FACTORS HAMPERING THE PROFESSIONAL AUTONOMY OF TEACHERS: THE CASE OF SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS IN THE ELLIOTDALE CIRCUIT, SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract
This study examines the factors hampering the professional autonomy of teachers at secondary schools in the Elliotdale Circuit of the Dutywa Education District. Secondary school teachers in the circuit were in constant fear of the loss of their professional autonomy as a result of interference and imposition on their professional duties. A qualitative approach with case study design was employed in the study. Purposive sampling technique was used to select five principals, twelve teachers, two subject advisors and three teacher union representatives. Data collected through face-to-face in-depth individual interviews were analysed thematically. Themes were drawn from the responses of the participants. Findings revealed that strict rules and regulations put in place by the department, the perceptions that teachers would not teach effectively when given professional autonomy, the constant supervision of teachers' work, bureaucracy as a management style, the existence of unqualified teachers, teachers' lack of passion for the profession and the prevalence of politicking and conflicts between the Department of Education and the teacher unions, were some of the factors found to be hampering the professional status of secondary school teachers in the Elliotdale Circuit. Some recommendations were made, these included: the Department of Education should use a democratic and participatory style of management in supervising teachers' work, the departmental officials should have less control over the teachers in relation to the core act of teaching and learning and the Department of Education should forge a working relationship with all the teacher unions in matters relating to teacher professional autonomy.
Key words: Professionalism; Autonomy; Bureaucracy; Managerialism; Victimisation.

INTRODUCTION
Teachers are key agents in the education system in all countries. Traditionally they were conceptualized and treated as members of a profession, as opposed to service workers (Wits Education Policy Unit, 2005, hereafter referred to as WEPU). In a less diversified society and more illiterate communities, teachers enjoyed a high status and were regarded as agents of literacy and mental development. This view is echoed internationally as there has always been an acknowledgement that teachers are the most important factor in learning and teaching (Wits Education Policy Unit, 2005). Education plays a central role in any society in changing the lives of people the world over. In this regard, teachers play a critical role in nurturing the minds and hearts of the youth. Almost every professional - be it a nurse, doctor, engineer or pilot - has passed through the hands of a teacher (Chireshe & Shumba, 2011).

It is important to highlight here that, though teachers are the most important factor in learning and teaching, recently, the teaching profession has been plagued by numerous problems. These problems include the growing attempts by government to control teachers' work and the accompanying discourse of managerialism (Wits Education Policy Unit 2005; John 1992; Barbara, Dale & Katalin, 2011). Hilferty (2008) questions whether contemporary patterns of educational reform will see the creation of positive new partnerships beyond the school that will enhance the professional autonomy and collective work lives of teachers, or whether it will initiate de-professionalisation, as teachers flounder under conditions of uncertainty, multiple pressures and intensified work demands from educational officials.

A number of studies on teacher professionalism have been carried out in Sub-Sahara Africa, Europe and Asia (Chireshe & Shumba, 2011; Barbara, et al 2011; Wits Education Policy Unit, 2005; Ntando, 2009; Hilferty, 2008). The countries covered by these studies include South Africa, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Australia, United Kingdom and Japan. One of the key factors hampering the professional autonomy of teachers is low levels of empowerment of teachers in schools. Other related studies on teachers professional autonomy have been done in countries such as South Africa (Dekker & van Schalkwyk, 1990), Nigeria (Enviado & Yamith, 2009), and London (Gerry & Warren, 2011). Manuel (2007) reports that among the many educational arguments that support the notion of teacher autonomy is the current lack of teacher voices in decision-making processes. Similarly, Barfield, Ashwell, et al (2001), report that teacher autonomy may hinge on "ideas of professional freedom and self-directed professional development". Successful teachers have always been autonomous in the sense of having a strong sense of personal responsibility for their teaching (Barfield, Ashwell et al, 2001).

