In the school field there are a large number of definitions of the concept of autonomy. So we can start from scientific disciplines and within them also from individual theories. We can also start from a particular entity to which autonomy refers and thus speak about the autonomy of school, teaching, school space, teacher, headteacher, student, parents, profession, science, ... Frequently, however, the concept of autonomy is just an implicit assumption. Whatever we set as our starting point, the key issue is in which way autonomy is defined in relation to something else (e.g. autonomy of school in relation to the state and the structures of power). We could say autonomy is “an abstract concept that has little or no influence on practice” (Koren, 2006: 86).

Examination of our school system shows in our country autonomy does not have a long history. In the school field it only started to assert itself in recent decades. In the 1995 White Paper (Bela knjiga) autonomy is defined as a general and leading principle. Today “education system is founded on the principles of democracy, autonomy and equal opportunities. These principles are based on human rights and the state governed by the rule of law” (Krek, 1995 in: Koren, 2006: 85).

Krek and Metljak (2011) emphasises in practice the scope of the concept of autonomy is much wider. We can imagine it as a general assumption related to the modern concept of knowledge, modern science, and subjectivity. This is why it is not possible to narrow it down to just the structural solutions of the system and to various forms of autonomy. The concept of autonomy can be imagined as a kind of ethical posture we adopt or develop gradually, and which supposedly determines the thought and behaviour of each acting individual in definite frameworks of autonomy within the school system. This ethical posture is supposed to determine the thought and behaviour of each acting individual in the system of (public) schooling while it is simultaneously connected with the ways of transmitting knowledge and values (through teaching) in (public) school.

So the author (ibid.) explains in the system of (public) schooling there are a number of players (teachers, school heads, ...) who are autonomous, their autonomy being assured by predetermined frameworks). It is about the fields of autonomy within which these players have the possibility of freedom in their functioning. Krek thus sees the implementation of teacher's autonomy on the level of selecting the formats and methods, and of techniques, the implementation of these tasks being limited with the doctrine of the profession and with basic ethical principles.

Previous experience and the findings on education in Slovenia demand from us to "build further development on professional autonomy in making decisions about the use of internal approaches, social networks as a source of learning among organisations, teachers and other professionals as development of the quality of education." (Krek and Metljak, 2011: 49). The principle of autonomy exposed in the White Paper (Krek and Metljak, 2011) tells it is necessary to let professionals be autonomous in doing their jobs, and to act upon their own judgement. For this they must, of course, know their teaching field, the findings of educational sciences, and act responsibly on this foundation. They must also be open for cooperation and support of other professionals from outside school.

The growing expectations of parents, students, and politics, and all the changes that cause a growing diversity of professional roles in education are the main reasons why educational professionals must constantly take part in further training to be able to cope with their enlarged role. The enlarged role includes understanding social changes and responding to them, influencing the conditions of one's work, and

improving the work with children, adults, workmates, parents, and others. (ibidem)

Methods

Participants

In the study 104 primary school teachers (n=104) from different basic schools in Slovenia took part. On the level of inference statistics the employed non-random sample is defined as simple random sample from hypothetical population.

The sample represents 24 % of teachers with higher vocational education, 7 % with higher professional degree, 66 % teachers with higher university degree, 2 % with specialisation and 1 % teachers with master's degree. The surveyed teachers have a minimum of 2 and maximum 37 years of work experience. The sample contains 97 % female and 3 % male teachers.

Instruments

Data were gathered with a questionnaire consisting of two parts. The first part refers to demographic data and the second to teacher's autonomy. In this framework there is a five-point Likert-type scale of attitudes.

Validity is based on taking account of scientific findings about teacher's autonomy until now while rational validation is based on expert review. Reliability is confirmed with sufficient value of Cronbach's alpha coefficient ($\alpha = 0.60$).

Objectivity is assured with unified, unambiguous instruction in the questionnaire. Objectivity in the phase of conducting the survey is based on unguided investigation, and in the phase of reading the responses on the closed ended type of questions that make objectivity possible.

