

Autonomy and Teacher Learning: The Embrace of Critical Theory

Hairon Salleh
*National Institute of Education,
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore*

Abstract

Although the centrality of autonomy in learning is accepted, explicit reference to it is still lacking in teacher learning. This can be attributed to the use of different terms in the discourse of teacher learning which may not be familiar in the discourse of autonomous learning. However, I will show in this paper that the concept of autonomy has been alluded to directly or indirectly in the literature on teacher professional development and teacher learning in the use of terms such as 'agenda', 'voice', 'political role', 'taking initiative' and 'the will to learn'. Furthermore, I will argue that the concept of autonomy is foundational to the current developments in teacher learning, but that this concept needs to be integrated with concepts that are related to critical theory, especially the notions of empowerment, emancipation and democratic participation. Autonomy is crucial for not only sustaining successful teacher learning, but also fulfilling the emancipatory ideal of adult learning.

Introduction

The importance of teacher professional development or teacher learning in modern capitalist states has received increasing attention by both educational policy-makers and practitioners because of its potential to support educational change and reform. As much as schools are required to make significant changes in the way they operate, the way schools and, thus, teachers learn also requires significant changes (Ashdown, 2002). Teacher learning must now embrace the notion of lifelong learning where teachers are expected to systematically learn throughout their teaching career – from initial teacher education to retirement (Guskey, 2000; Villegas-Reimers, 2003). There is also greater diversity of forms or platforms of teacher learning (Day & Sachs, 2004; Guskey, 2000; Villegas-Reimers, 2003). These include portfolios, reflective models, professional learning communities, network models and action research. These new forms of teacher learning not only provide new alternatives, but also challenge the traditional idea of teacher learning as isolated events which are restricted to three or four days during the school year, or to graduate courses and qualifications to attain better paid salaries, and the accumulation of time-based activities.

As part of this greater emphasis on teacher professional development, there has been a focus on the social, reflective and affective aspects of teacher learning.

Importance has been placed on teacher learning that embraces notions of collectivity, collaboration and community (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman & Kwang, 2001; Hoban, 2002; Huberman, 2001; Lester, 2003; Lieberman, 1994; Peery, 2004; Rogers & Babinski, 2002). As knowledge has become the foundation for all future learning (Alexander & Murphy, 1998) and especially so in the teaching profession (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Corcoran, 1995), teacher learning employing reflection and inquiry is also being increasingly recognised (Day & Sachs, 2004; Hoban, 2002). Increasing attention has also been given to the idea that teachers ought to find learning personally meaningful (Day & Sachs, 2004). Teacher learning cannot therefore be detached from personal aspects of being a teacher such as the moral and emotional aspects (McCulloch, Helsby & Knight, 2000; Peery, 2004) which take into account of

teachers' life histories, stories or biographies (Kelchtermans, 2004; Leitch & Day, 2001; Rogers & Babinski, 2002).

However, what I find to be most important and foundational in contrast to what has been described earlier is the idea of teacher learning that is underpinned by values espoused by critical theory such as empowerment, emancipation and democratic participation. Notwithstanding the broad sense of the term 'critical theory', the critical theory that I am using in this paper is closely related to the writing of Habermas (1972, 1996), and Brookfield (2005) who also made use of Habermas' writing on critical theory. Like Habermas, I stand to believe that the values of autonomy, empowerment, emancipation and democratic participation are foundational and universal. They are therefore inherent in all social activities including lifelong learning and continual professional development. These values relating to critical theory have a very close relationship with the concept of autonomy.

Autonomy can be related to empowerment insofar as it helps in the building of people's capacities such as knowledge, energy and authority to act successfully within an existing system and structures of power - working within the system, on their own behalf (Inglis, 1997; Maynard, 2004). Autonomy can be related to emancipation insofar as it enables people to critically analyse, resist and challenge structures of power - trying to change the system, by separating themselves from constraining modes of thinking or acting that limit perception and action toward realising alternative possibilities (Inglis, 1997; Thomas, 1993). Empowerment can be said to be the prerequisite for emancipation. Autonomy is, therefore, consistent with the importance of bringing to the fore teachers' political role in the discourse of professional development and teacher learning (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1996).

