

A SURVEY OF HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH TEACHERS IN THE PARK HILL
SCHOOL DISTRICT ON PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHER AUTONOMY IN SCHOOLS

By

ANDY DALE

Submitted to

The Educational Leadership Faculty
Northwest Missouri State University Missouri
Department of Educational Leadership
College of Education and Human Services
Maryville, MO 64468

Submitted in Fulfillment for the Requirements for

61-683 Research Paper
Spring 2012

Submission Date

August 8, 2012

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to analyze the effects of teacher autonomy on student achievement levels in public education. The research includes findings that answer the questions, “Is teacher autonomy perceived differently between two high schools in the same district?” “Do prescribed programs work as a means to increase test scores?” The research was conducted using an anonymous survey done through the use of Google Docs and was given to both high school Communication Arts departments in the Park Hill School District in suburban Kansas City, Missouri.. The findings were analyzed by Chi-Square through Microsoft Excel and A Statistical Program (ASP) software. Findings indicate that there is a difference between the level of teacher autonomy between the two schools. Both schools, while high achieving, do vary in the performance level on state End of Course Exams for both 9th and 10th grade.

INTRODUCTION

Background Issues and Concerns:

Educators are constantly trying to find their stride in teaching. One of the biggest areas of focus and debate amongst teachers and administrators is a feeling of autonomy from the administration for teachers to adequately, and by using their own resources, educate their students. This project will involve research and a survey of information to determine if teacher autonomy has a positive effect on student learning.

Practice Under Investigation:

This practice under investigation is the effect of teacher autonomy on student learning.

School Policy to be Informed by Study:

The school district in focus has two high schools with varying opinions and methods which support teaching autonomy. Each high school has roughly the same number of students with the same number of teachers. Each building also has 5 administrators to supervise its teachers. These high schools both serve students grades 9-12 with approximately 1600 students.

Conceptual Underpinning:

Both state and national governments implement mandated testing that districts are required to administer to their students. As standards for performance raise to even higher levels, schools are determining the best way to meet these goals. One such method has

been to deprive teachers of autonomy and force them to a set curriculum and “teach to the test.” While this practice is usually looked down upon by teachers, some schools have seen results with a more set curriculum. Either way, standardized testing scores are effecting the level of teacher autonomy in the classroom. In theory, an increase in teacher autonomy would increase student achievement as a number of factors come into play. Teacher autonomy allows teachers to take ownership of their work and allows them to do what they do best: teach. In theory, if a teacher is consistently concerned with getting through a prescribed curriculum with materials which have been provided for them, it leaves them very little room to modify or make improvements in their teaching practices. Secondly, teacher burnout is becoming an increasing problem. And as the brightest crop of new teachers are graduating from universities and colleges, schools need to make an effort to make keep them in the profession. If they are being forced to teach a certain way, it gives them very little ownership and allows them little room to practice the art of teaching which they learned in their respective college and university. Therefore, entrusting teachers to make adequate and appropriate instructional decisions, provides them a greater sense of ownership of their classroom and decreasing the amount of burnout which would work to increase student achievement.

Statement of Problem:

The current deprivation of teacher autonomy in the classroom is preventing students from a beneficial educational experience and increasing teacher burnout rates.

Purpose of the Study:

To determine if building climate affects the perceptions of teacher autonomy.

Research questions:

RQ1: Is there a difference of opinion regarding teacher autonomy between two high schools in the same school district?

RQ2: Is NCLB and other state level initiatives preventing teachers from exploring more creative and innovative teaching strategies and practices?

Null hypothesis:

There is no significant difference between perceptions of teacher autonomy between the two high schools in the same district.

Anticipated benefits of the study:

The benefits of this study will be for both teacher and student. This will require a reflection and analysis of teaching practices from the teacher. From the student perspective, they will benefit from a different approach to teaching which requires more interaction between not only student and teacher, but students with other students.

Definition of terms:

AYP: Annual Yearly Progress. Each public school is assessed in Comm Arts and Math. The school is required to reach a certain achievement level in these areas. Since this program began with the implementation of No Child Left Behind, each year the number of schools making this goal has decreased.

NCLB: No Child Left Behind. Education legislation created by the George W. Bush administration and put into effect in 2002. It is designed to set benchmarks for each child in Comm Arts and Math and is assessed each year.

Autonomy: being self governing. Ability and freedom to make own professional choices regarding curriculum and content.