Procedure

Data were gathered using an online survey that was published on the Internet. By e-mail we asked heads of basic schools for cooperation of teachers of primary classes and to forward them the online survey. The time foreseen for filling in the survey was approximately 3 minutes.

The data were processed on the level of descriptive and inference statistics using the SPSS 19.

The differences between the dependent samples were examined with the t-test for paired samples, and the correlations between variables with Pearson correlation coefficient.

Statistical analysis

The data were processed on the level of descriptive and inference statistics using the SPSS 19.

The differences between the dependent samples were examined with the t-test for paired samples, and the correlations between variables with Pearson correlation coefficient.

Results

First we were interested in finding how the surveyed understand the concept "teacher's autonomy". The responses were classified into three groups: The first group consisted of the majority of the surveyed teachers (72 %) who explain teacher's autonomy with terms similar in content such as: autonomous, independence, freedom – without defining the field of autonomy. The acquired data are illustrated with concrete answers: "Autonomy means autonomy and independence in the area of my professional work to me", "Autonomy is freedom and independence in work", "Teacher's autonomy means in her/his work teacher is independent and autonomous". The question arises in which areas of work she/he is autonomous?

In the second group we gathered the responses of the teachers (20 %) who understand teacher's autonomy as professional qualification. They explain this understanding with the following assertions: "Autonomous is the teacher who is a good professional", or "Teacher's autonomy means the teacher is selfconfident and that he/she is in good command of the contents he/she teaches", "Autonomy means good disciplinary and pedagogical and psychological training of the teacher."

In the third group we gathered the remaining responses of the teachers (8 %) who understand teacher's autonomy as trust, responsibility, professionalism.

We asked the employed teachers how they estimate their autonomy. More than a half (66 %) of the surveyed teachers responded they are autonomous, 9 % out of this number estimate even they are completely autonomous.

The fields in which teachers are autonomous are represented in continuation.

Table 1: Fields of teacher's autonomy

	Share of responses				
	I am not autonomous at all.	I am not autonomous	I am partly autonomous	I am autonomous	I am completely autonomous
Selecting the formats and methods work.	0%	0%	4%	39%	57%
Selecting teaching aids.	1%	4%	29%	35%	32%
Selection of textbooks	6%	12%	60%	17%	6%
Adapting learning matter	0%	6%	28%	46%	20%
Testing knowledge.	0%	3%	26%	43%	28%
In relations to parents	0%	0%	24%	56%	20%
Making arrangements for team-work with other teachers.	0%	3%	32%	41%	24%

The acquired data show teachers are the most autonomous in selecting the formats, methods and techniques of work (autonomous 39 % and completely autonomous 57 %), which is very encouraging and in accordance with expectations. It shows in fact teachers are autonomous in selecting the formats, methods and techniques of work in the classroom. With selecting teaching aids, especially with selecting textbooks, we see the situation is slightly different as the share of teachers who are autonomous in this area or completely autonomous is smaller (35 % autonomous, 32 % completely autonomous). The results are comparable to those obtained by Vogrinc and Podgornik (2005) on a sample of 137 teachers.

For the fields of autonomy we calculated standard deviation (σ) and the coefficient of variation (CV). The coefficient of variation is the lowest in the area: selecting the formats, methods, and techniques of teaching (CV = 13%, σ 0.57) . The obtained results additionally support our finding this is the field in which the surveyed teachers are the most autonomous. This field is followed by the area of relations with parents (CV = 17%, σ = 0.67), where all the surveyed also feel completely autonomous. We can thus make the conclusion the areas of selecting the formats, methods and techniques of work; and relations with parents are the fields of teacher's autonomy in which, according to the estimations of the surveyed, teachers feel the most autonomous. Next is the area of testing knowledge (CV = 20%, σ =0.81%) followed by arranging for teamwork with other teachers (CV = 21%, σ = 0.81), selecting teaching aids (CV = 23%, σ = 0.92), and the last area, in which teachers feel the least autonomous, the area of selecting textbooks (CV = 28%, σ = 0.87).

