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## **Freedom to Choose within Limits: Teacher Autonomy from the Perspectives of Basic School Teachers in the Central Region of Ghana**

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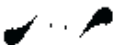


### **Abstract**

The study examined the level of autonomy among basic school teachers in the Central Region of Ghana as well as the effect of teacher demographic characteristics (gender, age and teaching experience) on the level of teacher autonomy. The study used the explanatory sequential (Quan-qual) design where different but complementary data were collected. Through the systematic sampling technique, a total of 315 basic school teachers were involved in the quantitative phase whilst 12 teachers (who were previously surveyed at the quantitative phase) were purposely sampled for the qualitative phase of the study. A continuous validated Likert-scale questionnaire comprising 18 items was adapted from Pearson and Hall (1993) and used for the quantitative phase. Using findings from the quantitative phase as basis, a semi-structured interview guide was designed to collect data to further elaborate the study's key findings. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyse the quantitative data whilst the interview was analysed thematically. The study revealed that teachers in the Central Region of Ghana hold positive perceptions about their autonomy with the level of autonomy being moderate. Positively, the study revealed that teacher autonomy is affected by gender whilst age and teaching experience affects their level of autonomy negatively. Based on the findings, it is recommended that the Ghana Education Service (GES) and school heads should periodically organize programmes that target conscientising the basic school teachers about the extent of autonomy that they have in the process of implementing the curriculum. With regard to the demographic characteristics of the teachers, school activities should be planned in a manner that encourage full exercise of autonomy irrespective of one's gender, age or teaching experience.

**Keywords:** Autonomy, Curriculum, teaching experience

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## **Introduction**

Prior to the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Ghana was one of the most highly centralized nations in Africa (Mankoe, 1992; Chapman, Barcikowski, Sowah & Gyamera, 2002; Mfum-Mensah, 2004). The Ministry of Education together with its subsidiary agencies such as National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NaCCA), National Council for Tertiary Education (NCTE), Ghana Education Service (GES), West African Examination Council (WEAC) determined nearly all significant aspects of the school curriculum including subject areas to be taught in schools, subject contents, instructional hours etc. The passage of the Local Government Law (PNDCL 207) in 1988, however, accorded increased authority to all facets of the economy of which education was equally affected. Afterwards, local authorities were given control over issues that related to curriculum, financial matters and school practice (Osei & Brock, 2006). In the education sector, efforts were made by the Ministry of Education (MoE) to decentralize the educational system. To this end, a feasibility study of curricular decentralization was conducted in 1986 where a programme outline was prepared and piloted in three regions. A large-scale decentralization of the curriculum was implemented in schools across the country in 1987 after the passage of the Local Content Curriculum (LCC).

With the implementation of the Local Content Curriculum, private and public Junior High Schools were tasked to develop locally courses that would equip students with the knowledge and relevant to their society (GoG, 1986). In essence, Local Content Curriculum sought to emphasize the teaching and learning of culture as well as technical and vocational skills that would enable students serve their local communities. This placed a herculean task on teachers to craft original lessons and to experiment with innovative pedagogies as they translated lesson plans into learning activities (Osei & Brock, 2006). The role of the teacher, therefore, was to localize the curriculum that had been planned centrally by creating tighter links between curricular and local conditions.

Arguably, agencies outside the school cannot meet the varying needs of individual students and local communities where the schools are situated. As a result, studies (LaCoe, 2006; Vieira, 2007) agree that teachers within the school levels are often empowered to make their own professional decisions to meet the unique and diverse needs of the individual learners and the local communities within the catchment areas of the schools. For teachers to be better positioned professionally to meet these diverse needs and interest, autonomy remains a significant variable that cannot be downplayed (Ingersoll, 1997; Pearson & Moomaw, 2005; Skinner, 2008). Kumaravadivelu (2001) states that teacher autonomy:

... entails a reasonable degree of competence and confidence on the part of teachers to want to build and implement their own theory of practice that is responsive to the particularities of their educational contexts and receptive to the possibilities of their sociopolitical conditions (p. 548).