DESE: Missouri Department of Education

IEP: Individual Education Plan. Plan created on a student by student basis to address needs of special education students. These plans consist of accommodations and modifications for classroom teachers to follow to ensure that the needs of special education students are being met.

Summary:

PHSD is a suburban district based in Kansas City, MO. Each high school has roughly the same number of students with the same number of teachers. Each building also has the same number of administrators to supervise its teachers. These high schools both serve students grades 9-12 with approximately 1600 students. The research investigates the level of teacher autonomy in the classroom and then will compare this level to the success of its students on standardized test scores.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In a keynote address, University of Northern Kentucky Professor Doug Feldmann said, “I submit that those going into the education field in contemporary times are no longer overly concerned with traditional discouragements such as low salaries; rather, what appears to be desired today by teachers—both novice and veteran—is the freedom to make reasonable curricular and instructional choices, and the administrative support to enact such choices” (Feldmann 2011, p.2). This is, in fact the overwhelming issue teachers face in public education. Feldman (2011) will go on to argue that the lack of teacher autonomy has led to an increase in teacher attrition rates as well as a more compartmentalized view of public education. However, with the increase in emphasis in standardized test scores, policy makers have, what they feel to be, a more defined curriculum that teachers and public schools should subscribe to leaving the teacher with little freedom. It is publicly acknowledged that there is much good to come from a child’s education that extends beyond their standardized test scores. However, what cannot be determined is what should be achieved beyond these scores. Feldmann (2011) speculates that if this could be determined, and the teachers were left alone from policy makers and the general public to achieve these goals, America would see a drastic increase in the performance of public education. Furthermore, common syllabi and curriculum do not foster higher levels of achievement in teachers causing them to become complacent or leave the profession altogether.

Similar to Feldmann’s thoughts on teacher autonomy, the discussion also comes around about high stakes testing and the teacher response to the increase in this type of

assessment. Reich and Bally (2010) speculate through research that this sort of high stakes testing which determines levels of state funding for schools as well as public knowledge of which schools reach No Child Left Behind (NCLB) or Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) force teachers to abandon their own teaching strategies and practices and resort to “teaching to the test”. This often times requires teachers to teach a list of terms or ideas that may be too extensive to cover in such a short period of time. The other negative impact of high stakes testing on teaching practices is the abandonment of teaching actual content and students effectively learning information. Rather teachers are informing students on testing strategies for a particular test. Therefore, the question must be asked that if students are simply learning terms or testing strategies for a particular test at a particular time, are they actually learning skills that will make them effective and contributive members of an ever changing 21st century society?

Both the Feldmann (2011) and Reich and Bally (2010) articles speculate that what needs to be improved in public schools is a renewed faith in the educators to achieve holistic common goals and an improvement in teaching practices—not a quick fix to what teachers should teach and what students should know. Reich and Bally (2010) write, “What often happens is that the sense of urgency for the achievement of better results, that is, higher test scores, places tremendous strain on teachers and administrators alike. Paradoxically, as the pressure for higher achievement cascades down the institutional hierarchy, conditions are created that make higher achievement less likely to occur” (p.181).

In their article, “Following the Script” authors Parsons and Harrington (2009) evaluate the desire of inner city schools to raise reading levels of younger students and

that added pressure that NCLB places on that need. Because of this pressure felt by many schools, several have prescribed the notion that predetermined reading programs are the most effective and efficient way to increase literacy and reading levels in the inner city. However, these very programs work against what teacher education programs are instructing teachers. Teachers are taught to evaluate students on an individual basis by a variety of assessments and practices—naturally, many of these practices must be created by the teacher to help the individual student needs. As a result, standardized test scores often times decrease as prescription to such reading programs grows stronger (Parsons, Harrington 2009). Similar to Reich and Bally, often times the best method to improve instruction and therefore student performance, is continued professional development, collaboration with other professionals, and varied student assessment of performance. Oftentimes, these programs require teachers to assign isolated assignments and assessments which carry very little impact into overall student literacy and performance (Parsons, Harrington 2009).