Pearson correlation coefficient between work experience and the estimate of teacher's autonomy is 0.08 and is not statistically significant ($p=0.392$). On the basis of the obtained result we find there is no correlation between teachers' work experience and the estimate of teacher's autonomy. To a certain extent the result is surprising, as we had expected due to permanent teacher in-service training as a form of lifelong learning of educational professionals, which besides study programmes for acquisition of qualifications or for further training provides educational professionals opportunities for renewal, extending and deepening their knowledge as well as for learning the latest findings of the discipline, there would be a correlation between the two variables. The basic goal of further professional training is namely professional development and professional and personal growth of educational professionals, which also contributes to the quality and efficiency of the whole educational system. Financially the system is also supported by the relevant ministry, and represents part of the system of promotion of educational professionals in Slovenia.

Also interesting is the correlation between teacher's work experience and teacher's autonomy in individual areas which indicates statistically significant correlation between the number of years of work experience and the estimation of autonomy in selecting the format, methods, and techniques ($p=0.299$), textbooks ($p=0.304$), adapting the contents of learning ($p=0.208$), and relations with parents ($p=0.227$).

Table 2: Barriers to enforcing teacher's autonomy

	Share of responses				
	Does not influence at all.	Does not influence .	Partly influence s.	Influence s.	Influence s fully.
Regulation in the field of education	0%	1%	15%	46%	38%
Curriculum	0%	2%	18%	53%	27%
Professional qualification	1%	7%	15%	41%	36%
Material status of school	1%	5%	32%	45%	17%
Knowledge catalogues	1%	8%	32%	50%	10%
Headteacher	3%	14%	40%	33%	10%
Teaching materials with guidelines how to teach	1%	10%	55%	34%	1%
External knowledge testing	8%	16%	36%	35%	6%
Timetable	4%	19%	42%	31%	4%
Parents' influence	1%	24%	57%	17%	1%

The data show regulation in the field of education, curriculum, and professional qualifications have the greatest influence on teachers' autonomy, and parents the least influence. So regulation (laws and rules) is the factor that hinders teachers in the realisation of their autonomy the most.

The surveyed teachers demonstrate strong agreement in the factors that hinder their autonomy in the area of regulation in the field of education (CV=17%, $\sigma = 0.729$) and curriculum (CV =18%, $\sigma = 0.729$).

With the t-test we determined the differences between the estimated influence of regulation in the field of education and the influence of other factors on teacher's autonomy. We found there are statistically significant differences in all cases. More detailed results show the

following differences between the influence of regulation in the field of education and curriculum ($t = 2.532$, $p = 0.006$), material situation of school ($t = 4.738$, $p < 0.001$), knowledge catalogues ($t = 6.438$, $p < 0.001$), headteacher ($t = 8.867$, $p < 0.001$), teaching materials with guidelines how to teach ($t = 12.082$, $p < 0.001$), external knowledge testing ($t = 9.541$, $p < 0.001$) and timetable ($t = 10.522$, $p < 0.001$). On the basis of the obtained results we estimate regulation in the field of education and teacher's professional qualification influence autonomy the most ($t = 1.583$, $p = 0.06$).

Table 3: Results of the set of paired t-tests between the estimation of teacher's autonomy in the area of selecting textbooks and the estimation of autonomy in other areas of autonomy

Difference between autonomy in the area of selecting textbooks and	t	Levels of freedom	p - value
Selection of format, methods, and techniques	-15.083	103	< 0.001
Selection of teaching aids.	-9.332	103	< 0.001
Adaptation of learning content.	-7.943	103	< 0.001
Knowledge testing.	-9.216	103	< 0.001
Arranging for team-work with other teachers.	-8.525	103	< 0.001
With relations with parents.	-9.496	103	< 0.001

The obtained results show teachers feel the least autonomous in selecting textbooks. There are statistically significant differences in each of the measured areas. It can be seen from the table teacher's autonomy in selecting textbooks is statistically smaller than teacher's autonomy in other areas. The selection of textbooks does not only depend on individual teacher. In practice namely teachers collectively decide on the use of a certain textbook. Their choice is then submitted to the headteacher, who prior to the final decision about the purchase must obtain a written consent of Parents' Council (Pravilnik o upravljanju učbeniških skladov 2010 = Rules on the administration of textbook funds).

