

## TEACHERS' VIEWS ON THE DEGREE OF AUTONOMY OF TEACHING IN PRIMARY PRIVATE EDUCATION AND THE ROLE OF PARENTS IN SHAPING THE AUTONOMY FRAMEWORK

DOI: 10.26341/issn.2241-4010-2023-1d-1

**Vasiliki Kl. Papadopoulou**

*Graduate of the MSc "Education and Culture: Pedagogical Psychology and Educational Practice", Harokopio University of Athens*

[vasilikipapad@yahoo.gr](mailto:vasilikipapad@yahoo.gr)

### **Abstract**

*This study presents primary school teachers' opinions in the private education sector about their degree of teaching autonomy and whether their autonomy is influenced by the intervening role of their pupils' parents. In this context, the theoretical part of the study presents the concepts of "autonomy", "teacher autonomy" and "autonomy of the teaching work" as well as the teachers' beliefs of private primary education and the ways with which they are influenced by the involvement of the students' family environment.*

*The research employs the qualitative paradigm and the research tool used is semi-structured interviews. The results of the research reveal a variety of limiting factors to the autonomy of teachers and their teaching practice, while some of the areas of involvement of the parents/guardians are enumerated. The teachers' desire for parents' disengagement from their evaluation is also recorded. In general, autonomy has been proved to be inextricably linked to the attitude or personality of the teacher and its effects are present in a variety of ways. Finally, suggestions are made to improve the position of the teacher within the wider context of private education.*

**Keywords:** *autonomy, teacher autonomy, teaching autonomy, parental involvement, teachers' wills, private primary education*

### **Introduction**

The school is generally considered to be a miniature of society. People with diverse backgrounds and skin colour, people of different languages and religions, people from high social backgrounds as well as from middle or low social backgrounds, interact in classrooms daily (Manousou, 2017). European countries are increasingly granting increased autonomy to their teachers (Eurydice, 2008), while in the Greek educational system this does not exist due to the centralized and conservative nature of education in schools (Pasiardis, 2004). Parents tend to intervene in their children's lives as students and, by extension, in purely learning issues, which are the concern of teachers (Comer & Haynes, 1991). Sometimes this is considered necessary. However, many times, the result of this intervention is a reduction in the teacher's autonomy in their teaching work (Hawes & Plourde, 2005). Parents want to have the first and last say on their children's education even in the classroom, downgrading the role of the teacher, whom they themselves pay in private education (Psaltis & Gavrilidou, 1996).

The conclusions of this qualitative research were drawn exclusively from the personal views of the aforementioned individuals and due to the small sample size, the widespread use of the results of the research is limited.

## **1. Autonomy of educational work and private education**

### ***1.1. The concept of autonomy***

As Wolff (1970) points out, autonomy involves two components, perception, and behaviour. When an individual's beliefs and convictions have been formed based on a spirit of freedom, this will be also reflected in their behaviour as they act accordingly.

Raz (1986) recognizes in the concept of autonomy the political freedom and the personal value of its morality, resulting in individual well-being and the immense value of individual willpower (Marshall, 1994). Subsequently, self-interest differs from personal well-being, which is achieved by setting a high purposefulness of the individual that gives him/her well-being (Bellamy, 1988).

### ***1.2. The autonomy of the educational project***

Educational work is defined as the teaching work of the teacher in the context of a school complex with the result of this work being clear in the operation of the school (Papakonstantinou, 1993). The teacher also has the role of the person who encourages the student to think, act and interact with him/her while at the same time, he/she is the active recipient of the teaching work (Nomikos, 2006). The educational community accepts Holec's (1981) definition which refers to the right of decision making and freedom in the teacher's preferences on how to implement his/her teaching work and the application of supervisory tools with the active participation of all those present within the classroom. The evaluation of the educational work consists of a hotchpotch of the curricula, the infrastructure of the school premises in terms of materials and equipment, participation in the Parent-Teacher Association and its methodology (Benson, 2001).

