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AN ANALYSIS OF A SURVEY ON AUTONOMY IN TEACHING PROFESSION ACROSS
DISCIPLINES

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ABSTRACT

Teachers work within the time constraint and the parameters set for conducting the classes and exams. They are under the pressure to complete the prescribed syllabus and without any choice in the adoption of teaching method or in the covering of contents in the syllabus in a few institutions.

The content may be beyond the comprehension of learners whose exposure may be restricted due to their schooling, educational and financial family background and their style of learning and aptitude for the particular content. But the approaches of the teachers in covering the syllabus, conducting the classes and exams may be the same and inappropriate to the learners from varied background.

A few teachers, especially the fresh hands, find the expectations of the management in the high performance of learners, coverage of the portions allotted within the stipulated time, the conduct of exams at a time for learners with varied proficiency not realisable.

The researcher is curious to be aware of the attitude of the teachers working in a college in Chennai towards the autonomy in their teaching profession and their views of the teaching profession with imposed restrictions. She prepared the questionnaire and conducted the follow-up interview to find out the views of teachers on teacher autonomy and to ensure whether the teachers would like to avail themselves of the autonomy if granted. This paper is about the findings of the analysis carried out on the responses made for the questionnaire and in the follow-up interview.

Key words: Teacher Autonomy, Choice of Teaching Methodology, Allotment of Portions for Test / Exam

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Teachers can expect autonomy in their profession in framing the curriculum, following interactive teaching method or allowing the learners to have experiential learning in the class, allotting the portion for the test and exams by the teachers themselves or making it necessary for the head of the department to consult those who handle the subject before allotment, allowing them to use the

supplementary course materials and teaching materials whichever they like and above all, entertaining co-learning or co-participation of the teachers with the learners in the class if the topic is new and hitherto unexplored.

This paper explores whether teachers are aware of the possibility of autonomy or their desirability to have autonomy in these areas of their

profession and the problems they face without autonomy.

The aspects of teaching on which the attitude of teachers were sought are discussed as they keep teachers under the pressure of

1. Producing good (if possible, exemplary) exam performance of the learners.
2. Covering the syllabus without leaving any topic untouched irrespective of the level of difficulty from the student's perspective.
3. Maintaining uniform test portion at regular space interval.

Exemplary exam performance of learners, uniform test portion and coverage of whole syllabus rest on the proficiency level, needs, grasping capacity, readiness to learn and the previous knowledge level of the learners. These factors differ from batch to batch.

If learners are from geographically distant places, differences in culture and language demands special consideration on the part of teachers for the attitude and aptitude of learners of every batch to understand their needs.

To develop the organizing skill, presentation skill and communicative skill in learners, experiential learning should be encouraged. At least, a few of the classes can be spared for self-learning of learners. They can present papers, handle seminar classes and attempt to arrive at solutions for the problems.

If the same teaching strategy followed in the class every year, it may not produce desirable outcome with a few batches of learners.

Time constraints do not allow teachers to test the grasping capacity of learners and to clarify the doubts of learners outside the class room. So interactions in the class solve this problem to a certain extent.

Even teachers may be allowed to explore the topic that is new and unhandled by any teacher previously with the learners in the class. Instead of leaving the topic untouched, teachers will be ready to unravel the topic without hesitation in mind.

The use of OHP/LCD will abate the problem of teacher's inability to reach the whole class, if the class is unmanageable. It saves teacher's time by displaying the illustrations at one click.

Framing the syllabus is done by the higher authorities. The board may have one or two representatives from the department concerned. The syllabus framed may stand good for three or five years consecutively. Whether it will suit learners admitted every year is a question. Deletion, addition of a few topics may be made possible for the teachers after analyzing their level of knowledge and needs of learners admitted.

Experienced and able teachers who contact learners are aware of the needs and proficiency level of the learners even at the beginning of the course and can select the topics from the prescribed syllabus based on their needs.

The order of the topics specified in the syllabus may not be based on the inter relationship between different topics or on the order of difficulty level. The order may be shuffled based on the needs and grasping capacity of learners.

The allotment of portion for the test can be common to all the branches or all the learners of the same branch, when the knowledge level of learners is more or less the same. Otherwise, it is advisable if the deciding authority consults teachers who handle the particular subject.