Finally, autonomy is related to democratic participation because individuals are essentially social beings who not only belong to several layers of communities within society, but also relate and work interdependently with each other - 'No individual is completely independent or autonomous, but rather, interdependent and contextualised within a social setting' (Marsh, Richards & Smith, 2001, p. 381). Autonomy, empowerment and emancipation can be conceptualised as a 'stepping stone from dependency and domination to a social and political circumstance in which interdependence and the importance of human agency are paramount' (Fielding, 1996, p. 412).

In this paper, I will discuss how the notion of autonomy is closely tied to notions of empowerment, emancipation and democratic participation, and how these notions are consistent with current developments in teacher professional development or teacher learning. Even though the closely related terms of 'autonomous learning' and 'independent learning' have not been explicitly used in the literature on teacher professional development or teaching learning, they have consistently been alluded or referred to indirectly using different terms. Understanding the priority of autonomy in teacher professional development and teacher learning is crucial in guaranteeing not only the success and sustainability of teacher learning in general, but also the emancipatory potential of learning espoused by Habermas (1975) in the day-to-day practices of teachers.

Autonomy, Empowerment, Emancipation and Democratic Participation in Teacher Learning

In an attempt to sketch the characteristics of future teacher professional development or teacher learning, Leithwood (1992) recommended that professional development programmes needs to focus on the following:

- Developing survival skills.
- Becoming competent in the basic skills of teaching.
- Expanding one's instructional flexibility.

- Acquiring instructional expertise.
- Contributing to the professional growth of colleagues.
- Exercising leadership and participating in decision-making.

In this list, it is interesting to observe that while Leithwood started by focusing on technical skills, he ended by stressing the social aspect of professional development consisting of building relationships with fellow colleagues to develop collegiality, collaboration and joint decision-making. The last requirement would imply that teachers need to play a more active role in the political aspect of teacher learning and practice. The act of exercising leadership and participating in decision-making is synonymous with autonomy, empowerment, emancipation and democratic participation.

Tickle (2000) also made a similar proposal when he emphasised the following key characteristics of teaching originally proposed by Zimpher and Howey (1987):

- Technical competence.
- Clinical competence.
- Personal competence.
- Critical competence.

With regard to critical competence, he proposed that teachers ought to rationally critique social institutions, social structures, and the norms and values, or ideologies, which operate within them in order to bring about change. This, in essence, is emancipatory.

I propose, however, that the order and priority of skills, competencies or abilities should be reversed. Without the development of autonomy, empowerment, emancipation and democratic participation, teachers will not be able to make sustainable developments in the rest of the skills. For example, without the ability to exercise leadership and participating in decision-making, teachers will not be able to successfully contribute to the professional growth of colleagues. And without the competency to rationally critique social structures, teachers will not be able to provide the right social environment to development personal and technical competencies.

The importance of bringing to the fore teachers' political role in the discourse of professional development has been established by many (Ball, 1996; Byrd & McIntyre, 1999; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1996; Day and Sachs, 2004; Fiszher, 2004; Forde, McMahan, McPhee & Patrick, 2006; Lester, 2003). Day and Sachs (2004) maintained that professional development is political as it serves the interests of some groups better than others. Here, the question that deserves answering is 'Whose interests are served more in professional development arrangements and efforts?' Enhancing teachers' political roles would also mean enabling and encouraging teachers to be decision-makers. Frankes and his colleagues (cited in Byrd and McIntyre, 1999) stressed this point when they related teachers as decision-makers with teacher empowerment and development of new roles and democratic structures. This would imply that teachers are not only individual decision-makers, but co-decision-makers. Forde et al. (2006) had also contributed to the idea that teachers need to reclaim their identity as decision-makers in their professional practice.

Another aspect of teachers' political role is the notion of voice. In his evaluation of professional development, Lester (2003) observed that teachers want their voices heard. In terms of knowledge creation within the discourse of professional development, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1996) brought to light the absence or lack of input of teachers' voice in the planning and organisation of professional development arrangements, claiming that

What is missing from the knowledge base for teaching are the voices of teachers themselves, the questions teachers ask, the ways teachers

use writing and intentional talk in their work lives, and the interpretive frames teachers use to understand and impose their own classroom practices. (p. 93)

Ball (1996) argued in the same vein by stating that 'teacher development is considered especially productive when teachers are in charge of the agenda and determine the focus and nature of the programming offered' (p. 502). Teachers should therefore determine the shape and course of their own development. They should have input into the planning of these events in order to help make professional development efforts more applicable to their situations (Guskey, 2000) and encourage their commitment (Fiszher, 2004).