### ***1.3. Teacher autonomy in the teaching work***

Each teacher, depending on his/her working environment, has a different perception of autonomy because he/she exercises it to the corresponding extent that he/she is allowed to do so (Little, 1990). The teacher's autonomy is based on his or her independence combined with isolation and solitude from colleagues and school administrators (Hargreaves, 1994).

Short's (1994) definition speaks of the teacher's freedom within the boundaries of the school setting and more specifically the classroom in terms of organization, management and use of the supervisory materials of the lesson. Specialized knowledge in his/her field inevitably shapes his/her authority.

A natural consequence of the above is the recognition of the teacher's value by other colleagues and the management of the school where he/she works so that he/she is entitled to make decisions on wider school issues (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005).

According to Maslach (1993, p. 20), the build-up of accumulated emotions leads mathematically to psychological exhaustion, with a direct impact on the neurological system of the human organism. Bandura (1997) emphasizes that the goals, strategies and motivation to overcome difficulties come as an outgrowth of the learning development and influence behaviour.

## **Private and public education in Greece**

In our country, the educational system is shaped accordingly by the governmental structure at the time and the Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs oversees educational

issues. The dominant characteristic of the system is its pyramidal and hierarchical structure (Kontis et al., 2007: 1388). The character of Greek education is linear and centralized.

Education is divided into private and public, with the former growing rapidly compared to the latter. Private educational institutions in our country are also under the Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs (M.E.R.R.A.), as well as public education. The control in the private sector lies in terms of teaching staff, building facilities and the number of classrooms, classes and pupils in them (European Commission, 2008). Also, the same Greek-language subjects are taught with a greater emphasis on foreign-language subjects and activities provided.

## **2. Parental involvement in private sector education**

### ***2.1 Factors of parental involvement in private sector education***

The primary elements that a child embraces are respect and understanding. Meta-analyses of research on strategies for higher educational achievement lead to the consideration of three types of parental aid. The first type refers to the way parents educate their children through their after-school educational programs (e.g., visits to museums, libraries, educational books). The second type is the involvement of parents in school administration or through volunteering and communication with the teaching staff and finally, the third type is the planning of the children's careers based on their aspirations and expectations for their offspring (Hill & Tyson, 2009).

The more educated parents are, the greater their desire to enhance their social capital through their children and double their involvement at home on school preparation (Hill & Tyson, 2009). On the other hand, there are parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and minorities (Reynolds, 1992).

## **3. Methodology**

### ***3.1 The purpose of the research***

The present study aims to investigate the views of private sector primary school teachers on the degree of autonomy they have in their teaching work and the role of their students' parents in shaping it. More specifically, the objectives are formulated as follows:

- To investigate the views of private sector primary school teachers on the degree of autonomy of teaching.
- To record the beliefs of private primary school teachers on the role of parents in shaping the framework of autonomy in teaching.

The necessity of conducting this research is proven by the literature review. Following the conclusions drawn from the sample of participants, the research is expected to contribute to making the "voice" of teachers in private schools heard in order to claim the maximum degree of autonomy in their teaching work and to achieve a harmonious cooperative action with parents in order to provide high quality education to students.

### ***3.2 The research questions***

The research questions of this study are listed as follows:

- 1) What are the views of private sector primary school teachers about the degree of autonomy they have in their teaching?

2) What are the beliefs of private primary school teachers about the role of parents in shaping the framework of autonomy in their teaching?

### ***3.3 The research method and its limitations***

According to Paraskevopoulou-Collias (2008) the qualitative method is the most complete way to collect and process information and data concerning the daily life of the participants in a survey, although there are diametrically opposed views.

The limitations of a qualitative research lie in the following elements (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Lincon & Guba, 1985 cited in Sarafidou, 2011: 84- 87 & in Tsiolis, 2014: 380 -382; Isari & Pourkos, 2015: 124- 126):

- 1) The research should be prevailed by the credibility of the sample.
- 2) Its transferability.
- 3) In this respect, it was necessary to clarify some questions to the interviewees. This is the dependability of qualitative research.
- 4) The confirmation of the results of each research by other researchers (confirmability).

