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# Teacher Autonomy: A Critical Review of the Research and Concept beyond Applied Linguistics\*<sup>1</sup>

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In this paper I will review conceptual and empirical research on teacher autonomy beyond the limits of applied linguistics. Research shows that teacher autonomy can be conceptualized as a personal sense of freedom from interference or in terms of teachers' exercise of control over school matters. This review clarifies the meaning of teacher autonomy, provides valuable insights about different domains in which teachers exercise their control, and explores some of the personal and contextual factors that affect their performance. This paper confirms the necessity to analyze teacher autonomy beyond a particular field.

Key words: Teacher autonomy, Autonomy, Applied linguistics, Language teaching

En este artículo se revisan investigaciones conceptuales y empíricas sobre la autonomía del profesor, más allá de los límites de la lingüística aplicada. Esta revisión clarifica el significado del concepto *autonomía del profesor*, esclarece los ámbitos en los que se ejerce la autonomía y explora algunos de los factores personales y contextuales que afectan este ejercicio.

Palabras clave: autonomía del profesor, lingüística aplicada, enseñanza de lenguas

Dans cet article, l'on révisé des recherches conceptuelles et empiriques sur l'autonomie de l'enseignant au-delà des limites de la linguistique appliquée. Cette révision nous permet d'éclaircir le sens du concept d'autonomie de l'enseignant, de préciser les domaines où l'on exerce l'autonomie et d'explorer en outre certains des facteurs personnels et circonstanciels qui affectent cet exercice. Mots clés: Autonomie de l'enseignant, linguistique appliquée, enseignement des langues

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\* Recibido: 27-03-07 / Aceptado: 18-07-07

1 This article makes part of the research project *Desarrollo de la autonomía profesional de los asesores de práctica a través de la Investigación Acción* from the GIAE (Grupo de Investigación Acción y Evaluación en lenguas Extranjeras) from the School of Languages of Universidad de Antioquia. Funded by the School of Languages of Universidad de Antioquia.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Teacher autonomy has been gaining increasing interest among educational researchers, policy makers, administrators, and practitioners across content areas over the past two decades. During this time, different research conferences (AILA 1999, 2002, 2005), a listserv on autonomy in language learning (Auto-L), and a number of conceptual and empirical individual papers and published books have devoted quite a lot of attention to this topic. Scholars and practitioners have connected teacher autonomy to student learning (Palfreyman & Smith, 2003; Sinclair, McGrath, & Lamb, 2000), teacher education (Little, 1995; Reeve, 1998; Smith, 2003; Tort-Moloney, 1997), professional development (Fleming, 1998; Smyth, 1995), teacher empowerment (Short & Rinehart, 1992) and broader issues such as privatization and school reform (Contreras, 1997; Levin, 2001). Teacher autonomy has surfaced as one of those captivating contemporary terms associated with educational quality, innovation and decentralization of schools across different countries.

Yet, for a variety of reasons and despite its widespread use, the meaning of teacher autonomy and its implications for schooling and school stakeholders remain opaque. First of all, the lack of correlation among theorists within and across subject areas has resulted in a notable inconsistency in the use of the concept (Santos, 2002; Smith, 2003). Second, although teacher autonomy has been connected to a number of theories including professional development, teacher decision making, teacher efficiency, and empowerment, this relationship still remains unclear (Short, 1994; Short and Rinehart, 1992). Additionally, articles about teacher autonomy seem to be more connected to theoretical analyses than to empirical studies that may test and enrich previous ideas (e.g., Benson, 2001; Huang, 2005), while scholars lament the absence of literature reviews in the area, which does not allow for initial generalizations across studies and theories (Vieira, 2003). Teachers and researchers interested in the analysis and promotion of teacher autonomy find the concept opaque and hard to examine from an empirical perspective.

### 1.1 The Concept of Teacher Autonomy

Conceptual literature on teacher autonomy shows a variety of definitions for this concept. According to Smith (2003) in the case of language teaching and

learning “definitions have tended to advocate one *aspect* to the exclusion of others, from teacher autonomy as a generalized ‘right to freedom from control’ (Benson 2000), to teachers’ capacity to engage in self-directed teaching (Little 1995, Tort-Moloney 1997), to teacher’s autonomy as *learners* (Smith 2000, Savage 2000)” (p. 1). A similar phenomenon occurs in general education. Definitions of the concept vary from those that see it as the process of building a personal identity as professionals in conjunction with the interests of the educational community (Contreras, 1997), to those that associate it with teachers’ isolation as a result of how schools have been traditionally organized (Anderson, 1987, Lortie, 1975).

A compendium of definitions presented in literature reveals a wide variety of perceptions in teachers and researchers. While some authors have provided straightforward definitions taken from existing literature on student autonomy and defined teacher autonomy as freedom for control over teaching (Shaw, 2002) or as the promotion of student autonomy (Thavenius, 1999), other scholars have examined the concept in a more comprehensive way. For instance, Barfield et al (2002, p.3) define teacher autonomy as “a continual process of inquiry into how teaching can best promote autonomous learning for learners” which involves, among other principles, action, negotiation, understanding of constraints, and collaborative support. On this line of thought, other academics have elaborated on the concept and described it as a multidimensional capacity associated with shared decision making based on students’ needs and interests, teachers’ self regulation, professional competence, and freedom from externally imposed agendas (Castle & Aichele, 1994).