What is clear is that teacher professional development efforts cannot be mandated. Using the language of critical theory, teachers cannot be controlled, coerced and manipulated to be involved in professional development practices. 'Mandated learning' contradicts not only the values of autonomy and empowerment, but also the notion of learning itself. The will to learn must come from the teachers themselves. In this regard, Eekelen, Vermunt & Boshuizen (2006) postulated that a will to learn must be present before teachers engage in actual learning activities.

Teachers must therefore be actively involved in professional development matters (Hawley & Valli, 1999). They must take the initiative to identify what they need to learn in the development of the learning opportunity and the process to be used. Teachers' participation in solving the problems of teaching practice is essential, and therefore cannot be mandated. The tendency to mandate can come to seem so natural, and therefore becomes less noticeable, that practices of 'collegiality can be used as a managerial tool in the guises of a professional development process to coerce teachers into doing the bland work of economic reconstruction' (Smyth, 1995, p. 87).

Sachs (2003) went further challenging coercive forces and proposed that teachers work toward developing features of political activism, which she termed 'activist teacher professional' – premised on concepts of trust, active trust and generative politics. While trust is important in reducing complexity by creating social cohesion through collaboration and mutual respect, active trust requires outward strong commitment of time, energy and intellectual resources to make joint decisions. Generative politics requires the fostering of conditions under which desired outcomes can be achieved without being imposed; involves creating situations in which active trust can be built and sustained; demands giving autonomy to those most affected by specific programmes or political outcomes; and requires the decentralisation of power. The concept of an activist teaching profession essentially seeks to extend the democratic way of life.

The notion of autonomy has also been closely related to the notion of agency in the discourse of teacher professional development or teacher learning. Forde et al. (2006) stated that 'the concepts of autonomy and agency are crucial if we are to consider a process of continual professional development' (p. 5). This suggests that teachers ought to be able to make decisions and take actions based on their professional judgement. Guskey (2000) alluded to the notion of autonomy and agency when he made the claim that professional development is an intentional process. Teachers ought to begin with a clear statement of the purposes and goals of professional development; ensure that the goals are worthwhile; and determine how the goals can be assessed. All these require teachers' intentional decision and action.

Smylie (1995) has also pointed to the importance not only of autonomy, but also of participatory teacher learning – and thus collective and collaborative – decision making in teacher learning. In his attempt to identify conditions that promote learning in the workplace, Smylie suggested the following:

1. Opportunities for individual members of a school to work together and learn from each other should be provided on an ongoing basis.
2. Teachers should be given the chance to work together in groups, as colleagues, in an open atmosphere that allows taken for granted assumptions and beliefs to be communicated and examined.
3. The presence of shared power and authority, as well as participatory decision making in the workplace ... implies the acknowledgement that expertise and position or formal status are not necessarily equivalent.
4. Professional learning is also promoted by a certain degree of autonomy and choice for individual members.

Goodson (2003) captured the notion of 'collective autonomy' when he proposed that a new conception of professionalism, which he and Andy Hargreaves termed *principled professionalism*, needs to embrace the notion of heteronomy – where teachers work authoritatively, yet openly and collaboratively with other partners in the wider community who have a significant stake in students' learning.

However, collaboration in itself does not automatically lend itself to teacher learning. In this regard, Clement and Vandenberghe (2000) found that collaboration in itself is not the most promising path for professional development. They proposed a positive balance between collegial collaborative work and individual autonomous work, but also pointed out that this balance would have to take different forms in different schools and for different teachers. The context within which teachers collaborate with each other, and which effects teachers' collaboration, is equally important. Wilson and Berne (1999) alluded to the importance of context when they contended that future research in professional development should look at why and what teachers learn, and the contexts that enable teacher learning. In this regard, they claimed that little effort has been put into explaining how contexts enable learning.

Achinstein (2002) shares the same concern for balance between collegial collaborative work and individual autonomous work, but understood it within the concept of conflict. He claimed that conflict is inherent in any community, and that communities of colleagues are arenas of dissent, diversity and discussion. Hence, close collegial communities can block opportunities for growth and development if they exclude conflict. What is crucial is how conflict is managed. How members embrace each others' differences would make a difference in a community's potential for professional development and organisational learning. This implies the need for 'collective autonomy' to adopt values for democratic participation. This concurs with Brookfield's (2005) critical theory of adult learning which suggests that democratic participation is the eventual outcome of adult learning.