Discussion and conclusions

From the presented understandings of the concept "teacher's autonomy" it is evident the most frequently teachers understand autonomy in its broadest sense. It is thus about general understanding of the concept

“teacher’s autonomy”, which is encouraging and it shows teachers are aware of the meaning of “being an autonomous teacher”. We agree with Kroflič’s (1999) estimation teachers gradually have been wresting their way out of the vise of state and Church harnessings in direct proportionality with the growth of their professional knowledge and competence. As Marentič Požarnik (2004) states, it is, however, also true autonomy and expertise are the basic factors of teacher’s professionalism, closely linked to each other. Of course the question arises whether the teacher is actually autonomous or in which areas of work he or she is in fact autonomous. We tried to answer this question by determining an estimate of teacher’s autonomy and by identifying the barriers teachers encounter in implementing their own autonomy.

On the basis of the obtained results we estimate during teaching teachers acquire new experience, which by all means is useful for them and contributes to being more autonomous. The experience helps them in selecting the format of work, methods and techniques that help them best to lead their students toward the set goals. During teaching teachers also acquire the feeling and experience in the area of relations with parents. We can namely recognise teacher’s autonomy if the teacher consciously selects and decides about the values, procedures, priorities, including in the relation with parents. In this teacher’s communication skills play an important role, adds Lepičnik Vodopivec (2005). Also Kramar (2002) states autonomous teachers self-assuredly make decisions about drafting, articulation, planning, preparing, performing, and evaluating the education process. It is teachers’ supreme right – in conformity with their professional competences – to design didactic solutions and to act independently in the classroom; teacher’s autonomy is related to the obligation and responsibility to take account of scientific and professional argumentation and to behave professionally and ethically responsibly and in accordance with the values in force.

In any case, from our study we can see it is in the area of selecting textbooks that teachers feel the least autonomous, so in future school heads could consider teachers’ opinion on the purchase of textbook packages a little more.

It is a fact teachers’ situation and their autonomy cannot be thought outside the actual social influence and consensus with the highest levels of authorities, which are called the first to create the conditions in which teachers will first be separated from all kind of everyday political pressures. The society, the state, is the one on whom teachers’ autonomy depends and who provides possibilities for it in the first place.

How much autonomy there is and what kind it is depends on the time and the wish of authorities to have an autonomous teacher.

When the teacher (as the subject of autonomy) is confronted with the question how to exercise the freedom she/he has in a certain field of autonomy the answer seems simple – they lean on the symbol framework (such as science, rules, knowledge) that are in force in the field of autonomy (e.g. in a definite discipline of science, such as pedagogy). The problem is the symbol framework (e.g. laws, regulation) establishes the network on which teacher (the subject of autonomy) can lean, yet the framework itself is not a subject of autonomy, so the burden of decision always remains with the actual holder of autonomy – the teacher (Krek and Metljak 2011:59)

In teacher's profession the principle of autonomy is one of the essential principles. On the basis of data analysis we found teachers delineate the concept of autonomy with independence, free, self-assured, and independent decision making about teacher's work, in decisions about the formats, the methods and techniques of teaching, in the selection of teaching aids and textbooks, adaptations of learning contents, testing knowledge, in relations to parents, and in making arrangements for teamwork with other teachers. It is in the selection of formats, methods and techniques of work that they feel the most autonomous, while they feel the least autonomy in the field of selecting textbooks.

