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PROFESSIONAL AUTONOMY AS A PREREQUISIT
FOR UNIVERSITY TEACHERS’ PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH

O. Gavrilyuk, E. Tareva, S. Nikulina
Krasnoyarsk State Medical University, Krasnoyarsk, Russia

Abstract

Traditionally remaining one of the most stressful human service jobs, teaching represents nowadays a complex of increasingly stressful situations. This may have an enormous detrimental effect on the teaching-learning process, as well as on promoting the health of future populations and students’ well-being, where teachers are known to play a key social role. Demonstrating the benefits autonomy has for teachers’ personal and professional self-development, as well as for their professional efficiency and psychological comfort, this paper emphasizes the potential of professional autonomy as a prerequisite for teachers’ psychological health. The purpose is to reveal the potential of university teachers’ autonomy as a factor of their professional development and burnout prevention. The notions of teachers’ professional autonomy, teachers’ psychological health, job stress and burnout in teaching are identified and characterized in the study. Teacher’s autonomy is represented as one of the criteria of psychological well-being and mental health of a person. The paper demonstrates how autonomy, involving internal locus of control, intrinsic motivation to professional achievement and to personal development, pedagogical mindfulness and professional responsibility, can allow teachers to mitigate their stress, tolerate occasional frustrations and setbacks, and to prevent emotional exhaustion as one of three main burnout components.

Keywords: psychological health, job stress, stressors, educational environment challenges, personality traits, university teacher’s professional autonomy, well-being, burnout prevention, professional self-development

Gavrilyuk Oksana Aleksandrovna – Candidate of pedagogical sciences, Associate professor, Head of the Department of Latin and Foreign Languages, Krasnoyarsk State Medical University, Krasnoyarsk, Russia;
Adress: 1, Partizan Zheleznyak street, Krasnoyarsk, 660022; phone: +7 (391) 2271212;
E-mail: oksana.gavrilyuk@mail.ru
Relevance

Teachers are known to play a key social role in promoting the health of future populations and students well-being (Duncan, 2011: 320; Maguire et al., 2011 : 108). Meanwhile, studies have shown that university teachers, as people who work in helping professions, suffer themselves from a high level of stress (Frostenson, 2012; Gold & Roth, 1993). This can be caused by the fact that modern university teachers are involved in a plenty of activities that include teaching, learning new information and developing new skills, keeping abreast of technological innovations, dealing with students, parents, and the community and ongoing adaptation to the measurement systems. Teaching staff nowadays also needs the competences to “adapt to rapidly changing and ever-increasing technology innovations for teaching” (Kopcha, Rieber, & Walker, 2015) and constantly innovate.

Traditionally, university teachers have been regarded as professionals who have a great amount of responsibility in their job. Nowadays the teacher becomes accountable rather than responsible, implying that the teacher loses the traditionally enjoyed mandate of trust (Solbrekke & Englund, 2011). At the same time, teachers suffer from ever-increasing hardships, such as work overload, more administration, greater pressure from pupils, principals and parents, for example with regard to marking, stronger forms of evaluation, lack of recognition and students’ unruly behavior, new and traditionally irrelevant clerical work tasks, poor wage development. The problem is accentuated by a widespread criticism of the profession of teaching in our society. As a result, today teaching is more stressful than ever. Being unable to cope in an efficient way with these transformations and not seeing the possibility for change, some teachers are becoming frustrated, dissatisfied, demotivated, physically and psychologically depleted, they tend to be dogmatic about their practices and to rely rigidly on structure and routine. Many of them leave or intend to leave the profession. Coping unsuccessfully with chronic stress can lead to work burnout (Jennett, Harris & Mesibov, 2003) and de-professionalization of teachers (Frostenson, 2012), both causing teachers’ performing far below their maximum potential, regardless of how well prepared they are.

At the same time, M. Frostenson claims that a general explanation of the de-professionalisation of the teaching profession, as well as other professions, is that
professional actors have lost autonomy which involves the situation when professional actors lose their ability to influence and the power to define the contents and forms of their own work, and fail to maintain the boundaries of their professional domains vis-à-vis other professionals, the authorities, or others (Frostenson, 2012). Teacher’s burnout is also reported to be correlated with a lack of autonomy (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005).

**Statement of the problem**

Given the extent of the problems of chronic stress, work burnout, de-professionalization in teaching profession and the consequences for both teachers and students, it is necessary to gain a better understanding of the factors that enable certain teachers to cope successfully with chronic stress while others do not (Hydon, Wong, Langley, Stein, & Kataoka, 2015; Johnson, & Naidoo, 2016).