Five different scholars have provided the basis for a definition of teacher autonomy in applied linguistics. In 1995, David Little called attention to the importance of having autonomous teachers in order to promote student autonomy, highlighting the necessity to analyze this concept in a field where learner autonomy was being considerably discussed and researched. In 1996, William Littlewood described autonomy from two different perspectives, the capacity for independent decision making, which includes having abilities and skills for action; and willingness, which involves motivation and confidence to carry out choices. In 2000, Ian McGrath suggested that teacher autonomy

could be perceived as both self directed professional development and freedom from control by others. In 2003, Richard Smith summarized some of the previous discussions and highlighted the multidimensionality of teacher autonomy as well as the importance of teacher-learner autonomy associated with professional development. Finally, in 2005 Jing Huang integrated these conceptual discussions and presented one of the most recent and comprehensive definitions in the field. He defined teacher autonomy as “teachers’ willingness, capacity and freedom to take control of their own teaching and learning” (p. 4). This definition will be used as an initial starting point for this review, but will be revised after the examination of the empirical and conceptual research presented in this paper.

## 1.2 This Review

In order to make the concept of teacher autonomy a more researchable and applicable construct, I will attempt to clarify and expand its meaning, describe its relationship with other concepts, and present various implications for theory and practice. For this purpose, I will examine and integrate empirical and conceptual research carried out by educational researchers and theorists across different countries using a variety of methods. It is important to clarify that although the starting point for this review has been the literature produced in applied linguistics, which is my main area of interest, I have examined the concept of teacher autonomy beyond these limited domains. I believe that teacher professional autonomy transcends individual disciplines and needs to be studied from a multidisciplinary perspective on account of its complexity.

I took various steps in order to attain the goals of this review. To begin with, I reviewed papers which I had used in previous research projects, paying special attention to the concept of teacher autonomy and how it had been examined. The next step consisted of browsing research documented in books, journals, conference papers, databases such as ERIC and Education Full Text, and discussions on this research in a listserv on autonomy, as well as other materials either mentioned in different articles and procured by using the internet or interlibrary loan across the United States, or recommended and provided by other practitioners. Some of the articles, including some mentioned in a previous

review by Huang (2005) on teacher autonomy, were removed from the list of empirical studies in this paper as they either did not discuss the concept of teacher autonomy (e.g., Reeve, 1998; Serrano-Sampedro, 1997; Stanley, 1999; Thavenius, 1999; Vieira, 1999, 2003), or did not provide enough information about the research question, aim, method, and theoretical framework, or discuss findings connected to the concept of teacher autonomy (e.g., McGrath, 2000; Santos, 2002; Smith, 2000). At the end of the selection process, 30 empirical reports on teacher autonomy published during the last three decades were finally considered. This paper will review these studies and complement their insights with conceptual articles.

The rest of this paper will be divided into three sections. First, I will review the empirical and conceptual literature on teacher autonomy; then, I will discuss some emergent patterns in this literature; and finally, I will conclude with some insights about the meaning of teacher autonomy and some recurrent public misconceptions.

## **2. EMPIRICAL AND CONCEPTUAL LITERATURE ON TEACHER AUTONOMY**

Empirical reports on teacher autonomy published during the last three decades can be organized into three main groups: papers that focus their attention on teacher sense of autonomy in the context of school reform; those that describe teachers' exercise of professional autonomy; and those that explore teacher autonomy in professional development experiences.

### **2.1 The Measurement and Study of Teacher Sense of Autonomy**

The first group of empirical studies attempts to examine the construct of teacher sense of autonomy, conceptualized as a personal sense of freedom to execute professional action. While some of these studies devote a lot of attention to the construction and validation of a research tool, others explore the way that teachers perceive their own autonomy in the context of school reform. They provide different research scales as tools for the investigation of

teacher sense of autonomy (Charters, 1976; Chauvin & Ellett, 1993; Forsyth & Danisiewicz, 1985; Friedman, 1999; Pearson & Moomaw, 2006; Short & Rinehart, 1992; Wilson, 1993) and demonstrate the close relationship between teacher sense of autonomy and teachers' job satisfaction and commitment (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005); job position and school district size (Reyes, 1989); salary, workload, paperwork, and levels of stress (Pearson, 1995; Pearson & Hall, 1993); as well as educational policies that increase teachers' responsibilities and accountability (Archbald & Porter, 1994; Crawford, 2001; Veugelers, 2004). They also study teacher control and how it is affected by the way schools are organized, and show how teacher sense of autonomy can be reduced in the presence of organizational factors such as external regulations or pressures exerted by the different school stakeholders (Ingersoll, 2003). These scholars confirm the introduction of teacher autonomy as another slogan associated with additional teachers' responsibilities, increased accountability, and augmented external pressures on teachers and school administrators, all results of school restructuring recently described by Veugelers as top-down control over bottom-up processes (p. 154). Veugelers thus questions the false illusion of empowerment within stringent and external vigilance from educational authorities.

Within this line of thought, Charters (1976) calls for a division between the subjective and objective levels of analysis in the empirical study of teacher autonomy. From this perspective, teacher sense of autonomy refers to a subjective and personal sense of freedom, and not necessarily to all those personal and external factors that limit teacher decision making. He argues that personal beliefs such as teacher efficacy, confidence, and competence do not necessarily refer to external limitations that affect teacher freedom, but to mediators between different events, teacher sense of autonomy and final decision making. The same applies to those difficulties that teachers experience in their interaction with learners, which should not be analyzed as external constraints for teacher sense of autonomy unless they refer to external forces that cannot be resolved by the educators and make them feel that their own autonomy is being violated or threatened. As the author stands, a high sense of autonomy is a necessary yet not sufficient condition for effective teaching whereas "[t]he absence of outside interference, regulation, or pressure does not



certify *ipso facto* that he or she will feel in full command of the instructional task” (p. 219). The difference between teacher sense of autonomy and those personal and external factors that shape teacher decision making represents a key issue that needs to be considered in the empirical examination of this construct. Sections 3.1 and 3.2 will elaborate on these matters.