#### ***3.3.1 The research participants***

The participants in this study were selected according to strict standards to meet the necessary characteristics. Prior to the interview, they were informed in detail about the purpose of the research and the researcher's details both verbally and in writing by signing a consent form.

Specifically, a total of 20 people participated in this qualitative survey. The participants are all teachers in primary education in the private sector. Fourteen of them are teachers (PE70) who have their own classroom (S... -EKP/T) while the remaining six (6) are teachers of specialties such as Drama, Physical Education, English, German (S....-EKP/EID). They are all residents of urban areas of the prefecture of Attica, Thessaloniki, Western Achaia.

Private sector primary school teachers responded in the first stage to questions regarding their demographic characteristics.

More specifically, in the first question on years of experience in education in general, twelve (12) out of a total of twenty (20) individuals have worked from one (1) to six (6) years with most working four (4) years. It is noted that nine (9) individuals are teachers with their own classroom (PE70) and the remaining three (3) are teachers of specialties such as Physical Education and foreign languages. The other four (4) teachers interviewed responded that they have been working in the field of education for seven (7) up to nine (9) years of which three (3) are primary school teachers (PE70) and one (1) is a foreign language teacher. Finally, the remaining four (4) teachers have been in the profession from ten (10) to twenty (20) years with equivalence between general education and specialization.

In the second demographic question on how many years they have been working in the current school unit where the interview was conducted, four teachers were hired in the previous academic year, namely they have been there for one year (three are primary school teachers and one is a specialist teacher), three have been working for two years (all of them are primary school teachers), the other two have been working for three years (as primary school teachers). Further, each one teacher works in the same school for four years (primary school teacher), five years (primary school teacher), seven years (primary school teacher), eight years (primary school teacher), 15 years (foreign language teacher). Particular emphasis is placed on the fact that only four primary school or specialist teachers of the respondents remain in the same school for six years and two teachers for nine years of service. In the third and final question of demographic characteristics to investigate the choice or not of a particular school by the primary private school teachers, the responses received were as follows:

Sixteen (16) teachers responded positively and four of them responded negatively. Specifically, eleven are primary school teachers and five are specialty teachers who chose this school to work while three primary school teachers and one specialty teacher did not make that choice.

### *3.3.2 The research tool of the survey*

The research tool used is the semi-structured interview method, with some questions and with the formulation of new relevant questions that emerged during the discussion. The questions were focused on exploring the views of the participating teachers based on the research questions about the degree of autonomy in their teaching and the role of parents in shaping this context. The content of the interview questions has been derived from the literature review of the topic under investigation and has been checked by both the researcher and the supervisor.

### *3.4 Analysis of research data*

With the completion of all the interviews, their recording and de-recording, the organization and extraction of thematic categories and subcategories was implemented with the necessary processing of these primary data in order to structure them according to the questions and purpose of this qualitative research without the use of any software (Hahn, 2008). The "content analysis" method was preferred and with the microanalysis technique, namely the "line by line" analysis of the content of the interview questions (Strauss & Corbin, 1996). This resulted in the initial grouping of the content of the interview guide questions. More specifically, the first broad grouping concerns the general perceptions of primary private school teachers about the term 'autonomy' and autonomy in teaching and the factors influencing it in the field where they currently work, and the second grouping concerns the role of parents in the degree of autonomy of teachers in private education. The existence of these groups was very helpful in classifying the primary material and highlighting the relationships even if they do not correspond to the respective aspects of reality (Silverman, 2000). The coding method chosen by the researcher is **Thematic grouping of the interview questions** (Richards, 2005). Below is the commentary of the recorded data having the necessary documentation from the words of the participating teachers.