With all of the research to suggest that a lack of autonomy has negative contributions in the education field, there is obviously evidence to suggest the positive effects of such practices in schools today. According to one source, “Autonomy also emerges as a key variable when education reform initiatives are examined. Some researchers argued that granting autonomy and empowering teachers is an appropriate starting point for education experts to solve current school problems” (Melenyzer, 1990; Wilkinson, 1994). The teaching profession is sometimes regarded with a lack of professionalism as teachers are continuously being told what to teach and how to teach it. According to the article, “A Nation at Risk at Risk” “...revealed that the professional

working life of teachers is, on the whole, unacceptable; this finding began a long-standing argument on teaching as a profession. Seven recommendations have originated from "A Nation at Risk" to improve the preparation of teachers or to make teaching a more rewarding and respected profession" (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Naturally, with an increase in teacher autonomy, teachers begin to feel a sense of professionalism increase. Therefore, if teachers are to be regarded as professionals, they must be granted the freedom to educate their students in the best way they see fit, which gives way to an increase in the perceived value of teacher autonomy (Perason& Moornaw 2006).

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

A survey was sent out asking teachers to rank the level of autonomy they feel they have from their building administrators. The survey was conducted with one department at each high school—communication arts. Teachers were asked if they feel as if their students are prepared for standardized tests based on their instruction. Teachers were also asked if they feel state tests influence their curriculum choices in any way. The independent variable in this study is the number of teachers surveyed at each school. The dependent variable was their responses to the survey questions.

Study Group Description:

The two groups being surveyed are the communication arts departments at both high schools. They have the same number of teachers teaching the same subjects at both buildings.

Data Collection and Instrumentation:

The survey was constructed using Google Docs. Every teacher in the survey had their own Google Docs account. Questions were constructed to best determine the attitudes regarding teacher autonomy in their building. 28 surveys were distributed and 26 were returned—13 from each school.

Statistical Analysis Methods:

A Statistical Package (ASP) software was used to complete the statistical calculations in this study. Additionally, Microsoft Excel was used to compile some totals used in the research using Chi Square analysis. A non-experimental, one-time survey served as the research design. The alpha level was set at 0.25 for all tests with this research. The independent variable was the teacher placement at either Park Hill South High School or Park Hill High School. The survey will measure the results of several dependent variables. Tests run will include chi square data analysis. The study group for this research consisted of the 28 faculty members at two high schools in the Park Hill School District. One high school will be referred to as PH-1 and the other will be PH-2. Both schools have the same number of teachers in the communication arts department teaching the same subjects at both schools. Fourteen faculty members work in each department and were asked to complete the survey one time only. No other departments were consulted from either school.

An anonymous questionnaire was distributed via Google Docs to Communication Arts staff members of both PH-1 and PH-2. The survey had specific questions regarding teacher autonomy. The first question on the survey allowed for the teacher to identify their place of service. This question serves as the independent variable. Questions were designed to elicit a “yes” “no” response. Teachers were allowed to explain any answers but were told that this information will not be included in the survey results. The survey remained open for a two-week period. 28 communication arts teachers responded to the

survey. Responses were then tallied and posted to an Excel spreadsheet. Words were recoded as numbers in answers so that the statistical analysis could be completed.

FINDINGS

To determine the attitudes towards teacher autonomy, a survey was given to 26 communication arts teachers in the Park Hill School District. The survey began with this question.

Table 1:

Question 1: Do you feel like you have teacher autonomy in your school?

Table 1					
Question 1: Do you feel like you have teacher autonomy in your school?					
Source	PH-1	PH-2	Chi Sq	df	p-value
Have Auto	69% (9)	38% (5)			
No Auto	31% (4)	62% (8)	2.476	1	0.116
Alpha = or < .25					

As seen in this table, 9 teachers from PH-1 feel like they have teacher autonomy in the work place. 5 teachers from PH-2 feel as if they have teacher autonomy in the classroom. The difference is 4 teachers or 15% of the total number of teachers surveyed between the two schools. 4 teachers from PH-1 feel as if they do not have autonomy in the work place. 8 teachers from PH-2 feel like they do not have autonomy in the work place. This is a difference of 4 teachers or 15% of the total number of teachers surveyed. The Chi-sq was 2.476 and the p value was .116. Because the p value is less than .25 the null hypothesis is rejected for this question.

Table 2:

Question 2: Do you feel that teacher autonomy affects student performance?

Table 2					
Question 2: Do you feel that teacher autonomy affects student performance?					
Source	PH-1	PH-2	Chi Sq	df	p-value
Yes Auto	77% (10)	69% (9)			
No Auto	23% (3)	31% (4)	.195	1	0.658
Alpha = or < .25					

As seen in this table, 10 teachers from PH-1 feel like teacher autonomy affects student performance. 9 teachers from PH-2 feel as if they teacher autonomy affects student performance. The difference is 1 teacher or 4% of the total number of teachers surveyed between the two schools. 3 teachers from PH-1 feel as if teacher autonomy does not affect student performance. 4 teachers from PH-2 feel like they do not have autonomy in the work place. This is a difference of 1 teacher or 4% of the total number of teachers surveyed. The Chi-sq was .195 and the p value was .658. Because the p value is greater than .25 the null hypothesis is not rejected for this question.