Within this initial group of studies Friedman (1999) also makes a big contribution by depicting four different domains in which teachers exercise their autonomy: namely, curriculum development; teaching and assessment; professional development; and school functioning, which basically refers to administrative matters. This observation is supported by various scholars who confirm that teacher sense of autonomy varies across these domains and call for further research to explore these variations. These domains will be explored in more detail in section 3.3 of this paper.

Finally, some of these reports prove that, because of the complex condition of teacher sense of autonomy, educational researchers require the use of alternative methods that go beyond surveys and do not necessarily reflect all the complexities of this phenomenon (Chauvin & Ellett, 1993). These scholars call for interpretive research methodologies which may investigate the construct in more depth and examine different factors that interplay with it in different educational contexts. The following two sets of studies look at teacher autonomy from this epistemological perspective.

## **2.2 Teachers’ Exercise of Curricular Autonomy**

If the first collection of studies explores teachers’ perceptions of their own autonomy within the context of school reform, this second group actually scrutinizes the way teachers exercise their professional autonomy in order to interpret, construct, and implement the curriculum and attain educational goals in different educational contexts. These studies demonstrate that teachers’ exercise or rejection of autonomy in each domain is not easily predicted as it is shaped by a number of factors that may favor or hinder their desire to accept new responsibility. These research studies show that issues such as teacher perceived competence to exercise autonomy in a specific endeavor, support

from colleagues and administrators, school culture and societal traditions, and the provision or absence of resources for teachers to succeed in these tasks are evaluated by educators before exercising their autonomy (Bjork, 2004; Fleming, 1998). These studies confirm that when teachers are ordered to accept new curricular demands without being provided the necessary conditions to succeed, curricular guidelines are often misinterpreted and new regulations frequently implemented without substantial change. (Agudelo-Valderrama, 2006; Newel & Holt, 1997)

Newell and Holt's study also highlights the effect that failing to differentiate between teacher autonomy, isolation and independence may have in educational settings. Their study reflects those of Anderson (1987) and other scholars and practitioners (e.g. DuFour, 1999) who describe the way teacher autonomy has been interpreted in many schools (See also Lortie, 1975). According to Anderson:

It is well known that norms exist in schools that promote teacher autonomy and individualism. This means that most teachers cope with everyday teaching tasks... individually, that they are prone *not* to interfere with the work of colleagues, and that for the most part they guard carefully their right to teach in the ways they think best. (Parish and Arends, 1983, p. 63) (...) Not only do teachers work in self-contained classrooms, but they have little professional contact with other teachers, rarely sharing common planning periods (McLaughlin, Pfeifer, Swanson-Owens, and Yee, 1986). Furthermore, in many schools there tends to be a general lack of agreement among teachers and administrators as to primary goals, policies and procedures (Deal and Celotti, 1977). Policies, even when written, tend to be implemented inconsistently (McLaughlin *et al.*, 1986). (...) [W]e know there are some problems associated with teacher autonomy. (...) [T]hese problems can be relabeled as isolation and stress, disenchantment and alienation, and resistance to meaningful change. (pp. 358-360)

This proves the importance of understanding the differences between autonomy, isolation and independence. While isolation refers to being apart from others and independence is associated with doing things by oneself or not relying on others, autonomy means "to act freely, with a sense of volition and choice" (Deci, 1995, p.89). This explains why a teacher may have the power to act but may be isolated from others, or may be part of a collaborative teacher community but may lack professional autonomy when trying to exert control

over school matters. Separating and being able to discern among autonomy, isolation and independence represents one of the challenges for teachers, educational leaders and researchers interested in reclaiming teacher control within the context of school restructuring.

The problems generated when confounding these terms are magnified in education. According to Contreras (1997), in reaction to their lack of autonomy over educational policies, teachers try to be independent from students and parents and exclude them from the educational decisions that affect them. This results in teachers' lack of autonomy from authorities, and their complete isolation from educational communities. For Little (1995) "total independence is not autonomy but autism" (p.178). He refers to Allwright (1990) who defined autonomy as "a constantly changing but at any time optimal state of equilibrium between maximal self-development and human interdependence" (as cited in Little, 1995, p. 178). By the same token, Smith (2003) describes the social condition of teaching and autonomy by arguing that "teacher autonomy necessarily involves *interdependence*, or 'relatedness', not just individualism" (p. 7), especially because teachers' actions must benefit students' learning, which necessarily constrains teacher autonomy and makes it interdependent. Finally, DuFour (1999) and Gimeno-Sacristán (2000) present autonomy as in equilibrium with teachers' commitment to the educational project determined in each community, and concur with Benson (2000) who stated that from a critical perspective "autonomy is less a matter of shaping one's own life than of shaping the collective life of the society in which one lives" (p. 114).

This argument about the real meaning of teachers' professional autonomy is clearly addressed and clarified by Boote (2006) in terms of professional discretion. For this scholar, teachers reconcile competing demands by using their learned expertise, revising and adapting curricula according to their students' needs, and considering external requirements for accountability. He defines teachers' professional discretion as the "capacity and obligation to decide what actions are appropriate and the ability to take those actions" (p.465), and describes the way teachers consider different possibilities of action according to a number of external constraints that direct professional action, as well as how they define and carry out appropriate actions for their learners' benefit. This

conceptualization of teacher autonomy as professional discretion provides an insightful way to understand professional autonomy in educational settings and may represent a useful way to conceptualize autonomy in the current context of teaching. It establishes a balance among teachers' required freedom for decision making, obligation to provide high quality education, and external controls over teachers' decision making.