## **4. Results**

More specifically, the first Thematic Category (1<sup>st</sup> TC) is **"The criteria for selecting the public sector versus the private sector"**. This category corresponds to the first (1<sup>st</sup>) research question. From their responses, the following six (6) Thematic Subcategories (TSC) emerged. **Career advancement** (2<sup>nd</sup> SPC). **Professional tenure** (3<sup>rd</sup> TSC). **Uncertainty about the professional future in the public sector** (4<sup>th</sup> TSC) and **the place of appointment** (5<sup>th</sup> TSC). The sixth (6<sup>th</sup>) Thematic Subcategory (TSC) is **the pay equivalence between the public and private sectors**.

The second thematic category (2<sup>nd</sup> TSC) is **"The concept of autonomy in general"**, which answers the first research question. In this regard, the thematic subcategories (TSC) are three (3): **the freedom of choices, decisions, actions without restrictions and controls** (1<sup>st</sup> TSC), **as a characteristic of independence** (2<sup>nd</sup> TSC) and finally, they attribute to it the characteristic of **childhood skill** with its beginning from a very young age. The third thematic category (3<sup>rd</sup> TSC) is **"Autonomy in teachers' teaching work"**. It concerns the 1<sup>st</sup> research question. Eight (8) thematic subcategories are distinguished which are as follows: **Flexibility of teaching materials** (1<sup>st</sup> TSC), **full knowledge of the subject matter of work** (2<sup>nd</sup> TSC)

and **freedom of action** (3<sup>rd</sup> TSC). The fourth thematic subcategory (4<sup>th</sup> TSC) is the **state actors. Teacher-colleague relations** (5<sup>th</sup> TSC). The sixth thematic subcategory (6<sup>th</sup> TSC) has to do with **the factors affecting teacher autonomy in private education** and the **degree of their sense of autonomy** (7<sup>th</sup> TSC). Finally, the eighth thematic subcategory (8<sup>th</sup> TSC) is the **teacher's character as a factor in their autonomy**.

The fourth thematic category (4<sup>th</sup> TSC) is **"The role of the family and school environment in shaping the child's personality and parental involvement in learning issues"**, which responds to the 2<sup>nd</sup> research question. The first thematic subcategory (1<sup>st</sup> TSC) is **the factors shaping students' behaviour in private school. The degree of parental involvement in learning issues and the quality of the relationship with the teacher in private school** is the second thematic subcategory (2<sup>nd</sup> TSC). The third and final thematic subcategory (3<sup>rd</sup> TSC) is **teachers' feelings about parental involvement in their teaching work**.

In the last research topic category (5<sup>th</sup> TC) are **"The rights and desires of the private education sector"** and are part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> research question. The thematic subcategories (TSCs) are as follows: **The setting of teachers' boundaries** (1<sup>st</sup> TSC) and **the articulation of teachers' desires** (2<sup>nd</sup> TSC).

## Conclusions - Proposals

From the results of the present research, it is clear that most of the teachers interviewed characterize the "autonomous" person as "master of himself", as Wolff (1970) had mentioned.

In the conclusions drawn for his teaching work, professional teachers want to be helpers in the creation of the all-round personality of their students in collaboration with the family environment, regardless of years of experience. About half of the teachers interviewed feel that they have autonomy in their teaching work in private education since they have many years of experience while the rest feel that they enjoy their autonomy marginally since they have the least amount of experience. This finding is consistent with research data from previous scientific studies where each teacher has a different perception of autonomy because they exercise it and to the respective degree they are allowed (Little, 1990) as well as the fact that not every professional seeks the same degree of exercising their autonomy (Hughes, 1975).

In addition, teachers refer to the flexibility of the teaching material, the opportunity for self-direction and the choice of methods of rewarding or punishing the behaviour of their students, adapted to the dynamics of each class and the needs of the students in the class.

Some, of course, argue that teacher autonomy and teaching autonomy are concepts that are synonymous for the sake of students. This is contributed to, they point out, by the state through changes in current laws, by school administration and the supportive collaborative professional environment, and by the quality of the relationship with parents. Regarding the second factor, Latendresse (2005) spoke of academic success of children whose parents had expressed their desires and aspirations to rise as high as possible in their educational career.