The argument that individual autonomous work and collegial collaborative work (that is, as both personal and organisational development) must go hand-in-hand has been made by Kelchtermans (2004). In addition, he alluded to the need to show how the ongoing processes of negotiation, power and influence, and the explicit and implicit attempts to control the working conditions actually determine whether and in what way teachers can develop professionally. He therefore placed the issue of power relations at the centre of teacher learning. The idea of 'collective autonomy' has to take into account power relations within the discourse of teacher professional development or teaching learning. In this regard, I propose that 'collective autonomy' requires consensual, as opposed to conflicting power relations where individuals within communities have equal rights and resources to influence collective outcomes whether symbolically (abstract realities) or materially (physical realities) through consensual decision-making. Consensual power relations would also require individuals within communities to work towards common goals, and common values in order to reach those goals.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have not only attempted to place the notion of autonomy within the discourse of teacher professional development or teacher learning, but also link the notion of autonomy with notions from critical theory such as empowerment, emancipation and democratic participation. I have put forward arguments to support my proposition that the notions of autonomy, empowerment, emancipation and democratic participation are consistent and foundational with current developments in teacher professional development or teacher learning, although using different terms such as 'agenda', 'voice', 'political role', 'taking initiative' and 'the will to learn' are used in these discourses. In this regard, I am also proposing that the concept of 'autonomy' in learning cannot stand on its own but must embrace other conceptual and theoretical frameworks in order to sustain its relevance within its own field and the wider intellectual community. In this way, the notion of 'independent autonomous learning' will not be accused of being only a slogan or a 'buzz word' (Marsh et al., 2001).

The Author

Hairon Salleh is a lecturer with the Policy and Leadership Studies at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He has taught in both primary and secondary schools in Singapore for seven years before entering the academic profession. His current areas of research include teacher professional development, teacher learning, action research, education reforms and critical theory. His recent publications include a journal article entitled *Action research in Singapore education: Constraints and sustainability*, and a book entitled *Knowledge & inquiry: An introduction to research skills*.

References

- Achinstein, B. (2002). *Community, diversity, and conflict among schoolteachers: The ties that bind*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Alexander, P. A., & Murphy, P. K. (1998). The research base for APA's Learner-Centered Psychological Principles. In N. M. Lambert & B. L. Coombs (Eds.), *How students learn: Reforming schools through Learner-Centred Education* (pp. 25-60). Washington, D. C.: The American Psychological Association.
- Ashdown, J. (2002). Professional development as 'Interference'? Insights from the Reading Recovery in-service course. In C. Sugrue & C. Day (Eds.), *Developing teachers and teaching practice: International research perspectives* (pp. 116-129). London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Ball, D. L. (1996). Teacher learning and the mathematics reforms: What do we think we know and what do we need to learn? *Phi Delta Kappan*, 77, 500-508.
- Brookfield, S. (2005). *The power of critical theory: Liberating adult learning and teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Byrd, D. M., & McIntyre, D. J. (1999). Introduction: Professional development schools. In D. M. Byrd & D. J. McIntyre (Eds.), *Research on professional development schools: Teacher education yearbook VII* (pp. vii-5). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Clement, M., & Vandenberghe, R. (2000). Teachers' professional development: A solitary or collegial adventure? *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 16, 249-305.
- Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. (1996). Communities for teacher research: Fringe or forefront? In M. W. McLaughlin & I. Oberman (Eds.), *Teacher learning: New policies, new practices* (pp. 92-112). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. (1999). Relationships of knowledge and practice: Teacher learning in communities. In A. Iran-Nejad & C. D. Pearson (Eds.), *Review of Research in Education*, 24, 251-307.
- Corcoran, T. B. (1995). *Helping teachers teach well: Transforming professional development*. (Consortium for Policy Research in Education Document No RB-16). New Brunswick, NJ: CPRE Policy Briefs Carriage House, Eagleton Institute of Politics.
- Day, C., & Sachs, J. (2004). Professionalism, performativity and empowerment: Discourses in the politics, policies and purposes of continuing professional development. In C. Day & J. Sachs (Eds.), *International handbook on the continuing professional development of teachers* (pp. 3-32). Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Eekelen, I. M., Vermunt, J. D., & Boshuizen, H. P. A. (2006). Exploring teachers' will to learn. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 22, 408-423.
- Fielding, M. (1996). Empowerment: emancipation or enervation? *Journal of Education Policy*, 11, 399-417.
- Fiszher, E. P. (2004). *How teachers learn best: An ongoing professional development model*. Lanham, MA: Scarecrow Education.
- Forde, C., McMahon, M., McPhee, A. D., & Patrick, F. (2006). *Professional development, reflection and enquiry*. London: Paul Chapman.
- Garet, M. S., Porter, A. C., Desimone, L., Birman, B. F., & Kwang, S. Y. (2001). What makes professional development effective? Results from a national sample of teachers. *American Educational Research Journal*, 38, 915-945.
- Goodson, I. (2003). *Professional knowledge, professional lives*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Guskey, T. R. (2000). *Evaluating professional development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Habermas, J. (1972). *Knowledge and human interests* (trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro). London: Heinemann.
- Habermas, J. (1975). *Theory and practice* (trans. J. Viertel). Boston: Beacon Press.