Thus, these studies on teachers' exercise of professional autonomy provide important elements that enrich the discussion about this complex concept. They question the extent to which teachers can exercise their own autonomy exclusively based on their beliefs about teaching and learning or based on a sense of obligation to their educational communities. They also bring to light the conditions necessary for teachers to exercise their autonomy, and corroborate that in order for teachers to exercise autonomy, they require training, support and professional guidance. These scholars also allow us to conclude that teacher professional autonomy does not refer to teacher isolation or to irresponsible delegation of additional work to educators, but should be better perceived in terms of freedom for professional action, discretion within limits, interdependence, and support. They call for educational policymakers, teachers, and administrators to acknowledge this condition. The final set of studies also reinforces this need.

### **2.3. The Enhancement and Exercise of Teacher Autonomy in Professional Development Experiences**

The last group of studies complements the issues discussed above and describes teachers' engagement in different professional development experiences in order to enhance their professional autonomy. In this set of studies, professional development is defined by Schibeci and Hickey (2003) as "involvement by teachers in a variety of activities related to their diverse roles: as curriculum designers and implementers, as administrators and assessors, and as the connection between schools and community" (p. 120). Researchers and practitioners in this area confirm that teachers enhance their sense and exercise of professional autonomy, professional competence, awareness of innovative theories and practices, and positive attitudes towards teaching and learning

in self-directed professional development experiences or teacher preparation programs that include collaboration, experiential learning, shared decision making, risk taking, and reflection as part of their agendas (Daoud, 1999; Lamb & Simpson, 2003; Osses & Ibáñez, 2005; Sahasewiyon, 2004; Webb, 2002). These studies reveal the multiplicity of factors that may shape reactions towards professional development (Schibeci & Hickey, 2003) and show that different external constraints may affect the way teachers exercise their autonomy in this type of endeavor. These external constraints include contrived professional development (Judah & Richardson, 2006; Schibeci & Hickey, 2003), lack of time (Peters, 2004); contrived collegiality, teachers' problematic interrelationships, and excessive workload and paperwork, (Usma & Frodden, 2003), as well as lack of support from the administration manifested in imposition of tasks, intrusion in teachers' meetings, lack of support for continuity, and job instability (Frodden & Picón, 2005).

These studies also clarify that there is not a correct answer in terms of the type of activities that may favor teachers' growth and exercise of autonomy, and raise awareness of teachers' varying reactions in each particular situation (Usma & Frodden, 2003; Warfield, Wood, & Lehman, 2005), thus aligning with research on educational psychology that examines the personal factors that may hinder or favor the exercise and development of autonomy. Deci (1995), for example, links autonomy with motivation and self-efficacy in order to explain how individual personalities and expectations affect the varying ways in which different people may react to the same particular event. He shows how individuals affect their context in order to obtain the positive or negative prompts that they need, and as a product of this synergistic relationship, they end up modifying the context according to their own needs and expectations (p.181).

Additionally, this group of studies confirms that professional development can take place as part of formal research or academic programs, non-award programs such as research conferences, and even personalized experiences such as action research, teachers' study groups, mentoring or coaching (Schibeci & Hickey, 2003). Finally, this body of research demonstrates that a combination of factors should be taken into consideration when examining the effects of professional development experiences on teacher autonomy, and also proves

that practitioner research may be an excellent alternative not only for the improvement of curricular matters, but also for a better understanding of teacher learning and exercise of autonomy. These findings will be discussed in the following section.

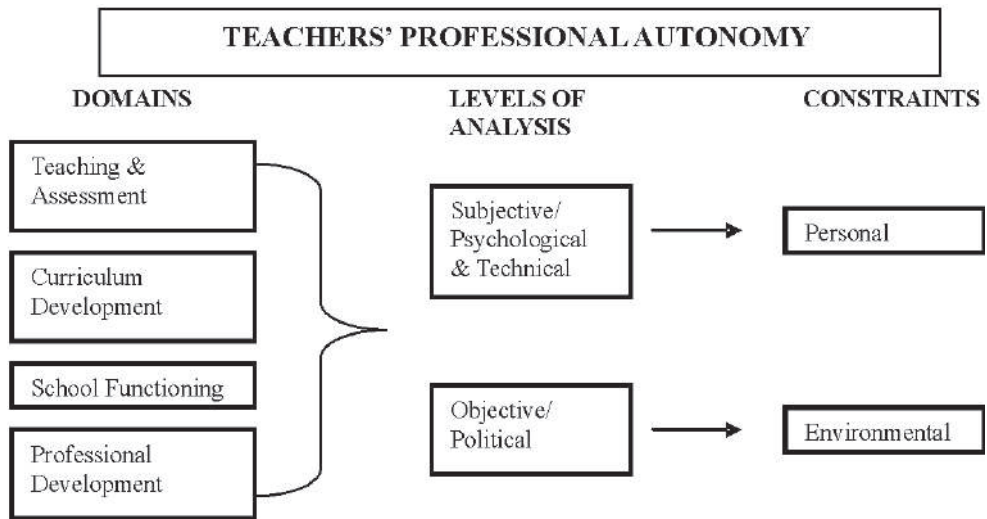
### **3. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

The previous body of research demonstrates that the concept of teacher professional autonomy can be better explained by revising three areas: the subjective and objective levels of analysis of autonomy; the four different domains in which teachers exercise some kind of control; and the personal and environmental factors that shape teachers' decision making (see Figure 1). This section will attempt to clarify these emergent issues, discuss the role of professional development for the enhancement of professional autonomy, and clarify the difference among teacher professional autonomy and other associated terms such as teacher empowerment, teacher motivation, and professional competence.

#### **3.1 The Subjective Level of Analysis: Teacher Sense of Autonomy as a Personal Belief and Internal Constraints**

From a subjective point of view, the concept of teacher autonomy is defined as a personal sense of freedom to execute the necessary actions and exert control over the school environment. Analyses at this level focus on teacher sense of autonomy and how it is affected by the internal factors or personal constraints in every educational situation. These analyses consider the relationship between teacher sense of autonomy and professional competence, teacher confidence, awareness about new theories and practices, perceptions about teacher and student autonomy, job satisfaction, and teacher empowerment.