This paper examines the factors hampering the professional autonomy of teachers in the Elliotdale Circuit of South Africa, a quick survey among teachers in the secondary schools revealed that teachers were always in constant fear of the loss of their professional status and prestige, the loss of their autonomy and independence due to factors that had an impact on their professionalism, thus creating in them a culture of resistance and suspicion when there was a provincial or district visit to the secondary schools. These teachers felt that there was a constant interference and imposition regarding what they must teach and how they should teach in class. It is important to highlight here that very little research has been done in the area of factors hampering secondary school teachers' professional autonomy in South African rural public schools but given the importance of teachers in national development, it became necessary to conduct a study that

intended to find out the factors hampering the professional autonomy of teachers at secondary schools in the Elliotdale Circuit of the Dutywa Education District.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows: Section one deals with the de-professionalisation of the teaching profession, teacher professional autonomy and resistance in schools and the importance of teacher professional autonomy. The research method and design employed in the study are presented in section two while the results of the study and the discussions of the research findings are presented in section three. The last section comprises recommendations, conclusions and suggestions for further studies.

De-professionalisation of the Teaching Profession
According to the WEPU (2005) the deprofessionalisation of teachers is attributed to the ascendancy of right-wing governments globally which introduced policy initiatives that were not only conservative, but undermined teacher autonomy. The governments were bureaucratic and demanded more accountability from teachers. The emphasis was more on learners' grades as opposed to the quality of learning and teaching (WEPU, 2005). Furthermore, Dekker and Van Schalkwyk (1990) explain that the difference between a bureaucratic and democratic system of educational control lies in the fact that: bureaucratic control of teachers aims at ensuring a standardised product of teaching and learning, while democratic control of teachers emphasises the importance of developing the individual as a person and realizing his or her potential.

According to Gerry and Warren (2011) teachers have never enjoyed professional autonomy that occupations such as medicine and law have traditionally had. Cultures of intensive control of teachers work with growing centralized prescription of what should be taught in schools have eroded the traditional model of teacher professionalism. Gerry and Warren (2011) explain that critics of growing centralized prescription of what should be taught in schools suggest that schools districts have resulted in a managerial professionalism which accepts that decisions about what and how to teach are made at national or school level rather than by individual teachers themselves (Gerry & Warren, 2011).

Teacher Professional Autonomy and Resistance in Schools
It is again important to highlight here that there is a relationship between teacher professional autonomy and teacher resistance in schools, For example, Vander Westhuizen (2008) confirms this relationship by reporting that the factors that give rise to teacher resistance in schools include the loss of personal choice and values, possible loss of autonomy and authority and lack of teacher involvement in decision making. Smith and Cronje (1995) also extend this confirmation by claiming that if the desire to maintain the status quo and autonomy of teachers is lacking in schools, there is bound to be resistance from the teachers.

Importance of Teacher Professional Autonomy
Jim (2009) shows the importance of teacher professional autonomy by reporting that the more professional autonomy is given to teachers and the more these teachers have a say in how and what new practices they implement, the more likely they will be to embrace new ways of teaching. On the other hand, Sislu (2006) reports that unreasonable demands of administrators from teachers and discouraging team spirit can affect the professional autonomy and motivation of teachers in schools. Furthermore, Manuel (2007) states that among the many educational arguments that support the notion of teacher professional autonomy in schools are: the current lack of teacher

voices in decision-making processes, the important role autonomy plays in teacher development, the need for teacher development to encourage self-motivated professional learning and the need to explain that teacher autonomy is not about working in isolation. Based on the last argument that supports the notion of teacher professional autonomy in schools, Enviado and Yamith (2009) explain that teacher autonomy does not mean a generalised right to freedom from control or capacity to engage in selfdirected teaching, but as a capacity for self-directed teacher-learning Barfield, Ashwell, et al., (2001) also claim that successful teachers have always been autonomous in the sense of having a strong sense of personal responsibility for their teaching and exercise the highest possible degree of affective and cognitive control of the teaching process.

