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Teacher Autonomy in Practice: Insights from Government School Educators in North-East Delhi

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Abstract

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 identifies *'Rational thought and Autonomy'* as one of the five foundational aims of education to fulfil its overarching vision and goals. This study investigates the current state of teacher autonomy among educators in government schools across Delhi. The target population comprised primary, secondary, and senior secondary teachers working in these institutions. A randomly selected sample of 75 teachers—including PGTs, TGTs, and primary teachers from North-East Delhi—participated in the study. Data was collected through a structured four-point Likert scale questionnaire, focusing on four key dimensions: *Curriculum and Lesson Planning, Teaching Methods and Strategies, Assessment and Evaluation, and Classroom Environment and Management.* Quantitative analysis was employed to interpret the findings. Results indicate that while teachers experience a moderate degree of autonomy in selecting teaching methods and instructional strategies, significant limitations persist in areas such as curriculum decision-making, assessment practices, and resource allocation. These findings point to the need for systemic reforms to strengthen operational autonomy and provide holistic support for teacher empowerment. The study also recommends future research incorporating private school teachers to enable comparative insights and broaden the understanding of teacher autonomy in diverse educational settings.

Key Words:*Teacher Autonomy, Curriculum and Lesson Planning, Teaching Methods and Strategies, Assessment and Evaluation, Classroom Environment and Management.*

1. Introduction

The UNESCO 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development envisions teaching as a profession where educators are empowered with the autonomy to make pedagogical decisions that best support student growth. This vision affirms the pivotal role of teacher

autonomy in delivering quality education and in fostering essential 21st-century skills such as creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving. Empowering teachers in this way is fundamental to achieving inclusive and holistic student development.

The concept of teacher autonomy has evolved considerably over time. In ancient India, teachers or *gurus* exercised complete autonomy, independently deciding what, how, and when to teach, guided by the needs of their students and philosophical traditions. A similar tradition of intellectual freedom was evident in ancient Greece, where philosophers like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle shaped education through inquiry, dialogue, and critical reflection. However, this autonomy witnessed a decline during the colonial era. Colonial powers imposed rigid educational structures that reduced teachers to mere implementers of centrally prescribed curricula, emphasizing rote memorization and compliance over independent thought. As Kumar (2014) notes in *Politics of Education in Colonial India*, colonial education policies institutionalized a centralized and bureaucratic system—a legacy that continues to shape curriculum design and constrain teacher autonomy in postcolonial India.

The 19th and early 20th centuries marked the emergence of the industrial model of education, particularly in Western contexts. This shift brought about increased bureaucratization and standardization within schooling systems, where teachers were progressively seen as functionaries tasked with implementing predetermined curricula—significantly curtailing their professional autonomy. In the post-independence period, especially in developing nations like India, education was reimagined as a critical instrument for nation-building and social transformation. Teachers were portrayed as key agents of change, and efforts to expand teacher education gained momentum. However, despite this recognition, the continued centralization of curriculum design and educational policymaking often limited teachers' decision-making power within classrooms, constraining the autonomy required for innovative and context-responsive pedagogy.

In the 21st century, the landscape of teacher autonomy remains complex and multifaceted. On one hand, the global emphasis on standardized testing, accountability frameworks, and performance indicators has imposed constraints on pedagogical freedom, often narrowing the scope for innovation in the classroom. On the other hand, there is an increasing acknowledgment of the value of teacher professionalism, creativity, and learner-centered approaches in fostering meaningful and effective education. Countries with progressive education systems—such as Finland—exemplify models where teachers are granted high levels of autonomy and institutional trust. In contrast, test-centric systems like those in the United States, China, and India continue to operate within more rigid structures, often limiting the discretionary space teachers have in curriculum implementation and instructional practices.