Findings in this area show that teacher sense of autonomy varies in different situations, working conditions and educational contexts. For instance, teachers report higher levels of sense of autonomy when the schools where they work or the professional endeavors they have been engaged in provide sufficient opportunities for decision making and risk taking. Teachers also report a higher sense of autonomy when new educational demands have been complemented



**Figure 1.** The Analysis of Teachers' Professional Autonomy

with the enhancement of their professional competence and awareness about innovative theories and practices; when they perceive teacher and student autonomy as a significant value in their professional lives; when they feel more job satisfaction; and when they possess positive attitudes towards teaching and learning.

These findings have a number of implications on a practical level. It is clear that more decision making does not necessarily imply a higher sense of teacher autonomy, as new responsibilities or wider scope for action have to be complemented with professional competence and support that may drive teachers' actions. In this process, educational administrators and policy makers need to acknowledge the complex process of teacher learning and provide the necessary conditions for teachers to succeed in their new responsibilities, thus allowing empowering endeavors to positively affect teachers' feelings and performance and professional development experiences to occur. Issues such as sense of competence, job satisfaction, working conditions and teachers' attitudes towards teaching and learning have to be carefully considered when empowering teachers and enhancing their sense of autonomy.

On an empirical level, the previous findings validate the suggestion that teachers' sense of autonomy should not be examined in isolation but as part of a personal beliefs system (Pajares, 1992). According to this theory, personal beliefs about confidence to affect students' learning (teacher efficacy), nature of knowledge (epistemological beliefs), causes for students' and teachers' behavior (locus of control, attribution, motivation), perceptions of self and feelings of self-worth (self-concept, self-esteem), confidence (self-efficacy), preconceptions about specific subjects or disciplines (the nature of learning a language, for example), and in this case, teacher sense of autonomy, filter perceptions about a specific situation and predispose actions, which at the same time, serve to reinforce or modify original beliefs. This supports the idea of studying teacher sense of autonomy in its interaction with other internal beliefs which, combined with professional competence and external constraints, finally shape teacher's actual behavior. This provides a valuable framework in which to examine teacher sense of autonomy in research studies, and acknowledges the complexity of teacher decision making in each of the different school domains, to be described later on in this paper.

In addition to the previous insights, this body of research corroborates that, despite all the valuable findings provided in this field, the relationship between teacher reported sense of autonomy and decision making needs further investigation. This would allow existing research tools in the field to be validated, and would provide further understanding of the possible mismatch between teachers' perceptions of autonomy and actual performance due to the influence of internal and external factors that may affect final decision making. This type of analysis would require research designs that would combine qualitative and quantitative methods of inquiry and consider different theoretical perspectives related to these phenomena. Teacher sense of autonomy, as any other subjective perception, should be examined in interaction with other personal and external factors that determine behavior.

Finally, the empirical reports presented in this paper confirm the urgent need to build on previous results and contribute to making teacher autonomy a more solid research construct that may provide strong explanations about teacher decision making. This consolidation may be attained when educational



researchers account for previous theorizations, empirical studies, gaps, and contradictions in order to propose new empirical studies that may contribute to what is already known. This would require a previous agreement on the description of the construct, better connections across studies, and a wider diffusion of research reports across subjects and countries.

### **3.2 The Objective Level of Analysis: Teachers' Exercise of Autonomy and External Constraints**

From an objective standpoint, teacher autonomy is conceptualized as the exercise of control over curricular and school matters despite the pressing influence of external constraints that may hinder it. From this perspective, although cognitive and psychological types of analyses provide valuable insights about teachers' autonomy and decision making as an internal process, they tend to disregard the political dimension of teaching and schooling (Vieira, 2007). For this reason, analyses on an objective and critical level inescapably examine the diversity of domains in which teachers exert their autonomy and the number of external constraints that impinge on it in different educational settings. This includes the current situation of teachers being given tasks traditionally assigned to other school agents, and how this renewed scope for action contrasts with their lack of time and resources to execute this additional work in a professional manner.

Research on teacher autonomy at this critical level shows that teachers' engagement in curriculum design, participation in teacher research, implementation of new methods for teaching, involvement in school transformation, and teaching and assessment practices are being notably affected by a number of external constraints. These include teaching load, lack of time, salary, excessive school paperwork, external pressures, imposed educational policies, contrived collegiality, lack of collegial and administrative support, and institutional centralized powered structures. These findings confirm the discourse of teacher autonomy as another slogan connected to school reform and accountability that regularly turns into additional work, deskilling, alienation, and imposition of stringent mechanisms of control over teachers (Apple, 1995; Crookes, 1997; Levin, 2001; Veugelers, 2004).

In different latitudes, researchers show how the role of the central government has been devoted to applying accountability processes in order to control what is done in schools (e.g. Crawford, 2001; Kane & Lauricella, 2001; Mullen, Stover, & Corley, 2001; Wells & Scott, 2001), which may explain in part why more money is being spent on controlling schools and teachers than on providing them with professional development (Webb, 2002). Accountability processes such as teacher, program, and school accreditation, standardized testing applied to teachers and students at all levels, and national systems that assign resources based on imposed criteria are increasingly being applied at an international level<sup>2</sup>. Teachers are encountered with a new system replete with new responsibilities (Kohonen, 2001) that commonly go beyond their traditional teaching role in the classroom, thus generating an array of contradictory feelings and reactions that can affect their confidence, energy and motivation (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998).