Table 3:

Question 3: Do students benefit from a prescribed curriculum?

Table 3					
Question 3: Do students benefit from a prescribed curriculum?					
Source	PH-1	PH-2	Chi Sq	df	p-value
Do benefit	0% (0)	8% (1)			
Do not benefit	100% (13)	92% (12)	1.04	1	0.308
Alpha = or < .25					

The results for this question were interesting in that they were almost unanimous between the two schools. As seen in this table, 0 teachers from PH-1 feel like students do not benefit from a prescribed curriculum. 1 teacher from PH-2 felt as if students do benefit from this prescribed curriculum. The difference is 12 teachers or 46% of the total number of teachers surveyed between the two schools. 13 teachers from PH-1 feel as if a prescribed curriculum does not benefit students. 12 teachers from PH-2 feel like students do not benefit from a prescribed curriculum. This is a difference of 1 teacher or 4% of the total number of teachers surveyed. The Chi-sq was 1.04 and the p value was .308. Because the p value is greater than .25 the null hypothesis is not rejected for this question.

Table 4:

Question 4: Does a lack of teacher autonomy affect teacher burnout?

Table 4					
Question 4: Does a lack of teacher autonomy affect teacher burnout?					
Source	PH-1	PH-2	Chi Sq	df	p-value
Yes	62% (8)	38% (5)			
No	38% (5)	62% (8)	1.384	1	0.239
Alpha = or < .25					

The results for this question were interesting in that they were the inverse of one another. As seen in this table, 8 teachers from PH-1 feel like a lack of teacher autonomy does affect burnout rates among teachers. 5 teachers from PH-2 feel that a lack of autonomy will affect teacher burnout rates. The difference is 3 teachers or 12% of the total number of teachers surveyed between the two schools. 5 teachers from PH-1 feel as if a lack of teacher autonomy does not affect teacher burnout rates. 8 teachers from PH-2 feel like a lack of teacher autonomy does not affect teacher burnout. This is a difference of 3 teachers or 12% of the total number of teachers surveyed. The Chi-sq was 1.384 and the p value was .239. Because the p value is less than .25 the null hypothesis is rejected for this question.

Table 5:

Question 5: Is what you teach the most important aspect of teaching?

Table 5					
Question 5: Is what you teach the most important aspect of teaching?					
Source	PH-1	PH-2	Chi Sq	df	p-value
Yes	8% (1)	23% (3)			
No	92% (12)	77% (10)	1.18	1	0.277
Alpha = or < .25					

The results for this question were interesting in that they were almost unanimous. As seen in this table, only 1 teacher from PH-1 feel like what they teach is the most important aspect of their teaching. Only 3 teachers from PH-2 feel that a lack of autonomy will affect teacher burnout rates. The difference is 2 teachers or 8% of the total number of teachers surveyed between the two schools. 12 teachers from PH-1 feel as if what they teach is not the most important aspect of their teaching. 10 teachers from PH-2 feel like what they teach is not the most important aspect of their teaching. This is a difference of 2 teachers or 8% of the total number of teachers surveyed. The Chi-sq was 1.18 and the p value was .277. Because the p value is greater than .25 the null hypothesis is not rejected for this question.

Table 6:

Question 6: Is how you teach the most important aspect of your teaching?

Table 6					
Question 6: Is how you teach the most important aspect of your teaching?					
Source	PH-1	PH-2	Chi Sq	df	p-value
Yes	92% (12)	77% (10)			
No	8% (4)	23% (3)	1.18	1	0.277
Alpha = or < .25					