India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a pivotal shift by explicitly emphasizing teacher autonomy and flexibility in adopting innovative pedagogies. Paragraph 13.4 highlights the need to empower educators to become motivated, creative professionals. The policy further states that teachers must be provided continuous opportunities for self-improvement and exposure to the latest advancements, and their innovative practices should be recognized for enhancing learning outcomes (NEP 2020,

p. 23). Similarly, the National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCFSE) 2023 underscores the importance of preserving teacher autonomy and enabling context-sensitive pedagogical decisions. Supporting this view, the OECD's *The Teacher and the Curriculum* (2010) links pedagogical autonomy with higher teacher motivation, job satisfaction, and accountability—factors known to improve student outcomes. Bhushan (2018) also affirms that teacher autonomy plays a vital role in fostering learner autonomy and improving overall learning effectiveness.

2. Need and Importance of Teacher Autonomy

Teacher autonomy is vital for fostering lifelong learning, enhancing student engagement, ensuring inclusive participation, and promoting effective classroom practices that lead to positive learning outcomes. Research consistently indicates that when teachers have the freedom to make instructional and classroom management decisions, they are more motivated, creative, and responsive to diverse student needs. Autonomy in choosing teaching methods, designing assessments, and managing classroom environments leads to a stronger sense of empowerment and professional commitment (Ingersoll, 2007; Pearson & Moomaw, 2005). Studies also link teacher autonomy with increased job satisfaction (Worth & Van den Brande, 2020), while greater curriculum autonomy is associated with reduced job-related stress (Parker, 2015).

In today's diverse and dynamic classroom environments, rigid, one-size-fits-all approaches often fall short of addressing the varied needs of learners. While policies aimed at standardizing education systems may ensure consistency, they can also conflict with the broader goal of promoting educational diversity (Dieudé&Prøitz, 2022). Granting teachers the autonomy to adapt content, teaching methods, and assessment strategies enables them to respond more effectively to the unique cultural, social, and academic needs of their students (Bangs & Frost, 2012).

Despite strong policy-level endorsements and well-established links between teacher autonomy and effective classroom environments, empirical research examining how this vision translates into practice—particularly in the context of Delhi's diverse educational landscape—remains limited. A clear disconnect persists between policy aspirations and classroom realities, especially when comparing the conditions in government and private schools. Questions continue to surface about the extent to which teachers are genuinely empowered to innovate and exercise professional judgment, or whether systemic constraints still restrict their autonomy.

This study aims to address this gap by exploring the current status of teacher autonomy in Delhi's government schools and evaluating the degree to which existing practices align with the goals outlined in NEP 2020. Such an inquiry is essential to understanding whether policy-driven educational reforms are effectively enhancing teacher agency and transforming classroom practices on the ground.

3. Definitions

Autonomy

The term *autonomy* originates from the Greek words *autos* (self) and *nomos* (law), signifying an individual's right to self-govern and make decisions free from external control (Siebert & Mills, 2007, as cited in Parker, 2015). In educational contexts, autonomy is often viewed as the freedom to make responsible, self-directed choices (Gonzalez, 1989; Frinkin, Post & Robert, 2009). Psychologists like Piaget and Erikson associate it with children's physical, psychological, and moral freedom. Academic autonomy involves various stakeholders including teachers, learners, researchers, administrators, and content creators—those actively shaping academic processes.

Although multiple models of teacher autonomy exist, this study adopts a governance-based perspective, defining it as teachers' capacity to make informed decisions about their roles within the framework of state regulations and resources (Frostenson, 2015; Mausethagen&Mølstad, 2015; Wermke& Forsberg, 2017; Wermke et al., 2019). Rather than increasing pressure, autonomy empowers teachers personally and professionally. It spans multiple domains such as instruction, classroom management, assessment, and curriculum planning. Key dimensions include decision-making, freedom, control, and scope of autonomy—interrelated components that reinforce one another (Strong, 2012). Globally, teacher autonomy is a core feature of education policy, closely tied to improvements in teaching quality and student learning outcomes.

Curriculum and Lesson Planning

As outlined in NEP 2020, *Curriculum and Lesson Planning* refers to a teacher's capacity to independently design, organize, and modify instructional content in alignment with students' learning needs and pedagogical objectives, while working within the prescribed curricular framework.