Our empirical studies among Russian university teachers (Gavrilyuk et al., 2013) as well as the work investigating Iranian teachers’ psychological health (Javadi, 2014) suggest that teachers’ autonomy is significantly and inversely related to their feeling of burnout. Based on the results of these studies, the purpose of the present work is to use recent literature review and the method of open discussions to further develop investigation of the role that university teachers’ autonomy plays in maintaining their psychological health. To achieve this purpose it is necessary to analyze the problems of stress, work burnout and professional autonomy in teaching profession in the context of teachers’ psychological health (Lauermann, & König, 2016; Madathil, Heck, & Schuldberg, 2014; Murray, Murray, & Donnelly, 2015; Nie, & Sun, 2015; Ramón, 2015; Yao, Yu, Ai, Song, Meng, & Li, 2014).

According to Y. Gold and R. A. Roth, professional health is an attitude, a lifestyle. It is a way of approaching personal and professional concerns, dealing with them as issues to be resolved rather than their being unsurmountable problems. It is a means of finding ways to maintain professional effectiveness through a balance of one’s psychological needs (Gold & Roth, 1993). The authors stress that having achieved a satisfying state of professional health, teachers should not expect to remain there for all time without further effort. There will be an ongoing challenge of new problems and opportunities, caused by changing values, increasing cultural and language diversity and pressures in the classroom (ibid). The core of teachers’
professional health is their psychological (or mental) health, which is defined by the World Health Organization as “a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community” (Mental health, 2014). According to D. Mohana, a teacher should have a high level of mental health to be able to enlighten his students and enthuse them for more learning (Mohana, 2013: 61).

The psychological health is very closely related with job stress. Generally, job stress refers to people’s psychological state which is incongruence and misfit between worker’s perceptions of the demands on them and their ability to cope with those demands (Gold & Roth, 1993). Long-term impact of environmental stressors may lead to burnout, which is often seen as a process of energy depletion and deterioration of performance. In this process, enthusiasm wanes while previous involvement, initiatives, seriousness, and sense of responsibility are gradually replaced by patterns of routines and indifferent attitude in work environment (Miller et al., 1990). Burnout is regarded as a multidimensional construct comprising three interrelated components: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach et al., 1993). Emotional exhaustion refers to feelings of being emotionally overextended and depleted of one’s emotional resources; depersonalization means a negative, callous, or excessively detached response to other people (often the recipients of one’s service or care); and reduced personal accomplishment refers to a decline in one’s feelings of competence and successful achievement in one’s work or a feeling of negative self-esteem (ibid). Consequently, burnout affects the quality of teachers’ professional performance and demotivates students.

Therefore, problems in teacher psychological health are often demonstrated through teacher’s burnout and de-professionalization of the teaching profession. As it was said above, both are reported to be correlated with a lack of autonomy. Conversely, autonomous teachers are reported to show better mental health than their non-autonomous colleagues (Barron, 2012: 94).

However, it is considered that the conditions of ongoing managerialization, reducing the level of provided teachers’ autonomy, do imply the possibility to endow teachers with
substantial freedom within their professional practice (Frostenson, 2012). This emphasizes the role of perceived teachers’ autonomy (autonomy as an ability, not a right to be self-governing) as “a common link that appears when examining teacher motivation, job satisfaction, burnout, professionalism, and empowerment” (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005).

Modern conceptions of perceived teacher’s autonomy emphasize teachers’ capacity to take control of their own teaching through planning, making choices, making responsible decisions as well as independence in carrying out teaching and learning process (Montgomery & Prawitz, 2011). Teacher’s autonomy is reported to imply prescriptive professional choice (i.e., choosing teaching materials and pedagogy), participating in decision making (i.e., on the temporal and spatial conditions of work), using one’s own teaching style, influencing the evaluation systems of professional teaching practice (Frostenson, 2012; Pearson & Moomaw, 2005). Autonomous activity, i.e. participation in decision making, is reported to be able to decrease the role stress (Miller et al., 1990). Extending this idea, the Self-determination theory (SDT) describes perceived autonomy as “an important condition, which determines psychological well-being, optimal functioning and healthy development of a personality” (Ryan & Deci, 2006). It also suggests that perceived teacher’s autonomy makes the process of teaching inner-directed, and, consequently, desirable and enjoyable (ibid.).

Materials and methods

The study used a descriptive research design. Most of the data were obtained through literature review and analysis of the results of selected studies.