The surveyed teachers state the regulation in the field of education as the main obstacle to teacher's autonomy, followed by the curriculum related barriers and by their professional qualifications. Paying regard to regulation in the field of education adopted by school authorities (the state) requires from teachers keeping logs and filling in a variety of documents (written preparation for each lesson, annual plans, etc.) that frequently do not allow teachers freedom and creativity. This is the way the state indirectly and directly monitors and controls teachers. It is well known, democratic school legislation prescribes professional autonomy of teachers, while simultaneously also imposing on them the responsibility for the attainment of the goals and objectives defined by the programme. (Čok, 2002: 148).

If turning to the starting point of our discussion then, we ask ourselves the question whether teacher's autonomy is an obstacle or an advantage – a strength or a weakness for schools, we find it is impossible to give an unambiguous answer. We can find the question of teachers' autonomy is a complex one, connected with a number of factors. We can nevertheless add it is important in his or her deliberations the

teacher required by today's society departs from what he or she knows and feels is the most appropriate and correct in the given case and moment (Hozjan, 2002). When parents' initiative, wishes or opinions, on the one side, and teacher's professional judgement, on the other side, are in conflict with each other, it is teacher's right and duty to act in accordance with her or his professional judgement. Here lies namely the essence of professional autonomy: in conflicts between teachers and lay publics (parents, etc.) teacher has the task to act as in her or his judgement is correct – even in spite of possibility of parents' resistance, if their proposals are professionally unacceptable (Čakš, 2005 : 20). In this an individual teacher cannot be as successful as when in equal cases the behaviour of all teachers in the school as a whole is similar and professionally grounded. If in students' and parents' experience the school is an institution of clear rules, demands, and behaviours, direct pressures on teachers are inefficient or not so strong. Such broader context defines the possibilities of teacher's behaviour and implementation of professional autonomy, which prevents teachers from succumbing to ideological, political or other demands of an influential parent or group of parents (ibid.). Negative influences on educational staff's decisions from the environment (e.g. parents' influence) can be overcome with professionalism (professional decision-making) and school's cohesiveness in the implementation of agreed rules. Autonomy and responsibility are the goal of teacher's own development and of student's development. Teacher's autonomy means freedom in the acquisition of and in increasing students' knowledge, not just of teacher's personal freedom. Teacher's autonomy is based on professional ethics, as teaching is moral endeavour guided by moral insight and responsible action. (Niemi and Kohonen, in Kalin 2002: 153) Teacher is thus autonomous if legislation allows her or him to be autonomous and if her or his independence is based on a high level of professional competence that allows the teacher to establish partnership relations. According to Miljak (Lepičnik Vodopivec, 2005), in teacher's autonomy we can recognise features such as: independence from authority, firm belief in one's own professional competence, ability to take account of the needs and interests of parents, creativity in establishing and realising mutual relationships and partnership with parents. To this Kalin (2000) adds some conditions necessary for the realisation of teacher's autonomy, such as: a high level of knowledge, teacher's readiness to critically manage new information and ability to shape decisions in a definite context, and rational thinking that contains the ability to identify problems and create solutions based on analysed evidence. Rutar Ilc (1999) estimates reflection is another condition for teacher's autonomy, and teacher's autonomy a condition for students' autonomy. Also Bečaj (2002) agrees with the judgement teacher's

autonomy is a condition for students' autonomy and adds strengthening teachers' autonomy requires a climate with as much freedom as possible, and diverse situations. Besides this, he emphasises acquiring autonomy is not a one off action, but a permanent process of coordination that requires good connections between subsystems. He believes that only good balance between them and individual interests can lead to teacher's autonomy and argues only the climate of freedom and diverse situations provide the teacher with permanent testing of her or his own autonomy. With this in view and considering the findings of research in teacher's autonomy in Slovenian schools, Marentič Požarnik (2005) rightfully asks questions about the limits of vocational and professional autonomy and states external boundaries include laws and rules, while internal ones professional responsibility, professional qualification and readiness for implementation of necessary change.

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