Teaching Methods and Strategies

Aligned with NEP 2020, *Teaching Methods and Strategies* refer to a teacher's ability to independently choose and apply pedagogical approaches that best meet learners' needs. The policy promotes learner-centered, experiential methods, encouraging teachers to innovate and adapt instruction to classroom diversity (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Assessment and Evaluation

Within the scope of teacher autonomy, *Assessment and Evaluation* refer to a teacher's ability to independently design and apply meaningful assessment methods. NEP 2020 emphasizes a shift toward competency-based and formative assessments, recognizing teachers as key decision-makers in monitoring student progress and informing instruction (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Classroom Environment and Management

As part of teacher autonomy, *Classroom Environment and Management* refers to a teacher's ability to independently create an inclusive, engaging, and responsive learning space. NEP 2020 emphasizes empowering teachers to build classroom cultures that promote safety, equity, creativity, and active learning (Ministry of Education, 2020).

4. Statement of the Problem

Although the NCFSE 2023 advocates for maintaining teacher autonomy and flexibility—encouraging educators to adapt and innovate beyond prescribed methods—it is essential to assess how this vision translates into practice at the ground level. This study, titled *"Teacher Autonomy in Practice: Insights from Government School Educators in North-East Delhi,"* seeks to investigate whether the autonomy endorsed in policy documents is truly reflected in day-to-day classroom experiences.

5. Research Questions

1. To what extent do teachers have the flexibility to design lesson plans and adopt teaching strategies based on the specific needs of their classrooms?
2. Are teachers permitted to adapt or modify teaching resources to suit the diverse requirements of their students?
3. To what extent do teachers have the autonomy to develop and implement their own assessment methods?

6. Research Objectives

1. To assess the extent of flexibility teachers have in designing lesson plans and selecting teaching strategies based on classroom needs.
2. To explore the degree to which teachers are expected to adhere to a fixed curriculum.
3. To examine whether teachers have the autonomy to adapt teaching resources to meet diverse classroom requirements.
4. To evaluate the level of freedom teachers possess in designing and implementing their own assessment methods.

7. Methodology

Research Design and Strategy:

This study adopted a quantitative research approach using the survey method to investigate the status of teacher autonomy among government school teachers in North-East Delhi.

Population:

The target population comprised all teachers employed in Delhi Government schools, spanning the primary, secondary, and senior secondary levels.

Sample:

A total of 75 teachers were selected through stratified random sampling to ensure balanced representation across teaching levels. The sample included Post Graduate Teachers (PGTs), Trained Graduate Teachers (TGTs), and Primary Teachers (PRTs). The study was confined to schools situated in the North-East district of Delhi.

Data Collection Tools:

Initially, 30 items were developed across four core themes—Curriculum and Lesson Planning, Teaching Methods and Strategies, Assessment and Evaluation, and Classroom Environment & Management—for the research tool. Following a detailed review and expert validation, 19 items were finalized for inclusion. A structured questionnaire

consisting of these 19 items was administered via Google Forms. Responses were recorded using a four-point Likert-type scale: *'Mostly', 'Sometimes', 'Can't Say', and 'Never'*. The inclusion of the *'Can't Say'* option provided participants with the flexibility to indicate uncertainty or lack of familiarity with a particular item, thereby improving response accuracy and reducing bias from forced choices.

8. Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Descriptive statistics, including mean scores, frequency counts, and percentage distributions, were utilized to identify patterns and trends related to different dimensions of teacher autonomy.

8.1 Theme 1- *Curriculum and Lesson planning*

Table 1: Autonomy of Govt. school teachers on Curriculum and Lesson planning

S.No	Statements	Mostly %	Sometime %	Can't say %	Never %	Nature of Teacher Autonomy Indicators
1	Do you have flexibilityin designing your lesson plans?	62.48	36.92	0	0	Positive
2	Are you required to follow a specific curriculum or framework?	53.96	34.08	4.26	7.1	Negative
3	Can you choose the topics or themes you want to cover in your classes, or are they predetermined?	66.74	28.4	0	4.26	Positive
4	How often do you have to submit your lesson plans for review or approval?	36.92	52.54	5.68	4.26	Negative
	MEAN (1+3)	**64.61**	**32.66**	**0**	**2.13**	**Positive**
	MEAN (2+4)	**45.44**	**43.31**	**2.84**	**5.68**	**Negative**

Findings on Teacher Autonomy in Curriculum and Lesson Planning

Table 1 depicts that Statements 1 and 3 reflect a positive orientation, highlighting the aspect of teacher autonomy in curriculum design and lesson planning.Analysis of the mean values indicates that approximately **64.61%** of government school teachers reported having the flexibility to design their own lesson plans and select topics based on the specific needs of their students. In contrast, **32.66%** of teachers indicated that such autonomy is only occasionally possible, while a small proportion, **2.13%**, reported

never having the opportunity to exercise this level of professional discretion in their teaching practices.