Husband and Short (1994) consider autonomy to be the ability of teachers to control their daily schedules, to teach as one chooses, to have freedom to make decisions on construction, and to generate ideas about the curriculum. These conceptualizations of the term 'autonomy' brings to mind the two types of the concepts theorized by Pearson and Hall (1993), to include general autonomy and curricular autonomy. General

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autonomy refers to the on the spot decisions teachers make in their classrooms whilst curricular autonomy borders on curricular decisions such as selection of activities, materials, methods and sequencing of instruction (Noormohammadi, 2014). Friedman (1999) refers to these two types of autonomy as organizational and pedagogical autonomy. Pedagogical autonomy may cover issues from developing the curriculum to dealing problems in the school that may emanate from the students or their parents whilst organizational autonomy connects participation in school policies, recruitment and budgeting.

Irrespective of the system of education, teachers deserve some level of autonomy in order for them to function as professionals. However, studies on teacher autonomy have established mixed findings with such evidence from both developed and developing countries. In the United States of America, for example, Anderson (1987) reports that teacher autonomy has been declining for at least a decade as a result of uniform staff development programmes based on research on effective teaching which have become widespread; classroom observations becoming integral part of imposed teacher evaluations and school principals haven been called on to assume the role of 'instructional' leader. In Canada and Finland, a study conducted by Paradis, Lutovac, Jokikokko and Kaasila (2018) found that the teachers perceived their autonomy at work in different ways, leading to different levels of satisfaction. Both Canadian and Finnish teachers who were involved in the study felt most autonomous when it comes to issues in their classrooms, in areas of individual classroom operations, but least autonomous regarding the curriculum to be covered that related, in part, to the school-wide autonomy.

Genc (2010) found that in Turkey the teachers were restricted by the curriculum the Ministry of Education designed, and the pre-service training they previously received about teaching. In order for the Turkish teachers to overcome these limitations, reflective journals were used to help develop teachers' autonomy and decision-making skills. Hong and Youngs (2014) found that in South Korea, the teachers did not welcome the idea of enhanced curricular autonomy. As such, the teachers preferred much restrictions on the curriculum even when the state agencies wanted to grant them autonomy. In South Africa, Ramatlapana and Makonye (2012) revealed that the prescriptive nature of the curriculum as espoused by Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) at times compromised educator autonomy in effecting quality education. Although the Ghanaian educational system appears highly centralized, it appears that there is a degree of autonomy for the teachers. Curriculum materials such as syllabus, textbooks, academic calendar and instructional resources are provided by the government. However, basic school teachers have been given the opportunity to prepare their lesson notes, select appropriate instructional resources and even decide the timetable for the various teaching periods at the school level. It, however, appears that there is the dearth of information on the level of teacher autonomy in Ghana. It is this gap in knowledge that this study sought to fill.

### **Statement of the Problem**

According to Parker (2015), the feeling of autonomy is considered an essential element to teachers' job satisfaction and commitment, efficiency and retention. Again, the study of teacher autonomy is quite critical as it is directly linked to better, more adaptive, and more adequate education for students (Hyslop-Margison & Sears 2010; Prichard & Moore, 2016). Moreover, Paradis, Lutovac, and Kaasila (2015) suggest that in order to

enhance teachers' well-being and a sense of professionalism, there is the need to study the perceived autonomy of the teachers. Critically, Strong and Yoshida (2014) posit that literature on teacher autonomy started to emerge only recently. It appears there is paucity of information with regard to teacher autonomy, especially in Africa (Junten, 2017). Meanwhile, Erss, Kalmus, and Autio (2016) and Salokangas and Wermke (2016) maintain that contextual factors can affect teacher autonomy which justifies the need to conduct a study in Ghana to ascertain how these contextual factors from the Ghanaian perspective fill the identified gap. Notwithstanding these contextual factors, studies related to teacher autonomy are often either quantitative in nature or treat teacher autonomy as a secondary focus (Salokangas & Wermke 2016). How teachers perceive their autonomy is, arguably, more fluid and stretches beyond what quantitative measures can capture (Paradis, Lutovac, Jokikokko & Kaasila, 2018). The current study, therefore, sought to fill the contextual as well as the methodological gaps identified in the literature. In order to fill these gaps, the study was underpinned by the following research questions:

1. What is the effect of teacher demographic characteristics (gender, age and teaching experience) on the level of autonomy among basic school teachers in the Central Region of Ghana?
2. What perceptions do basic school teachers in the Central Region of Ghana hold about their autonomy?
3. What is the level of autonomy among basic school teachers in the Central Region of Ghana?