METHODOLOGY
A case study design was used in this study in order to identify participants' views and perceptions about the factors hampering the professional autonomy of teachers at secondary schools in the Elliotdale Circuit of the Dutywa Education District and to establish how these factors could be addressed to ensure the realization of secondary school teachers' professional autonomy. The design was chosen because it is an evidence-based, empirical approach that focuses on an intense investigation of a single system or a phenomenon in its real-life context (Eunjung, Faye & Sara, 2010). The study was confined to seven senior secondary schools. Purposive sampling technique was used to select five principals, twelve teachers, two subject advisors and three teacher union representatives.

The researcher purposefully selected this sample because of the belief that they were in constant touch with teaching and learning and were also familiar with issues pertaining to teacher professional autonomy in the secondary schools (White, 2005). The researcher used semi-structured face-to-face, in-depth individual interviews to collect the data. An audiotape was used to record the interview proceedings. Interview is perhaps the most common form of data-gathering technique in the phenomenographical tradition (Joseph, Mallihai, Zui, & Terry, 2009). In general, all interview questions were found to be clear to the participants. Asking questions that were understandable to participants was an important part of establishing rapport (White, 2005). Permission to carry out the study was sought from the principals of the secondary schools, union officials and from the Department of Education. Participants were assured that their responses would be kept confidential and used only for the purpose of this study. Thematic analytical technique was used to analyse the data. The themes emerging from the analytical process; were constructed in line with what David (2003) says, that rigorous and systematic reading and coding of transcripts allows for major themes to emerge.

RESULTS
The results of the study based on the research objective and question that needed to be achieved are: there was inadequacy of teacher professional autonomy, there were stringent measures in the education system, teachers' innovations and creativity were disregarded, there were perceptions of teachers abandoning their work when professional autonomy is attained, frequent curriculum changes placed a high demands on teachers in the education system, there were politicking and conflict between the employer and teacher unions, a phenomenon of unqualified and under-qualified teachers in schools was common, bureaucratic management style in schools was also common, there were frequent visitation of schools by the departmental officials, there were victimisation of teachers in schools and poor leadership styles in schools were also notable.

DISCUSSION

Inadequacy of Teacher Professional Autonomy

The study revealed that senior secondary school teachers in the Elliotdale Circuit had inadequate professional autonomy in what they teach and in how they teach because teachers were not allowed to initiate and to come out with the strategies in the teaching and learning process. A teacher had this to say: *No, we do not have any autonomy here. Why am I saying this? Because the Department puts pressure on us to follow the syllabus guide lines when teaching. Teachers cannot initiate and come out with their ways of teaching to the learners but must follow strict procedures from the Department.* A principal said the following: *Yes, teachers do enjoy autonomy even though their subject advisors still monitor them but teachers have some control over the subjects they teach.* The Wits Education Policy Unit (2005) confirmed this finding by the report presented that alludes to the fact that, in South Africa, teachers' work during the apartheid period was under heavy control through a system of inspection where teachers were punished if they did not comply with the apartheid philosophy entrenched in the curriculum. The bureaucratic approach continues to be exercised long after apartheid ceased to be a guiding factor in education. t was also found that most heads of departments in the secondary schools were reluctant to allow teachers to enjoy their professional autonomy. A teacher had the following to say: *They are not and they do not enjoy any autonomy because they have to follow certain procedures, they also have their HODs who check their work all the time and subject advisors who monitor how they teach.* In reaction to this, Charlie (2011) states that one primary goal of teachers' work is to build independence, autonomy, and self-control in learners, a task difficult to complete if the teachers have no autonomy in their work, as they would be aiming to build autonomy in others while having little control over their own teaching.