Naturally, the results for this question were also interesting in that they were almost unanimous because they were the complete inverse of the previous question. As seen in this table, 12 teachers from PH-1 feel like how they teach is the most important aspect of their teaching. 10 teachers from PH-2 feel like how they teach is the most important aspect of their teaching. The difference is 2 teachers or 8% of the total number of teachers surveyed between the two schools. Only 1 teacher from PH-1 feel as if how they teach is not the most important aspect of their teaching. 3 teachers from PH-2 feel like how they teach is not the most important aspect of their teaching. This is a difference of 2 teachers or 8% of the total number of teachers surveyed. The Chi-sq was 1.18 and the p value was .277. Because the p value is greater than .25 the null hypothesis is not rejected for this question.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The null hypothesis stated there is no difference between the feelings of teacher autonomy between two high schools within the same district. The survey questions posed results that varied in their support or rejection of the null hypothesis. When it came to questions regarding building climate on the topic of teacher autonomy, there was a significant difference between the two buildings. For question 1, which asked if the teacher felt like they had autonomy in their district, there was a significant difference between the two buildings and the null hypothesis was rejected. A majority of PH-1 teachers felt like they had autonomy in their building where as PH-2 felt as if they did not. The p-value was less than .25 so the null hypothesis was rejected and a significant difference was found. Similar results were found for question 4 which asked if a lack of autonomy affected burnout. Surprisingly, the school who felt they had a greater sense of autonomy agreed that a lack of autonomy affected burnout whereas the other school who does not feel as great a sense of autonomy felt as if it did not affect burnout. These two questions reflect the perceived building climate and the difference between the two schools. Obviously, the teachers in either building see a varying level of autonomy in their buildings. However, there are a variety of possibilities to explain question 4. If teachers in PH-1 feel like they have freedom, perhaps they have worked in a district with less autonomy and appreciate this type of climate. Whereas people in PH-2 have not experienced as much autonomy so do not see the impact it has on burnout.

The other questions proposed in this survey were less about building climate and more about personal opinions and teaching philosophy. There was very little difference between the two buildings perceptions of autonomy and its importance in the

instructional framework of their classroom. Teachers in both settings recognize the importance of giving teachers freedom to teach in the most effective way possible. Questions 5 and 6 asked teachers to examine their personal philosophy regarding content versus methods. Almost conclusively, teachers from both schools agreed that how they teach is more important than what they teach. Again, this has less to do with building climate and the difference between the two schools and more about the ideology of educators.

There seems to be conclusive evidence that teachers appreciate a freedom to make their own instruction choices and that a prescribed curriculum is not only limiting to their practices, but potentially damaging to students education. Teachers appreciate the trust and freedom that is given to them to make proper and responsible decisions to best educate their students. This supports the research findings as well which states that teacher autonomy is key to the successful future of education and to reduce teacher burnout and improve teacher retention rates.

From professional and personal experiences, beginning teachers, while in college, are being encouraged to create lessons and to work collaboratively with colleagues to determine best practices and new innovative ways to teach. However, if these same teachers, upon entering the work force for the first time, are being told what to teach and more or less how to teach it, there is little continuation and continuity between what colleges and universities are encouraging beginning teachers to do, and what these teachers are actually being allowed to do when entering the schools. Teachers are public employees and yes, ultimately, should answer to the public and be able to show the public results to prove they are an effective educator. However, at the same time,

teachers, both beginning and experienced, have earned the right to be trusted experts in their fields. This trust is shown through administrators allowing teachers to teach without telling them how they should be doing their job. Feedback is a much needed component of teaching and administrators should not only be encouraged to evaluate their teachers, they should be required. However, this evaluation should consist of a mutual trust and understanding in which the trust of the administrator is instilled in the teacher to make their own educational choices in the best interest of their students.

Future studies should be done in this field to determine how teacher autonomy is defined in a school climate and how teachers feel like they are given this freedom and autonomy. Once this is determined, a real study can be done to see if this feeling of autonomy really affects student achievement.

REFERENCES

- A nation accountable: twenty-five years after a nation at risk. *US Department of Education*. 25 Retrieved from ERIC database June 18, 2012.
- Feldmann, D. (2011) The maintenance of teacher autonomy in a policy-driven era. *Mid-Western Educational Researcher*, 24(1). Retrieved from ERIC database June 18, 2012.
- Melenzyer, J. Wilkinson, T. (1994) Empowering the school community: meeting the challenge through university, school and community ventures. Retrieved from ERIC database June 18, 2012.
- Parsons, S. Harrington. (2009) Following the script. *A Phi Delta Kappan*, 90(10) 748-750 Retrieved from ERIC database June 18, 2012.
- Pearson, C; Moomaw, W. (2005) The relationship between teacher autonomy and stress, work satisfaction, empowerment, and professionalism. *Educational Research Quarterly*. 29(1) 38-54 Retrieved from ERIC database June 18, 2012.
- Reich, G, Bally, D. (2010) Get smart: facing high-stakes testing together. *Social Studies*, 101(4) 179-184. Retrieved from ERIC database June 18, 2012.