Various open discussions with participation of medical university teachers which took place in Krasnoyarsk State Medical University and Moscow State Medical University in 2014-2016 have also become an important source of information, taking into consideration the fact that people usually speak freely in these conditions.

Results and their discussion

The study outcomes allowed considering perceived teachers’ professional autonomy as a specific work-related teacher personality characteristic, which ensure teachers’ taking control of their work and developing as self-determined and socially responsible educational actors. Perceived teacher’s professional autonomy can be associated with a complex
of personal traits and professional skills. This complex includes intrinsic motivation to professional achievement and personal and professional self-development, internal locus of control, responsibility, creativity, ability to goal setting, ability to decision making, ability to make choices and critical mindfulness. Interacting, these characteristics make the teacher ready for self-directed professional activity and lifelong learning through teacher’s mastering new skills and competences to deal with new challengers of the educational environment. Specifically, perceived teachers’ autonomy allows teachers not to see educational environment challenges as stressors, but to transform these challenges into the factors of their own self-development.

Subsequently, for an autonomous teacher, the work of teaching generally represents a wide range of experiences and relationships with joy, fascination and satisfaction rather than risks for frustration and disappointment. This viewpoint corresponds with the idea proposed by S. Priebe and U. Reininghaus, who emphasize a positive, motivational, fulfilling state of work-related well-being instead of using negative stress model (Priebe & Reininghaus, 2011) and is relevant to ‘positive psychology’, a new research and application field that describes aspects of the human condition that lead to happiness and fulfillment to determine the factors that better one’s life (rather than trying to prevent negative situations) (Caprara et al., 2010).

Therefore, this investigation demonstrates that perceived teacher’s autonomy plays a role of a buffer against the negative impact of various stressors on teacher’s job satisfaction and a factor that promotes acquisition of new skills. It means that perceived teacher’s autonomy may be considered as one of the criteria of psychological well-being and mental health of a person. Taking into consideration that perceived teacher’s autonomy leads to better performance, job satisfaction, increase of self-esteem, work-related self-efficacy, is able to prevent teacher’s burnout, to produce an autonomous student (Ravikumar et al., 2015: 33), and to ensure the health promotion (Duncan, 2011 : 320), a special consideration should be given to the problem of teacher’s autonomy development.

**Conclusion**

The results of the literature review and the analysis of our findings received from the open discussions allow suggesting several conditions which are able to maintain high level
of perceived professional autonomy in university teachers. Among these conditions there are intrinsic and extrinsic ones.

Intrinsic conditions include intrinsic motivation together with autonomy-oriented system of values, teacher’s personality attributes and work-related competences. The extrinsic conditions represent a set of specific work incentives existing in the university educational environment and include:

1. Assessment of teaching should involve teachers’ critical awareness of the situation. It means that teachers should be provided with as more information as possible (concerning general educational and university context, teaching assessment criteria, opportunities for professional self-development, etc.). It also includes open evaluation which is necessary for making teachers self-monitor their teaching in order to observe and reflect upon the teaching strategies they use and the nature of the interactions they set up and participate in.

2. University educational context should provide professional challenges, opportunities to make decisions (e.g. providing freedom of choice through developing a flexible system of teacher portfolio) as well as offer teachers plenty of opportunities for empowerment and personal and professional self-development.

3. Any teacher evaluation should be based on the level of perceived teacher’s professional autonomy and followed by recognition of performance (including monetary and nonmonetary fringe benefits for pedagogical research, etc.). This factor involves teachers into competition, pedagogical self-monitoring and reflection.

4. The system of administrative control should stimulate teachers’ interaction in pedagogical project activities. This will prevent isolation, individualism and self-sufficiency among teachers and create the situation of cooperation, co-learning, negotiation and sharing.

Taken together, the above-mentioned internal and external conditions lead to better performance, the increase of teachers’ self-esteem and professional self-efficacy and are able to maintain teacher’s psychological health by stimulating:

- teachers’ self-empowerment and professional interaction;
- teachers’ awareness of the exterior constraints they are surrounded by;
- teachers’ abilities to perceive a lot of opportunities for making professional choice;
- teachers’ abilities to deal with any educational environment challenges positively through transforming them into the factors of their own self-development.

At the same time, the results of our investigation showed that deficiency of perceived teacher autonomy can be regarded as a signal of possible trouble and lead to burnout. It is expedient to conclude that perceived teacher autonomy plays a crucial role in providing a new type of psychological health-oriented higher education through allowing pedagogical research, teacher influence on school policies, effective implementation of new educational technology, teacher development and self-actualization in a broad sociocultural context, preventing university teachers’ burnout and retaining teachers in their jobs.

References