- Habermas, J. (1996). *Between facts and norms: Contributions to a discourse theory of democracy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Hawley, W. D., & Valli, L. (1999). The essentials of effective professional development: A new consensus. In L. Darling-Hammond & G. Sykes (Eds.), *Teaching as the learning profession* (pp. 127-150). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Hoban, G. F. (2002). *Teacher learning for educational change: A systems thinking approach*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Huberman, M. (2001). Networks that alter teaching: Conceptualisations, exchanges and experimentations. In J. Soler, A. Craft & H. Burgess (Eds.), *Teacher development: Exploring our own practice* (pp. 141-159). London: Paul Chapman.
- Inglis, T. (1997). Empowerment and emancipation. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 48(1), 3-17.
- Kelchtermans, G. (2004). CPD for professional renewal: Moving beyond knowledge for practice. In C. Day & J. Sachs (Eds.), *International handbook on the continuing professional development of teachers* (pp. 217-237). Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Leitch, R., & Day, C. (2001). Reflective processes in action: Mapping personal and professional contexts for learning and change. *Journal of In-Service Education*, 27, pp. 237-259.
- Leithwood, K. A. (1992). The principal's role in teachers' development. In M. Fullan & A. Hargreaves (Eds.), *Teacher development and educational change* (pp. 86-103). London: Falmer Press.
- Lester, J. H. (2003). Planning effective secondary professional development programs. *American Secondary Education*, 32(1), 49-61.
- Lieberman, A. (1994). Teacher development: Commitment and challenge. In P. P. Grimmett & J. Neufeld (Eds.), *Teacher development and the struggle for authenticity: Professional growth and restructuring in the context of change* (pp. 15-30). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Marsh, C., Richards, K., & Smith, P. (2001). Autonomous learners and the learning society: Systemic perspectives on the practice of teaching in higher education. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 33, 381-395.
- Maynard, M. (2004). Feminist issues in data analysis. In M. Hardy & A. Bryman (Eds.), *Handbook of data analysis* (pp. 131-145). London: Sage.
- McCullough, G., Helsby, G., & Knight, P. (2000). *The politics of professionalism: Teachers and the curriculum*. London: Continuum.
- Peery, A. B. (2004). *Deep change: Professional development from the inside out*. Lanham, MA: Scarecrow Education.
- Rogers, D. L., & Babinski, L. M. (2002). *From isolation to conversation: Supporting new teachers' development*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Sachs, J. (2003). *The activist teaching profession*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Smylie, M. (1995). Teacher learning in the workplace: Implications for school reform. In T. R. Guskey & M. Huberman (Eds.), *Professional development in education: New paradigms and practices* (pp. 92-113). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Smyth, J. (1995). Teachers' work and the labour process of teaching. In T. R. Guskey & M. Huberman (Eds.), *Professional development in education: New paradigms & practices* (pp. 69-91). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Thomas, J. (1993). *Doing critical ethnography*. London: Sage.
- Tickle, L. (2000). *Teacher induction: The way ahead*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Villegas-Reimers, E. (2003). *Teacher professional development: An international review of the literature*. Paris: UNESCO.

- Wilson, S. M., & Berne, J. (1999). Teacher learning and the acquisition of professional knowledge: An examination of research on contemporary professional development. *Review of Research in Education*, 24, 173-209.
- Zimpher, N. L., & Howey, K. R. (1987). Adapting supervisory practices to different orientations of teaching competence. *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision*, 2(2), 101-127.