### **Empirical Review**

Studies in teacher's autonomy remains inconclusive. Findings from the literature indicate that context plays a critical role in how teachers view their autonomy. For instance, Tuul, Mikser, Neudorf and Ugaste (2015) found that in Estonia preschool teachers favoured to have a lot of curricular autonomy in general terms. However, their findings reveal that the teachers preferred to be controlled centrally on matters such as aims, methods and content of education. Although the teachers wished to have more autonomy, especially, to design their curriculum internally, they were satisfied with the externally planned curriculum.

Similarly, Erss, Kalmus and Autio (2016) investigated the professional autonomy of upper secondary school teachers in three European countries in interpreting and implementing curricula. Their study revealed that although contemporary curriculum discourse in Estonia, Finland and Germany emphasizes, to differing degrees, school and teacher autonomy, the rhetoric of the Estonian and Bavarian curricula differs from that of the Finnish curriculum in terms of teachers' experiences of autonomy. The optimistic promise of the Estonian curriculum of 1996 to grant teachers the role of 'makers of education policy' was never realized as Estonian teachers expressed their dissatisfaction with top-down curriculum reforms where their professional expertise was ignored. In a similar fashion, the promise of more teacher autonomy in the 2008 Bavarian curriculum clashed with increased time and content pressure experienced by German teachers after the gymnasium reform of 2004, which shortened the duration of the school form by one year.

Paradis, Lutovac, Jokikokko and Kaasila (2018) conducted a study on Canadian and Finnish upper-secondary school mathematics teachers' perceptions of autonomy. how

upper-secondary school mathematics teachers in Canada and in Finland perceived their professional autonomy, and how these perceptions related to their cultural contexts. The findings of the study established that the Canadian and Finnish teachers in their study perceived their autonomy at work in different ways, leading to different levels of satisfaction. Both their Canadian and Finnish participants felt most autonomous inside their classrooms, in areas of individual classroom operations, and least autonomous regarding the curriculum to be covered, which related in part to the school-wide autonomy. Moreover, Wermke, Rick and Salokangas (2018) investigated and compared the perceptions of German and Swedish teachers concerning their professional autonomy. Their study revealed that the teachers in both jurisdictions perceived themselves to be very autonomous in making decisions on content and methods of teaching. However, the German teachers perceive felt more involved in making decisions about their work.

Strong and Yoshida (2014) studied teachers' autonomy in today's education climate. The study evaluated the psychometric properties of Friedman's (1999) Teacher Work Autonomy Scale to determine whether it was an acceptable instrument to measure U.S teacher autonomy in the present educational context. The study further ascertained the status of teachers' perceptions of their autonomy from a sample of US teachers. The study revealed that the teachers rated classroom management as the factor with the highest autonomy. It can, therefore, be argued that the teachers involved in the study rated their general autonomy higher than their curricular autonomy.

Lundstrom (2015) investigated teacher autonomy in the era of New Public Management. The study examined how upper secondary school teachers perceive and respond to the consequences of their professional autonomy of recent school reforms and restructurings. The study revealed that control increased while discretion decreased, and others think that managers exercise power by rewarding compliant teachers. Hong and Youngs (2016) examined conflicting perspectives on the effects of the new national curriculum in South Korea, which was intended to grant more autonomy to individual schools and teachers using interview data from secondary teachers. Contrary to the general belief that teachers want more autonomy to customize their curricula to meet students' needs, the study found that the participating teachers did not welcome the enhanced curricular autonomy nor did they believe it would diversify the school curriculum. The primary causes of this contradiction are the gap between the desired and the granted autonomy, the new national curriculum's negative impact on the relationships among teachers and their job security, and the prevalent credential culture in South Korea. Again, Paradis, Lutovac, Jokikokko and Kaasila study (2018) on Canadian and Finnish teachers found that Canadian teachers perceived their levels of autonomy to be variable (mainly declining), and were rather dissatisfied with this. However, the opposite was true for their Finnish counterparts, who perceived their levels of autonomy to be high and stable, and were considerably satisfied with it.