Conversely, Statements 2 and 4 are framed negatively and suggest a limitation on teacher autonomy. The analysis reveals that around **45.44%** of government school teachers stated that they are required to follow a prescribed curriculum or framework and are often mandated to submit their lesson plans for review or approval by a higher authority. Meanwhile, **43.31%** reported that this requirement occurs only occasionally. Additionally, **2.84%** of respondents expressed uncertainty, and **5.68%** affirmed that they are not subject to such oversight.

Discussion

These findings provide nuanced insights into the varying degrees of autonomy experienced by government school teachers, indicating conflicts between mandated curriculum adherence and professional freedom in instructional planning.

8.2 Theme 2- *Teaching methods and Strategies*

Table 2: Autonomy of Govt. school teachers on Teaching methods and Strategies

S.No	Statements	Mostly %	Sometime %	Can't say %	Never %	Nature of Teacher Autonomy Indicators
5	Are you allowed to experiment with different teaching methods and strategies?	75.26	22.72	1.42	0	Positive
6	Can you incorporate your own ideas and creativity into your teaching?	79.52	17.04	1.42	1.42	Positive
7	How much freedom do you have to adjust your teaching approach based on student needs and feedback?	65.92	32.66	1.42	0	Positive
8	Are there any restrictions on the use of technology or other resources in the classroom?	11.36	44.02	7.1	36.92	Negative
	MEAN (5+6+7)	**73.56**	**24.14**	**1.42**	**0.47**	**Positive**
	MEAN (8)	**11.36**	**44.02**	**7.1**	**36.92**	**Negative**

Findings on Teacher Autonomy in Teaching methods and Strategies

Table 2 depicts- Statement 1, 2 and 3 are positive in nature, and indicating teacher autonomy in teaching methods and strategies. Analysis of these three statements indicate that around **73.56%** Govt. school teachers have confirmed that they have flexibility to experiment with different teaching methods and strategies, they can incorporate their own ideas and creativity to customise their teaching, they have freedom to adjust their teaching approach based on student needs and feedback. Whereas **24.14%** teachers says that only sometimes this is possible. However, very negligible percentage of teachers are in the favour that they have no freedom to teach the class as per their strategies and pedagogy and only **1.42%** teachers are neutral about this.

Statement 4 is negatively worded and serves to highlight limitations on teacher autonomy, specifically in the context of using technological and other instructional resources. Approximately **11.36%** of teachers reported experiencing restrictions on the use of technology or other resources in the classroom. An additional **44.02%** indicated that such restrictions occur occasionally, often requiring prior permission. Notably, **36.92%** of teachers stated that they have never encountered any such limitations, suggesting that a significant number enjoy unrestricted access to instructional resources.

Discussion

Although many teachers report the freedom to utilize such tools without restriction, a substantial proportion still face occasional or consistent limitations that may hinder their ability to fully implement modern, resource-rich teaching practices. This suggests a disparity between pedagogical autonomy and operational autonomy, highlighting the need for systemic support structures that not only promote instructional freedom but also ensure equitable access to teaching aids and technological resources across schools.