An attitude questionnaire was prepared to know the views of twenty-eight teachers of various departments of engineering and non-engineering discipline of an Engineering Institution in Chennai. Teachers belonging to department of English(three), Physics(two), Mathematics(five) Chemistry(three), EEE(five),ECE(three), Civil(two), Bio-Informatics(one) and Bio-Technology(four) were respondents of the questionnaire. Their teaching experience vary from 2- 20. Eight statements were in the questionnaire to know their attitude to autonomy in a few aspects of teaching profession. Autonomy can be in the

1. Framing of Syllabus
2. Choice of Teaching Methodology
3. Choice of Course Materials
4. Choice of Teaching materials
5. Allotment of Portions for Test / Exam
6. Reordering of the topics in the syllabus
7. Making allowance for student's self-learning
8. Making allowance for co-learning of teachers with learners if topic is new

The analysis of questionnaire reveals that there is a strong inclination of teachers except three teachers (one CSE, one EEE and one Mathematics) towards framing the syllabus by themselves.

A teacher of Bio-Technology strongly disagreed with the freedom of exploring the unfamiliar topic with the learners.

Two teachers of Physics and one belonging to Mathematics conveyed their view that they could not take any decision on the necessity for the H.O.D to consult the teachers who handle the subject for the test portion. Other teachers favoured this idea of having a consultation with the teachers.

All the respondents strongly agreed with the freedom of having interactions in the class.

Only two teachers of engineering discipline opposed the view of allowing the learners to self-learning in the class.

Sixteen teachers out of twenty-eight teacher respondents opted for autonomy to rearrange the topic according to the needs of the learners.

The rest of the group expressed either their unwillingness or inability to decide on the shuffling of the order of syllabus prescribed.

Invariably teachers expressed their willingness to use reference materials in the class.

The analysis convinces Diane Larsen-Freeman's opinion "the more methods we have, ... We have more choices..."(qtd. in Bell), Holec, H 's outcome of research that teachers welcome the idea of incorporating learner autonomy in their practices(qtd. in *Cotterall*).

Among those respondents, four well experienced teachers were interviewed (open-ended) for their options and elicitation of actual practices. They expressed the possibility of misuse of the freedom given to a few of the teachers, inadequacy in proficiency and experience to frame the syllabus and decide on the test portion and their preference for going by the rules and regulations of the management.

A few of the problems, which teachers as well as the management have to face, shared by the teachers relating to the topic under discussion are incorporated with suggestions for solving them.

On the management's side:

The economic viability of the administration pressurizes them to grant admission to learners with low level of knowledge about the subjects which they prefer to take up. The aptitude of the student is also not given consideration because a few learners join purely out of peer pressure or parental pressure.

The existence of difference in the aptitude and knowledge level of learners poses difficulty to the teacher. To cover the syllabus, teacher is also not left with sufficient time before a test or an exam. Hence, if the knowledge level of learners varies much, below average learners find it very hard to catch up with others. There is no use covering the syllabus for the sake of examination and meeting the expectations of the management.

At the same time, conduct of examination at different times of a year as and when the portion is covered for the learners of a branch of study is not feasible. It will lead to unnecessary expenditure and a few logistics problem.

On the teacher's side:

If the experience of the teacher is inconsiderable, may be one or two years, they may not be able to adapt the teaching methodology to suit the capacity of learners.

If teacher is not familiar with the topics, the position of learners and teachers will be inexplicable.

The retention of teachers in self-financing educational institution is questionable. Change of institution means change of syllabus (curriculum), if the present institution where the teacher is working does not fall under the same university. There is a need for the exhaustive preparation of the topics within a short period of time.

These problems can be tackled, to the desirable extent, with suitable syllabi to cater to the needs and proficiency levels of learners of a particular branch of study.

For the subjects which is common to learners belonging to various branches of study, as in competitive examinations, three levels (beginner, medium and advanced) of question papers can be made available.

Conducting bridge courses can be done for orientating learners to the expectations of the teachers.

Teachers can be given breathing time for understanding learners and the expectations of the management.

Adequate help from the colleagues who are well-versed in the topic can be made available till the inexperienced teachers gain confidence to teach that topic.

However, this study enables them to analyse the existing practices and beliefs in the institution and to explore the feasible autonomy of teachers in a few aspects of their profession and to be conscious of this essential stage in self – development for teachers with less experience. It confirms the desire of teachers of different subjects to have autonomy in selective aspects of their profession.

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