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On the Relationship between Teacher Autonomy and Feeling of Burnout among Iranian EFL Teachers

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Abstract

Few studies (Abel & Sewell, 1999; Bolton, 2010; Fernet, Guay, Senécal, & Austin, 2012) have shed light on the negative influences that teachers’ dissatisfaction and demotivation can have on their professional development. To bridge this gap, the present study investigated the relationship between feeling of burnout with teacher autonomy, as a professional development construct, among ELT teachers in Iran. As many as 143 EFL teachers in different private language teaching institutes participated in the study. Data were collected using Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996) and Teaching Autonomy Scale developed by Pearson and Hall (1993). Correlation analysis indicated that teacher autonomy was significantly and inversely related to their feeling of burnout (r=53, p<0.05). The Step-Wise Multiple Regression also showed that the components of burnout; i.e., emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment were significant predictors of teacher autonomy. The findings offer some implications for in-service and pre-service teacher preparation programs.

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Keywords: Teacher autonomy; burnout; emotional exhaustion; depersonalization; reduced personal accomplishment

1. Introduction

Regarding the significant role teachers play in the field of language learning, their emotions and feelings have been the subject of many studies (Borg, Riding, & Falzon, 1991; Chan, 2004; Swanson & Koonce, 1986). According to some scholars, these emotions and feelings, can either heighten teachers’ professional progress, such as high teacher autonomy (Phil, 2010), or prevent their progress, in cases like burnout (Özer & Beycioglu, 2010). Thus, creating and enhancing awareness about such feelings and emotions and the relationship between them can be helpful in professional development of ELT teachers.

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In the context of ELT, some teachers have dilemma between what they want to teach and what they have to teach, moreover, many teachers are irked by the situations in which they cannot have much control over how and what they teach. Such feelings can bring about dissatisfaction and lack of motivation toward their career and lead to decline in teachers’ professional development. An exactly opposite concept to this point is Teacher autonomy, an ability or skill of teachers to develop their own teaching condition freely without any limitation. Though many scholars still consider its meaning opaque, the first definition on teacher autonomy was given by Little (1995, p.176) as the “teachers’ capacity to engage in self-directed teaching.” Later, Smith defined teacher autonomy as “the ability to develop appropriate skills, knowledge and attitudes for oneself as a teacher, in cooperation with others” (2000, p.89). The amount of autonomy felt by teachers depends on their abilities and characteristics, this amount can be varies not only regarding internal factors but also according to external causes such as, policy factors, institutional factors, conceptions of language, and language teaching methodologies (Shaw 2002). Dissatisfaction caused by these factors can immensely influence teachers’ views and attitudes and result in demotivation and stress.

As a concept related to Teachers’ emotions, stress has been known as a prevalent problem in different educational setting (Chan, 2004). Almost thirty to seventy-five percent of teachers suffer from a moderate to high degree of stress in their job (Borg et al., 1991), and as a consequence, experience burnout and quit their jobs. Sometimes the amount of stress is so high that teachers may face psychological problems like emotional exhaustion and depression which are relevant to the concept of “teacher burnout”.

Burnout has been defined variously throughout the history. As a pioneer, Maslach (1993) defined burnout as “a psychological syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who work with other people in some capacity.” According to Maslach and Jackson’s (1981), burnout consists of three dimensions: (a) emotional exhaustion, feelings of being exhausted from one’s emotional and physical resources (Maslach et al. 2001); (b) depersonalization, a state of aloofness and separation from learners, parents, and other teachers, and (c) a reduced sense of personal accomplishment is a teacher’s negative self-evaluation of oneself regarding their teaching. As a debilitating factor, burnout can be triggered by various factors like unsatisfactory working conditions, economical problems (Borg et al., 1991), low achievements, lack of motivation (Byrne, 1994), administrative leadership and participation in decision-making (Byrne, 1999). As alluded, the last two factors are related to the concept of teacher autonomy; their feeling of capability or freedom in their teaching, and enhancing such feeling can be a great means to prevent feeling of burnout in ELT teachers, thus requires highlighted attention. No study, previously, addressed the potential relationship can be existed between teacher autonomy and their feeling of burnout, therefore, considering this gap, the aim of current study is to find the answers of the following questions;

1. Is there any significant relationship between teacher burnout and their perceived sense of autonomy?
2. Can the components of burnout significantly predict teacher autonomy?

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

Participants of this study included 143 (68 male and 75 female) teachers, teaching English as a foreign language in language institutes aging between 20 to 45 years of age, with experience ranging from 1-15 years of teaching English in language institutes. Except for a small number, all of them had degree in English (BA, MA). They have thought in different levels (elementary, intermediate, and advanced) during their teaching span.

2.2 Instrument

The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), consisting of the 22-items (Maslach & Jackson, 1986) was used. Participants were requested to evaluate each item according to the frequency of their feelings ranging from 0 (never) to 6 (every day). The items are scored into the three components of emotional exhaustion, (9 items, maximum score
In order to evaluate teachers’ autonomy, Teaching Autonomy Scale (TAS; Pearson & Hall, 1993) was used in this study. The questionnaire, including 18 items, was a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (definitely false) to 4 (definitely true) to eliminate a neutral response.

2.3 Data analysis

Quantitative analysis was carried out to find the answer of the questions. Pearson-Product Moment correlation was run so as to explore if teachers’ reflection has any statistically significant effect on their burnout. The data, based on the participants’ responses to both questionnaires, were analysed with the help of SPSS (version 16) program. Then multiple regressions analysis was carried out to find out whether the components of burnout can predict any degree of teachers’ sense of autonomy.