8.3 Theme 3- *Assessment and evaluation*

Table 3: Autonomy of Govt. school teachers on Assessment and evaluation

S.No	Statements	Mostly %	Sometime %	Can't say %	Never %	Nature of Teacher Autonomy Indicators
9	Do you have control over the types of assessments you use to evaluate student learning?	42.56	49.21	3.99	3.99	Positive
10	Are assessments mandated by the school or district?	51.87	42.56	3.99	1.33	Negative
11	Can you design your own assessments as per students of diverse levels?	41.23	53.2	1.33	3.99	Positive
12	Are you required to use standardized tests or	29.26	58.52	7.98	3.99	Negative

	rubrics?					
13	Do you have flexibility in grading and evaluating student work?	38.7	50.54	6.65	3.99	Positive
14	Are there any specific metrics or benchmarks you're expected to meet in terms of student achievement?	39.9	50.54	7.98	1.33	Negative
	MEAN (9+11+13)	**40.78**	**50.98**	**3.99**	**3.99**	**Positive**
	MEAN (10+12+14)	**40.34**	**50.54**	**6.65**	**2.21**	**Negative**

Findings on Teacher Autonomy in Assessment and Evaluation

It is clear from the table 3 that Statements 9, 11, and 13 are positively framed, reflecting teacher autonomy in the domain of assessment and evaluation. Analysis of these responses reveals that approximately **40.78%** of government school teachers reported having the autonomy to select assessment methods, design their own evaluation tools, and apply flexible grading practices based on student learning outcomes. In contrast, **50.98%** of respondents indicated that such autonomy is only occasionally permitted. A very small proportion of teachers, **3.99%**, reported having no freedom in assessment-related decisions, with an equal percentage expressing no clear opinion.

Conversely, Statements 10, 12, and 14 are negatively worded and represent constraints on teacher autonomy in assessment practices. Approximately **40.34%** of teachers acknowledged that their assessments are governed by school or district mandates. These mandates often include the use of standardized tests or pre-determined rubrics, and adherence to specific benchmarks or performance metrics. An additional **50.54%** indicated that such restrictions are experienced only occasionally. **6.65%** of teachers remained neutral, while **2.21%** reported that they have never encountered such limitations.

Discussion

These findings highlight a complex reality: while a considerable number of teachers experience some degree of autonomy in designing and implementing assessments, a majority still operate within frameworks that require compliance with standardized evaluation systems. This reflects a partial autonomy model, where teacher agency is present but moderated by institutional expectations.

8.4 Theme 4- *Classroom environment and Management*

Table 4: Autonomy of Govt. school teachers on Classroom environment and Management

S.No	Statements	Mostly %	Sometime %	Can't say %	Never %	Nature of Teacher Autonomy Indicators
15	How much control do	41.23	46.55	5.32	7.10	Positive

	you have in alteringthe physical layout of your classroom as per need?					
16	Can you establish your own classroom rules and expectations?	43.89	42.56	7.98	5.32	Positive
17	Are the classroom rules set by the school or district?	38.57	49.21	7.98	3.99	Negative
18	How much autonomy do you have in managing student behaviour and discipline?	63.84	30.59	5.32	0	Positive
19	Do you have restriction on using types of materials or resources other than prescribed, in the classroom?	10.64	46.55	10.64	31.92	Negative
	MEAN (15+16+18)	**49.65**	**39.9**	**6.20**	**4.14**	**Positive**
	MEAN (17+19)	**24.60**	**47.88**	**9.31**	**17.95**	**Negative**

Findings on Teacher Autonomy in Classroom Management

Table 4 clearly states that the Statements 15, 16, and 18 are positively framed and pertain to teacher autonomy in classroom management. The mean response value of **49.65%** indicates that nearly half of the government school teachers reported having the autonomy to modify the physical layout of their classrooms, establish their own rules and expectations, and implement disciplinary strategies according to the needs of their students. Additionally, **39.9%** of teachers stated that such autonomy is only sometimes exercised. A small proportion, **6.2%**, remained neutral, while only **4.14%** reported that they never have the freedom to manage their classrooms independently. Overall, the data suggests that most teachers perceive a considerable degree of autonomy in managing classroom environments.

In contrast, Statements 17 and 19 are negatively worded, reflecting constraints on teacher autonomy in classroom management. The mean response value of **24.60%** indicates that a smaller, though notable, group of teachers reported that classroom rules are often predetermined by the school or district, and that they face restrictions in using materials or resources beyond those prescribed. Meanwhile, **47.88%** of teachers indicated that such restrictions occur only occasionally. Interestingly, **17.95%** of teachers affirmed that they are consistently able to set their own rules and use alternative instructional materials freely.