Findings on teachers' exercise of autonomy also account for the proletarianization of teachers described over the last two decades (Agudelo-Valderrama, 2006; Contreras, 1997; Smyth, 1995). Teachers' apparent autonomy to exert control over teaching, curriculum, school functioning, and professional development, is accompanied by a stringent intensification of work that reduces the creative profession of teaching to a daily survival, an involuntary inability to discern the political implications of educational reforms, and a frustrating incapacity to change the structural conditions in which teachers exercise their deceiving power. Teacher exercise of autonomy is then reduced to an illusory perception of control, while the creative and free essence of teaching is being eroded by imposed educational policies, practices, and procedures that determine what is to be done. Teachers' capacity to affect the educational community and

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2 These types of impositions are perceived in Colombia where a centrally introduced "National Plan of Bilingualism" reinforces the Common European Framework of Languages in schools, universities, and language centers. This Plan aligns with an international agenda controlled by the United States through the imposition of a Binational Trade "Agreement", which implies deep and retrogressive changes in the whole educational and productive systems in the country. Research and discussion around these impositions and how they affect teachers, students and educational institutions are just starting to be produced (See e.g. Asocopi Newsletter March 2007).

system is being reduced to a forceful routine, while collective discussion of the purpose of schooling is left to central bureaucracies that create new and more demanding procedures to exert their control, in accordance with their political and economic interests. Research across countries such as Colombia, Spain, and the United States confirms this reality as a global tendency that goes beyond an apparent union speech.

All these findings imply a variety of challenges for educational researchers and practitioners. First of all, they call our attention to reconstructing the real meaning of teacher autonomy as an initial standpoint to reclaim it and defend it. Teachers and scholars are called to reinforce that teacher autonomy should not be associated with additional work, but with teachers' professional exercise of control as an initial step for the construction of the type of schools required in each community. For researchers, this implies the examination of educational policies, institutional structures, educational practices, teachers' working conditions, and other external, personal, hidden and evident constraints in their relationship with professional action. This reconstruction of the concept would contribute to making teacher autonomy a valid common goal for school stakeholders, and a meaningful construct to be studied in educational research.

Additionally, these findings reinforce the necessity to improve the conceptual and empirical examination of teacher autonomy by considering a wider variety of theories across particular disciplines in order to account for its complexity. In the specific area of foreign language teaching and learning, for instance, the discussion of teacher autonomy needs to be widely expanded instead of being essentially focused on the connection between teacher and student autonomy, which despite constituting a valuable area of research, has limited the attention to a reduced aspect of the construct. The study of teacher autonomy might include the examination of studies of teacher motivation, empowerment, decision making, and professional development, which may effectively relate to language teachers' concerns as well.

Finally, and despite the paramount importance of a critical perspective for the analysis of teacher autonomy, it is important to reinforce the complementary condition of the cognitive, psychological, and critical views of teachers' sense and exercise of autonomy. As stated above, teacher autonomy conforms to a

comprehensive concept that includes different levels, domains and types of constraints, and a thoughtful analysis of its meaning should necessarily examine these multiple facets. Neglecting to do so would reduce this fascinating area of inquiry to a personal and technical concern completely isolated from the surrounding environment, or would limit it to political quarrels distant from both the classroom and the cognitive and psychological complexity of teacher behavior. This review of the literature calls for integrative studies that may acknowledge the complexity of the construct, and reminds us of the necessity to at least recognize the different implications of choosing a particular stance for analysis (Benson, 2001). Only in this manner will teacher autonomy be consolidated as a valuable tool for further understanding of school reform, professional development, teacher decision making, and students' learning, among many other issues.

### **3.3 Domains of Teacher Autonomy**

The research reviewed in this paper supports the value of studying teacher autonomy according to four different domains where teachers exercise some kind of control: teaching and assessment, curriculum development, school functioning, and professional development. The analysis of teacher autonomy based on these four domains provides important insights about the different types of responsibilities that teachers may have in a school, the professional competence and working conditions they may require in order to perform in each domain, and the different reasons why teachers may or may not decide to exert control. These four domains and their practical and empirical implications will be discussed in this section.

In terms of teaching and assessment, researchers have examined the extent to which teachers exert control over their teaching goals, content, skills, methods, and materials; assessment criteria and methods; time management; procedures for students' behavior; and the classroom environment. Research does not provide conclusive findings in terms of the areas in which teachers feel more autonomous or more commonly exert their professional autonomy. Nevertheless, findings confirm that teachers' autonomy in each of these domains varies and is widely determined, amongst other factors, by their professional competence and by the presence of centralized curriculum policies

or standardized testing that may inform aims, content and methods of teaching and assessment in each school.

Regarding the domain of teaching and assessment, it is important to highlight the lack of studies on teacher autonomy that analyze the relationship between teacher enhancement and exercise of autonomy and its effects on students' learning. Research on teacher autonomy still seems to be too focused on the process and its effects on teachers, but very little is said about the effects on students' knowledge, skills, and behavior. As discussed by a number of scholars in educational research and professional development (e.g. Guskey, 2000, 2002) "the new teacher education is frontally about outcomes, and it is now widely assumed that the sine qua non of good teacher-preparation policies and practices is that they ensure that teachers can ensure pupils' achievement" (Cochran-Smith, 2005, p.9). Further research on teacher autonomy thus needs to consider its effects on students' learning.

The second domain in which teachers exercise their autonomy refers to curriculum development. Research on this matter has examined teachers' proposal, initiation, implementation and evaluation of curricula, which includes the proposal of teaching, learning, and assessment goals, approaches, methods, content, and materials for the whole school or part of it, and the introduction of extra curricular activities to enrich the curriculum. The empirical evidence on this area shows that teachers' engagement with curricular innovations also varies from one teacher to another and is strongly influenced, amongst other factors, by cultural traditions, external factors, and teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning that may affect the way they lead, accept, or reject new instructional ideas. This research has brought to light the important role that collegial and administrative support may have in the successful implementation of curricular innovations for the improvement of teachers' practices and students' learning.

