Teacher Autonomy

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Dr. Ban made a couple of statements about teacher autonomy. In week two he said, "As teachers, we need the freedom and responsibility to implement our practice based on our judgment.” He went on to say, he thinks “. . . autonomy is a bad word in our profession. If we are a profession . . . then we should be held to the practice of our profession as defined by our field.”

The second statement aligns with the position of Richard Elmore who sees norms of autonomy as antithetical to distributed leadership and its tightly interconnected roles. He sees distributed leadership as ensuring a common teaching technology, agreement about goals and outcomes, and reciprocal accountability relationships among teachers and between teachers and administrators. The assumption here is that teachers with autonomy will not have the connection with colleagues needed for optimum professional growth and the best school program possible.

Teachers who self-isolate, of course, are less exposed to new ideas through interaction and do not have their ideas and methods critically evaluated by fellow teachers. They limit their own growth as professionals and contribute nothing to the growth of others. I think we all agree with Dr. Ban and Richard Elmore that teachers should not isolate themselves.

Teachers who are given the freedom to practice based on their judgment sometimes isolate themselves irresponsibly and sometimes choose to collaborate within a community. As stated by Pearson and Moomaw, “One teacher may view autonomy as a means to gain substantial freedom from interference or supervision, while another may view it as the freedom to develop collegial relationships and accomplish tasks that extend beyond the classroom.”

Many teachers and scholars define teacher autonomy as having this freedom of choice. Most teachers with autonomy, or the freedom and independence to make their own decisions and be creative, do not avoid collaboration with colleagues. They help to build a strong professional community among teachers. Obviously this is the responsible and professional path.

Autonomy provides individuals and small groups of like-minded colleagues room to operate and be innovative. Their creative ideas are often adopted by their peers and spread throughout the profession. Many teachers feel they lost the freedom to innovate and experiment within professional learning communities and communities of practice. Some feel that significant improvement in education cannot occur until teachers regain the autonomy they lost during the standards and accountability movement. Several respected authors have described autonomy as an appropriate place to begin in solving the problems of schools today.

The checks on this freedom are (1) the high expectations teachers have for each other within a strong community, and (2) the standards of the profession as a whole. These standards are conveyed through university training programs, state certification requirements, standards set by professional organizations, and supervisors who guide and evaluate without encroaching on or denying teachers a reasonable and respectful degree of autonomy. These norms and codes of conduct are well understood by most and leave plenty of room for teacher discretion and innovation.

The research of Pearson and Moomaw correlates autonomy with on-the-job stress, job satisfaction, feelings of empowerment, and professionalism. The results point toward a need to increase autonomy. They measured curriculum autonomy and general teaching autonomy. The Skaalvik and Skaalvik study tested whether teacher self-efficacy and teacher autonomy are independently associated with engagement, job satisfaction, and emotional exhaustion. The analysis revealed that both teacher autonomy and self-efficacy were independent predictors of engagement, job satisfaction, and emotional exhaustion.

Sergiovanni stated that “When informal communities of practice and institutionalized collaborative cultures are joined, we find the balance [needed] . . . between individual autonomy and collaborative work.” Too much collaboration deprives the school and students the benefit of the creative ideas of individual teachers while creating a group think situation; too much independent creative work deprives the school of teachers group creativity and deprives teachers of the professional growth collaboration yields.