Stringent Measures in the Education System

The study also found that departmental officials visited schools sometimes to challenge teachers' work, put up stringent measures in the education system and to keep checking on what aspects of the syllabus were being covered by teachers. A teacher had the following to say: *More or less teachers enjoy autonomy, but the Department of Education keeps on applying stringent measures. For example, teachers are not given the chance to decide on what aspects to cover in the syllabus as well as how to cover them.* This finding is corroborated by the findings of the Wits Education Policy Unit (2005) that explains that in South Africa, teachers' work during the apartheid period was under heavy control to the extent that teachers had little professional autonomy and very little claim of professional status. Another teacher lamented in the following way: *I do not think they enjoy any autonomy or freedom, because things are very strict and stringent, for that matter teachers must go by the rules and regulations which deny teachers being creative.* In support of this lamentation, Rick (1999) suggests that teachers must enjoy some degree of professional autonomy to enable them to pursue some topics and areas of teaching and learning that are of particular interest to them and to the learners. Rick (1999) further suggests that teachers must be free to challenge educational ideas and to offer different perspectives when addressing an educational problem. An opinion from a head of department was: *They are not and they do not enjoy any autonomy* to democratic professionalism which is advocated by the teacher unions. A subject advisor also presented the following views: *What I can say is that most of the teachers in this circuit are under qualified and also it is because of the conflict between the unions and the Department; where the unions fight for teachers autonomy while the Department fights for*

teachers to follow the policies from them and for the teachers to be governed. Judyth (1999) states that advocates of managerialism and democratic professionalism are often at loggerheads with each other because unions and other professional bodies tend to adopt democratic professionalism which ensures the realization of teacher professional autonomy in schools, while the employer or the Department of Education advocates managerial professionalism, which is bureaucratic and has the potential of disregarding the professional autonomy of teachers in schools (Judyth, 1999). Jackson (2010) also confirms the above findings by explaining that teachers will always lack professional autonomy and independence while they are employed in bureaucratic institutions like public schools. Perhaps private schools provide more autonomy although teachers there are bound by profit.

A Phenomenon of Unqualified and Under-qualified Teachers in Schools

It was also revealed that some of the teachers in the circuit were unqualified and under-qualified, therefore, as such, could not attain professional autonomy in the schools. The study found that unqualified and under qualified teachers had no passion to teach and were also less committed in the teaching profession. An opinion from a teacher is: *In most cases some teachers are not qualified, some go to the Elliotdale Circuit to teach because they are desperate to be employed in any kind of job and others do not have the passion to teach. So you cannot give autonomy to these kinds of teachers.* This is why Linda and Laura (2000) claim that the fact that the least-qualified teachers typically end up teaching is particularly problematic when decisions are to be made concerning teachers professional autonomy in schools.

A union member responded in the following way: You see, *most educators do things that are not professional, things such as late coming, absenteeism, not teaching and all these affect teachers' autonomy and also affect the learners.* This is why Linda and Laura (2000) highlight that differences in teacher effectiveness are extremely strong determinants of differences in student learning.

Bureaucratic Management Style in Schools

It was also revealed in the study that most school managers used a bureaucratic management style in managing and controlling teachers in schools. Bureaucratic practices such as strict rules and regulations, the Department of Education prohibiting schools from employing certain teachers and the cumbersome procedures involved in moderation of learner portfolios, were all evident in some schools. The following sentiment came from a teacher: *Yes, it is everywhere. Example, where the department categorically ask schools not to employ certain teachers on certain posts which affect the smooth teaching and running in the school. The department wants the schools to stick to their policies.* To confirm the findings above in terms of the nature of bureaucratic practices in schools, Judyth (1999) explains that in the Australian education system, teachers are placed in a long line of authority in terms of their accountability for reaching measurable outcomes that stretched through the principal, to the district/regional offices and to the central offices. Another feeling from a teacher was: *Surely, bureaucracy is still in school, like the strict rules and regulations from the department.* A school principal view was: *There is bureaucracy in schools because teachers in schools are accountable to the head of the school and the head is accountable to the circuit managers up to the national level.* According to WEPU (2005), managerial professionalism emanates from outside the teaching profession and it is often imposed by employers to control teachers work. It often means more bureaucratic control of teachers' work which is often driven by bureaucratic needs rather than the needs of the teachers. The WEPU (2005) claims that attempts by the

Department of Education to limit teachers' autonomy should be seen as an attempt to deprofessionalise the teaching profession.