Regarding their relationship with other teachers in the school unit where they work, the majority of those with a few years of experience claim that a good relationship affects their autonomy to the point, of course, where they themselves allow this to happen. Smooth collaboration brings better results in teaching work, some say, while others who have the most years in classrooms disagree as they do not consider them interrelated having (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005). Unfortunately, for some, the assessment and grading of students does not rely purely on their qualities.

Bandura (1997), in demonstrating the factors of teacher self-efficacy, noted the role of teacher character. Clearly, it is the family that needs to be in interaction with their children's

teachers so that there is synergy and correspondence of their views, which is perceived by the students and the results of this are highly positive in achievement and in the general behavior of the parents (Stevenson & Baker, 1987).

In conclusion, the private teachers in this study conclude that only a percentage of parents who have chosen private education for their children have done so under the pretext of being able to intervene in learning issues because of the payment of fees. These teachers have between one (1) and six (6) years of experience, namely they belong to the category with the least experience unlike the other participants in the study.

In general, the teachers in the study expressed the view that the interventionist attitude of parents is subconsciously or partially intentionally discriminated through the students. Some of the reasons why the teachers interviewed expressed satisfaction with the frequency of their meetings with parents and the formality of their relationship with them and highlighted their few years of experience. It is a fact that parental involvement in their children's educational process is judged to be of positive consequence for them (Driessen et al, 2005 & Latendresse, 2005), if it is bounded.

A part of the teachers in the survey with minor experience expressed their concern about the extent to which their evaluation in private education and the possibility of unemployment in the future depends on the parents' opinion of them to their supervisors. The solution to this burning issue comes in the form of setting the boundaries of teachers to parents from the early stages of their acquaintance, which has been documented in previous research (Maslach, 1993).

Therefore, the teachers in the study with a few years of experience, in an effort to enhance their autonomy, seek more freedom in their teaching methods with flexibility in the curriculum from the side of the respective Ministry. In addition, they seek more time for wide-ranging discussions with their students on topics relevant to their daily lives and outside the school environment. Although, the teachers in the survey consider themselves to be autonomous in their work, partially or fully and regardless of the years of work, they express the need to demonstrate greater trust in them by both private school decision-makers and parents, a finding which is in line with similar results of research by Kapsalis (2006, 2009) on the outcome of positive results in the children's learning life when harmony in the relationship between parents and the school environment is achieved.

Finally, a separate reference should be made to the variable "years of experience". As demonstrated by the findings of this qualitative research, it is observed that teachers who have been working in private education from one (1) to six (6) years are also the ones who feel less autonomous both as professionals and in the practice of their teaching work. In addition, they consider the quality of relationship among colleagues, the character of the teacher-professional, the opinion of their students' parents and the school management as the main factors limiting their autonomy. As a result of this, their desire for more freedom in their work. Regarding the teachers in the study with seven (7) to nine (9) years of service, they experience the desired freedom in their workplace although some would like more. Finally, the survey teachers with years of experience (from ten (10) to twenty (20) years) although only four (4) in number clearly speak of experiencing their absolute degree of autonomy. Therefore, years of experience play an important role in the sense and in the assertion of autonomy of the teacher-practitioner in this regard.

The findings of the present study lie in limitations, which stem from the limited number of teacher participants in the study and the use of one research tool, namely the semi-structured interview. In future researches extending the study of this topic, it is suggested that (a) other research tools should be used, such as for example the construction of a questionnaire or even field observation in private schools, (b) more private school teachers should be involved and (c) another method should be used such as a case study.