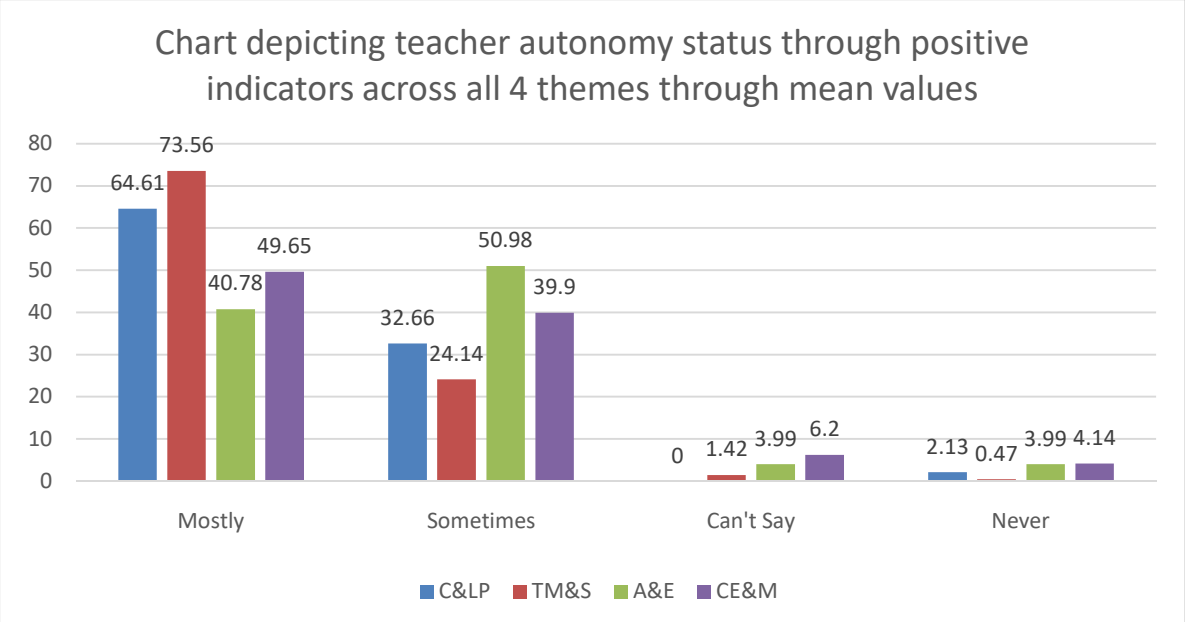
Discussion

These findings highlight that while many teachers enjoy a significant level of autonomy in managing their classroom practices, a portion still operates under externally imposed

constraints—particularly regarding classroom regulations and instructional resources. This points to a generally positive but varied experience of autonomy in classroom management among government school teachers.

Overall Statements showing positive status of Teacher Autonomy

1.Do you have flexibilityin designing your lesson plans?
3. Can you choose the topics or themes you want to cover in your classes, or are they predetermined?
5. Are you allowed to experiment with different teaching methods and strategies?
6. Can you incorporate your own ideas and creativity into your teaching?
7. How much freedom do you have to adjust your teaching approach based on student needs and feedback?
9. Do you have control over the types of assessments you use to evaluate student learning?
11. Can you design your own assessments as per students of diverse levels?
13. Do you have flexibility in grading and evaluating student work?
15. How much control do you have in alteringthe physical layout of your classroom as per need?
16. Can you establish your own classroom rules and expectations?
18. How much autonomy do you have in managing student behaviour and discipline?