Research on the exercise of teacher autonomy in curricular matters also shows that the concept is sometimes misinterpreted by practitioners. As reported by different authors, some educators may assume that teacher autonomy implies their isolation from their educational communities or their exercise

of free will without the limits imposed by the act of teaching. Some teachers may suppose that their autonomy does not imply a social commitment and responsibility towards the quality of service that they provide, and may reject the possibility to improve their performance or engage in collaborative efforts of curriculum innovation. For these reasons, some authors have called for the redefinition of teacher autonomy in terms of teacher discretion in order to reduce misinterpretations of the concept. Additionally, other scholars have called for the importance of supporting teacher autonomy with professional development and curricular leaders who may guide teachers' efforts, defend and maintain teachers' right to collaboratively define the best educational alternatives in their educational community, and help teachers retain quality education for their learners.

The third domain in which teachers exercise their autonomy is school functioning, described as teachers' decision making on administrative tasks such as school expenditures, budget planning, school finances, class timetable, curriculum matters for the whole school, and student demographic class-composition. Despite the initial condition of research on this domain, studies produced in this area show that teachers' decision making is highly controlled in both evident and hidden ways and that teachers' exercise of autonomy in this area is related to the teachers' position in the school, as school administrators report higher levels of autonomy in this type of task as compared with the other teachers. Additionally, scholars that are currently examining the so called "Charter Schools" in the United States have shown that although this was a promising alternative to decentralization, teachers and parents do not have a real opportunity to define the type of school and education most appropriate for their communities, while they are held to be more accountable than teachers in the traditional model. More research is needed in this domain, however.

The fourth domain where teachers exercise their autonomy is professional development or the extent to which they have the opportunity to engage in post-initial professionally related education and training and decide for themselves the content, methods, instructors, and location of their formation. Research shows that positive effects of self-directed professional development include the enhancement of professional competence and levels of motivation

to generate changes in the school environment. Research in this area also shows that, despite the positive effects that these types of experiences may have on their participants, teachers may accept or reject in-service training according to different factors. These may include relevance of and interest in the topic; compulsion to engage in the in-service training; opportunity due to location; convenience in terms of disruption of normal after-school schedule; rewards; previous experiences with professional development; and the amount of time and dedication as a product of being engaged in that program. Due to the frequent emergence and current relevance of professional development in relation to professional autonomy, this issue will be extended in a subsequent section of this discussion.

There are a number of implications to research into the four domains in which teachers exercise their autonomy. The fact that teacher autonomy varies across the different domains due to internal and external factors means that if teachers are expected to exert their decision making skills in teaching and assessment, designing curricula, participating in different school committees, and engaging in professional development, among other tasks, they need to be provided with the appropriate conditions for this to happen. If they are not, they may end up rejecting new responsibilities or not performing at the expected level due to a lack of professional competence, low motivation to accept new responsibilities, or adverse working or personal conditions to accept new challenges. As implied above, teacher autonomy is not an omnipresent attribute of certain teachers; it manifests itself differently in every teacher, and at the same time, every teacher perceives and exercises his/her professional autonomy across different domains in different ways. This variable condition must be acknowledged by administrators and policy makers in order that they might respect teachers' interests and areas of expertise, and provide appropriate conditions for them to succeed in every task.

This finding also calls for the necessity to examine teacher sense and exercise of autonomy in the four different domains in order to avoid biased analyses of teachers' autonomy based on partial evaluations of a particular domain. Additionally, because teacher autonomy in each of the four domains may vary according to job position, job stability, and type of school, these demographic aspects need to be considered

when defining the teachers to be included in a particular study, and determining its method. Finally, since teacher motivation, professional competence and personal beliefs influence teachers' perception and exercise of autonomy in every domain, these variables need to be judged in order to understand why and how teacher autonomy varies across domains. These suggestions apply to both quantitative and descriptive studies.

### **3.4 On Professional Development as a Means for Teacher Autonomy**

As stated in the previous section, professional development as a means for teacher autonomy represents one of the most recurrent themes across the studies. In the context of teacher autonomy, professional development has been described as teachers' participation in an array of activities that include action research, teachers' study groups, academic conferences, and formal education programs as a means of improving their professional competence, knowledge of their communities, the enhancement and exercise of their autonomy, and the transformation of their educational realities. Scholars in the fields of professional development and teacher autonomy opt for careful examination of the different abilities and competences required by in-service teachers to exert control over the four school domains described above, of the way the content and process of professional development may have a positive effect on teachers' knowledge, skills, behavior, and decision making, and in some cases, of how the whole process impacts on students' learning (see e.g. Osses & Ibáñez, 2005).

Research on professional development as a means for teacher autonomy has revealed the positive effects that action research and study groups, among other alternatives of development, may have on teachers' knowledge, attitudes, and actions depending on the content and process of these types of endeavors. In terms of the content, research has shown that professional development experiences may be better received by the teacher-learners and have a stronger influence on their performance when the topic under discussion relates to their concerns and needs. In terms of the process of professional development, different researchers confirm the positive effects that teacher-directed research, continuous connection between theory and practice, practical workshops, discussions, continuous feedback, critical reflection, and conducting and



reporting teacher research may have on teachers' engagement with professional development and exercise of autonomy. Effective professional development experiences have allowed participants to increase their awareness of innovative practices, improve their attitudes towards teaching and learning, and use their power to generate change in their schools.