## References

### English language

- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: the exercise of control*. New York: W. H. Freeman.
- Benson, P. (2001). *Teaching and Researching: Autonomy in Language Learning*: Pearson Education Limited.
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V., (2006). Using thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2). 77-101.
- Comer, J. P., & Haynes, N. M. (1991). Parent involvement in schools: An ecological approach. *Elementary School Journal*, 91(3), 271-277.
- Hahn, C. (2008). *Doing qualitative research using your computer: A practical guide*. Sage.
- Hargreaves, A. (1994). *Changing teachers, changing times: Teachers' work and culture in the postmodern age*. Great Britain: Redwood Books (Trowbridge).
- Hawes, C. A., & Plourde, L. A. (2005). *Parental involvement and its influence on the reading achievement of 6th grade students*. *Reading Improvement*, 42(1), 47-58.
- Hayes, R. B. (1997). The carcinogenicity of metals in humans. *Cancer Causes & Control*, 8(3), 371-385.
- Hill, N. E., & Tyson, D. F. (2009). Parental involvement in middle school: a meta-analytic assessment of the strategies that promote achievement. *Developmental psychology*, 45(3), 740.
- Holec, H. (1981) *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- Latendresse, G., Murphy, P. A., & Fullerton, J. T. (2005). *A description of the management and outcomes of vaginal birth after cesarean birth in the homebirth setting*. *Journal of midwifery & women's health*, 50(5), 386-391.
- Lengermann, J. J. (1971). Supposed and actual differences in professional autonomy among CPAs as related to type of work organization and size of firm. *Accounting Review*, 46(4), 665-675.
- Lincon, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills: Sage.
- Little, J. W. (1990). The persistence of privacy: Autonomy and initiative in teachers' professional relations. *Teachers College Record*, 91 (4), 509-536.
- Marshall, E. (1994). *The Morality of Freedom*.
- Maslach, C. (1993). Burnout: A multidimensional perspective. In: W. B. Schaufeli, C. Maslach & T. Marek (Eds). *Professional burnout: Recent developments in theory and research* (pp. 193-212). Washington, DC: Taylor and Francis.
- Pearson L. C. & Hall, B. W. (1993). Initial construct validation of the teaching autonomy scale. *Journal of Educational Research*, 86 (3), 172-178.
- Pearson, L. C., & Moomaw, W. (2005). The Relationship between Teacher Autonomy and Stress, Work Satisfaction, Empowerment, and Professionalism. *Educational research quarterly*, 29(1), 38-54.
- Pearson, L. C. & Moomaw, W. (2006). Continuing validation of the teaching autonomy scale. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 100 (1), 44-51.
- Raz, J. (1986). *The morality of freedom*. Oxford University Press.
- Richards, J. C. (2005). *Communicative language teaching today* (pp. 22-26). Singapore: SEAMEO Regional Language Centre.
- Silverman, D. (2000). Analyzing talk and text. *Handbook of qualitative research*, 2(0), 821-834.
- Stevenson, D. L., & Baker, D. P. (1987). The family-school relation and the child's school performance. *Child Development*, 58, 1348-1357.
- Wolff, R. (1970). *In defense of anarchism*. Berkeley: University of California Press.



Greek language

- Eurydice (2008). *Levels of Autonomy and Responsibilities of Teachers in Europe*. Brussels: Eurydice.
- Isari, F. & Pourkos, M. (2015). *Qualitative research methodology: Applications in psychology and education*. Available at [www.kallipos.gr](http://www.kallipos.gr)
- Kapsalis, A. (2006, 2009). *Pedagogical Psychology*. Aphi Kyriakidis, Athens, Greece.
- Manousou, Ch. (2017). *Diversity in school: creation, implementation and evaluation of an intercultural learning environment in primary school* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Thessaly. School of Human Sciences. Department of Elementary Education).
- Papakonstantinou, P. (1993). *Educational work and evaluation in schools*. Athens: Expression.
- Pasiardis, P. (2004). *Educational Leadership: From the period of benign indifference to the modern era*. Athens: Athens.
- Tsiolis, G. (2014). *Methods and techniques of analysis in qualitative social research*. Athens: Kritiki.
- Psaltis, A., & Gavriilidou, M. (1996). Parent-school cooperation: reality or utopia for Greece. *Synchronous Education: a Quarterly Review of Educational Issues*, (86), 57-60.