3. Results

3.1 Teachers’ burnout and autonomy

To answer the first research question, a Pearson correlation was run. The R-observed value was -.53. This amount of R-value is higher than the critical value at 143 degrees of freedom. (Table 1)

Table 1
Pearson Correlation for Teacher Autonomy and Burnout

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>r</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-.53</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The findings indicated that teachers’ autonomy had a significant inverse relationship with their sense of burnout (r = -.53, p < 0.05). In other words, the more the teachers are self-directed and have concern for developing their teaching skills, the less they have feelings of helplessness, disillusion, and emotional exhaustion.

3.2. Predictive power of components of burnout

A standard regression analysis was run to predict teachers’ autonomy through components of burnout and the 3 components were entered as independent variables. As displayed in Table 2, components of burnout; emotional exhaustion (E.E), depersonalization (DEP), and lack of personal accomplishment (P.A) predict 31% of teachers’ perceived sense of autonomy.

Table 2
Regression Model Summary of Teacher Autonomy and Components of Burnout

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>R^2</th>
<th>Adjusted R^2</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Regression</td>
<td>6743.87</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>58.134</td>
<td>31.48</td>
<td>28.40</td>
<td>.032</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residual</td>
<td>7753.67</td>
<td>139</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>11865.08</td>
<td>142</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Predictors: EE; Predictors; EE, DEP; Predictors; EE, EDP, P.A; Dependent Variable: Teacher autonomy

Furthermore, as the statistics in table 3 shows, Emotional Exhaustion (β = -0.23, p ≤ 0.05), Depersonalization
(β = 0.19, p ≤ .05), and Lack of personal accomplishment (β = 0.15, p ≤ .05) were found to make significant contributions to the teachers’ perceived sense of autonomy.

**Table 3**

*Multiple Regressions on the Dependent Variable*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Exhaustion</td>
<td>-21.48</td>
<td>-.23.12</td>
<td>-19.87</td>
<td>.032*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depersonalization</td>
<td>-17.14</td>
<td>-.19.15</td>
<td>-17.42</td>
<td>.036*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Personal Accomplishment</td>
<td>23.12</td>
<td>.15.17</td>
<td>22.61</td>
<td>.044*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. *significant at p ≤ .05

4. **Discussion**

Including two aspects of the curriculum and general teaching, teacher autonomy negatively correlated with burnout. According to the results, teachers who reported to have more feelings of authority in their teaching practice—regardless of their level of experience or formal training—reported to feel less sense of burnout in their teaching experience. This finding suggests that feeling more capacity and ability on their knowledge, skill, and learners can be one of the main aspects to be addressed by authorities and trainers, as it may help teachers feel more sense of autonomy and experience lower levels of burnout.

Furthermore, it aimed to explore if components of burnout can predict teachers’ feelings of autonomy, and the outcome acknowledged that components of burnout can be a good predictors of teachers’ perceived sense of autonomy; where the emotional exhaustion, which is directly related to job satisfaction, being the strongest predictor of teachers’ autonomy. Those teachers, who enjoy teaching the most and are satisfied with their teaching condition, put most effort into the teaching practice. These teachers may therefore feel less sense of burnout or depression in their teaching. According to Oxman and Michelli’s (1980) findings, intrinsic factors affect job satisfaction and extrinsic factors result in job dissatisfaction in teachers.

It is likely that when teachers work in a positive environment with more satisfaction and good relations between the staff and the principal, they feel more supported and therefore report less work-related burnout which is in line with the findings of previous studies regarding burnout and willingness to work (Delaunay, 2002), motivation of teaching (Dolunay, 2002), autonomous motivation (Fernet et al., 2012) and getting social support (Gündüz, 2005).

Furthermore, the investigation unfolded that low teacher autonomy resulted in reduction of personal accomplishment. Thus, the teaching context variables and conditions were differently related to and influence teachers’ cognitive and emotional responses. This means that effort to improve teachers’ working condition and their feelings of autonomy should be matter of great concern in order to develop the quality of teachers’ teaching and learners’ learning. This is in accordance with the outcome of the previous research studies that scrutinize autonomy by specifically looking at variables such as decision making processes (Friedman, 1999), school policies (Hara, 2006), and work environments (Pearson & Moomaw, 2006), which found out that contextual factors plays a vital role in the professional success of language teachers. Fernet et al. (2012) believed that autonomy-supportive conditions allow teachers to make certain choices and decisions about their work and develop a meaningful rationale which results in their professional development.

5. **Conclusion**

The results of this study revealed an inverse relationship between teacher autonomy and feeling of burnout, as two main concepts regarding teachers’ emotions and feelings that can immensely influence their success in their
teaching profession. Various contextual factors, job dissatisfaction and lack of feelings of authority on their teaching are the pivotal factors in triggering teachers’ feelings of burnout, thus it is important to understand what contributes to lower teacher autonomy and higher burnout in teachers. It was also found out that components of burnout can highly predict teacher autonomy in language teachers. By examining the predictors and designing program changes, school systems and teaching principles can better support teachers, enhance their sense of autonomy, and prevent burnout. Such findings can assist school principals and administrators in preventing the negative consequences of low teacher autonomy and burnout. Additional research is needed on the impact of professional development and related teacher factors in order to determine their long-term effects on teacher autonomy, burnout, and, of course, teachers’ professional development.

References