Research on professional development for teacher autonomy has different implications for teachers, administrators, legislators, and educational researchers. First of all, the positive and negative evidence on the enhancement of teacher autonomy in professional development experiences provides important insights about the way these type of projects need to be planned and implemented in educational contexts. These studies indicate that professional development should relate to teachers' interests and needs in the four different school domains described above, which depict the areas that may require more attention in the school and the new teaching, curricular, or administrative challenges that teachers need to address in their professional development experiences. Additionally, in terms of the process of professional development, this research shows that these types of experiences need to provide teachers with opportunities to connect theory and practice and experiment in real school contexts, so that teachers may evaluate the applicability of innovative theories in real life situations. These studies also confirm the important role that collegial dialogue and critical reflection may play in the enhancement of teachers' awareness of their learning and improvement of practice, and highlight the important role played by the administration in supporting the teachers. In summary, research on professional development for teacher autonomy provides the basic guidelines for the future design and implementation of similar endeavors, alerts us to the possible constraints to be encountered, and provides useful models for other groups of teachers to initiate their own learning projects.

Finally, the conceptual and empirical literature on professional development for teacher autonomy confirms the emergence of action research as a valid approach for the improvement of teachers' attitudes, practices, and environment. Action research in its different modalities is not just being presented as a research strategy for teachers to improve their professional competence or

attitudes towards teaching; it is also reported as an effective means for teachers to exercise their autonomy and transform their realities. In this study, action research is perceived as an effective means for teachers to show what they are doing across countries, and as an essential source of evidence of teachers' learning that may complement what scholars have done in other kinds of studies. Reports included in this paper corroborate that action research can be an important source to understanding the complex process of developing and exercising teacher autonomy and the different constraints that may affect it.

### **3.5 Concluding Remarks: On the Concept of Teachers' Professional Autonomy and Other Related Terms**

This review attempted to clarify the meaning of teacher autonomy by exploring the research beyond applied linguistics and describing the difference between this concept and other related terms such as teacher empowerment, teacher motivation, and professional competence. This research has shown a clear difference between teacher autonomy, professional competence, and teacher motivation by illustrating that while teachers may have the freedom to exert control over school matters, they may decide not to exert their autonomy because they lack either the professional competence or the motivation to succeed. Conversely, while a teacher may not have the professional competence to do a certain job, he/she may be motivated to exert his/her autonomy as another learning strategy. For these reasons, and contrasting this conceptualization with previous analyses presented in applied linguistics (see e.g., Huang, 2005), teacher autonomy, motivation, and competence need to be clearly separated in future definitions and studies. Motivation and professional competence may function as factors that propel or hinder professional action, while teacher autonomy should be assumed either as a personal sense of freedom for professional action, or as the power to exercise control in different school matters. Neglecting to separate teacher motivation, professional competence, and teacher autonomy, or merging them together into a definition of teacher autonomy, can generate confusion and lead to misinterpretations of the construct.

In the same manner, the revision of the literature on teacher autonomy allows for a clear definition and separation of two of the most commonly used terms

in educational scholarship: teacher autonomy and teacher empowerment. While teacher empowerment describes the process of shared decision making that takes place when school administrators enable teachers to engage in the collaborative process of participative leadership for the consolidation of a more democratic and equitable educational system (see Short, 1994), *teacher autonomy can be conceptualized as the perceived and actual capacity to exercise control<sup>3</sup> over teaching and assessment, curriculum development, school functioning, or professional development matters, within the limits of the educational goals accepted by the school community. This enhancement and exercise of autonomy is mediated by the synergistic relationship among personal factors such as teachers' professional knowledge, skills, dispositions and beliefs that shape performance, and environmental issues such as educational policies, administrative support, teachers' working conditions, and school stakeholders' interests and support that may encourage or hinder teachers' decision making.*

### 3.6 What Teacher Autonomy is not

Finally, this review serves to clarify what teacher autonomy is not and uncovers distorted meanings given to the concept.

1. Teacher autonomy is not independence or isolation. It entails interdependence, responsibility, mutual support, professional discretion, and commitment to the educational community. Perceiving teacher autonomy as isolation justifies educational policies that impose practices of collaborative work, exert control and pressure over teachers' work, and promote homogenization of teaching and learning based on standardized curricula and testing.

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3 The term "control" here refers to the ability to *exert influence* over those things that affect one's own life in order to obtain or prevent determined results (Bandura, 1992). Additionally, and because of the social condition of teaching and learning, the term "control" in the context of teachers' professional autonomy needs to be interpreted as "a question of collective decision-making rather than individual choice" (Benson, 1996, p. 33; See also Benson, 2001).

2. As opposed to illusory autonomy (Contreras, 1997), teacher autonomy should not be interpreted as additional responsibilities given to teachers as a way to hold them more accountable for their job or as a strategy for the state to reduce its obligations towards school communities. Teacher autonomy refers to the right of the teacher to exert initiative and carry out professional action according to school stakeholders' needs and based on the necessary conditions of success.
3. Teacher autonomy cannot be explained as an exclusive psychological, technical or political issue or just in terms of the promotion of student autonomy as has been frequently suggested in applied linguistics. The study of teacher autonomy involves the analysis of personal beliefs, professional competence, and environmental factors that interrelate for the successful exercise of control over school matters. Partial analyses that attempt to examine the construct from a single perspective may depict erroneous interpretations of this complex phenomenon.
4. Teacher autonomy is not a static entity that some people possess whilst others do not. It is a changeable condition that varies across different domains of teachers' decision making and in accordance with situational, personal, and external constraints.
5. Teacher autonomy does not refer to an absolute state of freedom from constraints. It refers to the responsible exercise of discretion within the limits of school stakeholders' interest and needs. Theories that define teacher autonomy in opposition to their students or colleagues or determine teachers' professionalism in terms of their unanimous capacity to decide without considering other school stakeholders may send erroneous messages to the public and justify those imposed standards and practices criticized in this review.

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