Frequent Visitation of Schools by the Departmental Officials

This study revealed that the departmental officials presented themselves at the school as the bosses of all, to rule and dictate to teachers what needs to be done without any consideration of the teachers' professional autonomy and without due attention to the challenges faced by the teachers. An opinion from a teacher was: *I think teachers see the members of the Department of Education as the bosses or officials who rule over them and for that matter they develop that attitude of being resistant. Also, the Department does not want to understand the situation on the ground from the teachers' points of view.* Another teacher claimed: *the department frequently visits us and expects all the rules and regulations to be followed.*

Victimisation of Teachers in Schools

It was also found that secondary school teachers were being victimized by the departmental officials and as a result, teachers became aggressive and defensive with the notions that their professional autonomy were been trampled upon. A teacher lamented: *the Department at times visits schools to victimise us and not to support or encourage us to put more effort in the teaching and learning. They are not in schools to support but to find faults.* A school principal said the following: *Subject advisors or from the employer sometime do come to police teachers and to find fault with their teaching or to find out what was wrong in schools without developing or supporting the teachers. Teachers are not also treated like professionals by the employer or subject advisors.* In support of the above statement, Ntando (2009) claims that in most cases in South Africa, teachers find themselves having to protect their professional autonomy in schools. Further, Manuel (2007) provides reasons why teachers may become aggressive and defensive to departmental officials' visitations, by explaining that when teachers are coerced by their managers, their performance is reduced and could lead to their frequent reactions, resistance and resentment.

Poor Leadership Styles in Schools

It was also found that poor leadership style and lack of knowledge in the interpretation of educational policy documents by the school management teams had hampered the professional autonomy of teachers in the schools. A school principal presented the following views: *The main thing is that we the managers of the schools only apply what is on the paper (the policy) and teachers do not like that. We the school managers lack the skills and information of how to apply the policies.* In connection with this finding, Smith and Cronje (1995) state that various organizational impediments, such as traditional and possible bureaucratic procedures and inappropriate management style, and a philosophy which expresses itself in the form of inflexible leadership, can impede teachers' professional autonomy which will eventually lead to teacher resistance.

CONCLUSION

Despite the key role play by teachers in the education system, there are factors hampering their professional autonomy in schools, to the extent that, teachers have inadequate professional autonomy in what they teach and in how they teach which significantly affected their effectiveness in schools. Issues of officials visiting schools sometimes to challenge teachers work, put up stringent measures in the education system and kept checking which aspects of the syllabus were

being covered by the teachers resulted in teachers developing attitude of being resistant in the schools. The rules and regulations put in place by the department were also considered as impediments to teacher professional autonomy in the schools. Perceptions of less teaching and learning in schools if teachers attained a high level of professional autonomy in schools were built on the assumption that teachers would go to school and leave at any time when not being monitored which subsequently would affect effective teaching and learning. Politicking and conflicts between the Department of Education and the teacher unions with regard to professional treatment of all teachers in schools were also seen as impediments to teachers' professional autonomy and also led to unhealthy work environment in the schools. The prevalence of unqualified and underqualified teachers in schools played a key role in denying teachers their professional autonomy by the employer because such teachers may not have the passion to teach and may also be less committed in the teaching profession. Last but not least, the phenomenon of departmental officials and school managers using bureaucratic management style in managing and controlling the work of teachers had a devastating effect on teachers professional autonomy, motivation and on the culture of teaching and learning in the secondary schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Department of Education needs to involve school teachers in Curriculum Policy Development. Involving teachers in curriculum development will increase their self-worth, as valuable specialists whose input matters in the development of educational policies. The departmental officials should have less control over secondary school teachers in relation to the core act of teaching. The Department of Education should also implement a flexible supervisory control system that best allows teachers to retain their autonomy in schools but at the same time does not compromise teacher absenteeism and lack of proper teacher preparation. Instructional supervision should only be done on unqualified and under qualified teachers, while leaving more experienced teachers to have more autonomy in what they teach. The Department of Education needs to forge a working relationship with all the teacher unions where the importance of teacher supervision, classroom visits and monitoring is discussed in a professional manner. In-service training should be organized by the department to educate all the officials on the educational needs of school visits (solely to support and develop teachers) and not to victimise teachers or find fault with their work.

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