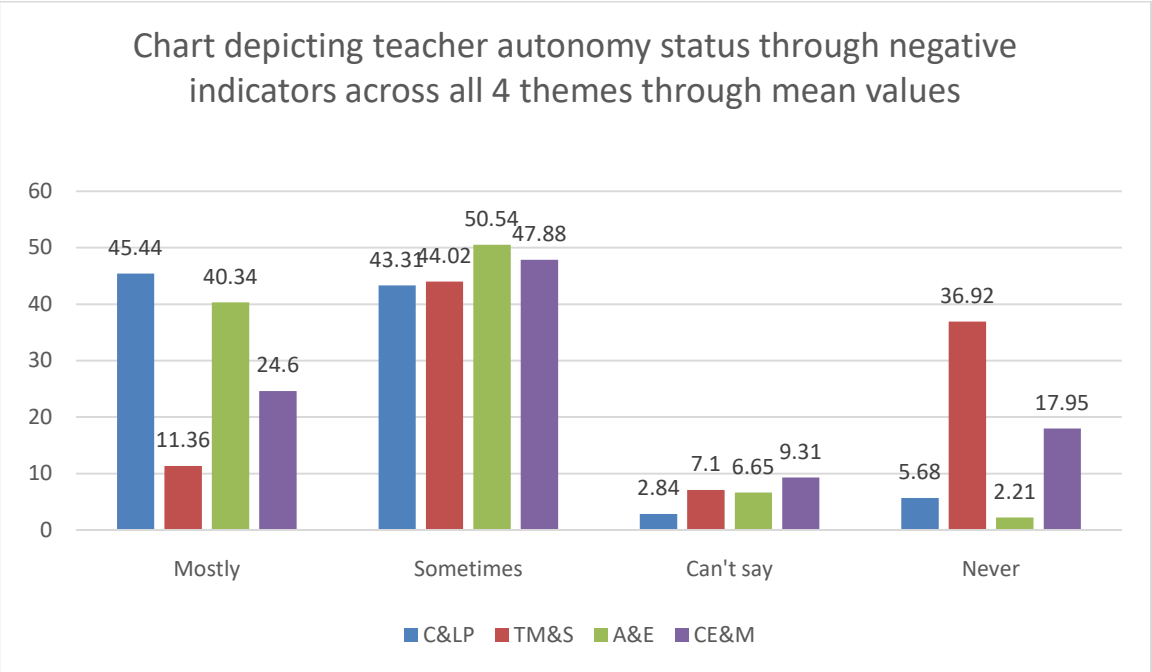


The chart indicates that teachers possess moderate autonomy in designing lesson plans and selecting instructional topics, as well as a fair degree of freedom in experimenting with teaching methods and strategies. However, a mean score of 40.78 reflects limited autonomy in selecting assessment types and accommodating diverse student needs.

Similarly, a mean score of 49.65 suggests partial autonomy in modifying classroom layout, establishing classroom rules, and implementing disciplinary practices.

Overall Statements showing negative status of Teacher Autonomy

2. Are you required to follow a specific curriculum or framework?
4. How often do you have to submit your lesson plans for review or approval?
8. Are there any restrictions on the use of technology or other resources in the classroom?
10. Are assessments mandated by the school or district?
12. Are you required to use standardized tests or rubrics?
14. Are there any specific metrics or benchmarks you're expected to meet in terms of student achievement?
17. Are the classroom rules set by the school or district?
19. Do you have restriction on using types of materials or resources other than prescribed, in the classroom?



The chart reveals that teachers exhibit relatively higher autonomy in utilizing technological resources (mean = 36.92) compared to other domains such as adapting the curriculum framework, selecting assessment methods, and developing evaluation tools. Conversely, a lower mean value of 17.95 indicates limited autonomy in selecting and using instructional materials beyond those prescribed by the system.

9. Conclusion

Teacher autonomy plays a critical role in empowering educators to make informed pedagogical decisions that best support student learning and achievement. An autonomous teacher not only fosters a culture of independent learning among students but also experiences enhanced personal and professional fulfilment. Upholding the

vision of educational policies that advocate for teacher autonomy requires a holistic and unwavering commitment to preserving this autonomy in both principle and practice. It is essential to bridge the gap between pedagogical and operational autonomy by strengthening systemic support structures. These structures must not only promote instructional freedom but also ensure equitable access to teaching resources and technological tools across all educational settings. Only through such comprehensive support can teacher autonomy truly thrive and translate into improved educational outcomes.

10. Recommendations

Future research should include private school teachers to facilitate comparative analysis and gain a broader understanding of teacher autonomy across diverse educational contexts.

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