Pearson and Hall (1993) studied the initial construct validation of the Teaching Autonomy Scale with the purpose of developing and validating an instrument for measuring perceptions of teacher autonomy. The study established no statistically significant differences in autonomy score by gender, or highest degree held. The study further found that age and years of teaching experience do not correlate with the teachers' autonomy.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study was underlined by the Self Determination Theory (SDT) which was expanded

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by Ryan and Deci (1985). The theory operates on the assumption that human beings can be proactive and engaged or, alternatively, passive and alienated, largely as a function of the social conditions in which they develop and function. As a result, the Self Determination Theory (SDT) as a macro theory of human motivation and personality concerns people's inherent growth tendencies and innate psychological needs. It is concerned with the motivation behind choices people make without external influence and interference. Thus, SDT focuses on the degree to which an individual's behaviour is self-motivated and self-determined (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Deci & Ryan, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Actions are engaged in freely based on one's values and interests; these individuals perceive an internal locus of causality of their actions. In this case, their behaviour depends on external pressures, rewards, or other external elements. Controlled behaviours are characterized by externally perceived locus of causality. People with low autonomy perceive a lower degree of personal choice and initiative, and their behaviour is a response to other people's pressure, inner expectations, or internal or self-imposed pressure. Deci (1971) maintains that offering people extrinsic rewards for behaviour that is intrinsically motivated undermined the intrinsic motivation as they grow less interested in it. Initially intrinsically motivated behaviour becomes controlled by external rewards, which undermines their autonomy. Studies (Amabile, DeJong & Lepper, 1976) have shown that other external factors like deadlines, which restrict and control, also decrease intrinsic motivation. Situations that give autonomy as opposed to taking it away also have a similar link to motivation. Using the SDT as a theoretical lens for this study, it is argued that teachers are trained to be generally autonomous in the environment they find themselves. Even in centrally planned jurisdictions where educational matters are centrally decided, teachers still have the mandate to adjust some aspect of the planned programme to suit local context. In essence, it would be almost impossible to achieve 100% fidelity in areas where the programme of instruction and other educational decisions are made by the government through its agencies. Essentially, the theory would permit the researchers to assess the extent to which teachers are able to make decisions at the local level in the face of externally controlled pressure.

### **Methodology**

This study adopted the mixed method paradigm. Specifically, the explanatory sequential (Quan-qual) design was employed to develop a complete understanding of the research problem by obtaining different but complementary data. It involved the collection and analysis of quantitative dataset followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data. The data were integrated during interpretation. The primary focus was to explain the quantitative results by exploring certain results in more detail or using follow-up interviews to better understand the results. The population of the study comprised all basic school teachers in the Central Region of Ghana. According to the Human Resource Division of the Ghana Education Service [GES] (2018), there are 1240 basic school teachers in the Central Region. Out of this number, a total of 315 basic school teachers were involved in the quantitative phase. The decision to use 315 teachers from a population of 1240 was influenced by Krejcie and Morgan (1970) who argued that it is appropriate to sample minimum of 291 respondents from such a population. In order to increase external validity, the researchers increased the sample size to 315. The systematic sampling technique was used to select the teachers. This was done by picking every 4th teacher on the list provided by GES after an interval has been generated by dividing the population by the sample size and a random first teacher

selected. For the qualitative phase, twelve teachers who participated in the quantitative phase were selected purposely.

A continuous validated Likert-scale questionnaire comprising 18 items was adapted from Pearson and Hall (1993) for the quantitative phase of the study. A semi-structured interview guide was designed from the findings that emerged from the quantitative data. The researchers administered the questionnaire and collected them on the same day. The sampled teachers for the qualitative phase were also interviewed two weeks after the quantitative analysis have been completed. Each interview lasted about 30 minutes. Each of the interviews was tape recorded for transcription. The analysis of the data was done in two stages. The first stage involved the use of descriptive statistics such as means and standard deviations and inferential statistics. In the second stage, the researchers studied the field notes, transcribed the audio interview data into texts and analysed following the modalities of thematic analysis prescribed by (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Data integration was achieved by reporting results together in a discussion section of the study. Thus, the study first reported the quantitative statistical results followed by qualitative data or emerging themes that supported the quantitative results.

### **Results and Discussion**

This section discussed the data collected from the field, involving the demographic information of the respondents as well as the relevant data to address the research questions. Table 1 provides a description of the demographic characteristics of the respondents

**Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents**

Variable	Sub-scale	N	%
Gender	Male	165	52.4
	Female	150	47.6
Age	20-30yrs	47	14.9
	31-40yrs	172	54.6
	41-50yrs	72	22.9
	51-60yrs	24	7.6
Teaching Experience	0-5	90	28.6
	6-10	111	35.2
	11-15	57	18.1
	16-20	29	9.2
	21 and above	28	8.9

Source: Field Data, 2018

Results in Table 1 shows that 165(52.4%) of the teachers are males whilst 150(47.6%) are females, suggesting that the teacher gender gap is closing, given previous research evidence (Afful-Broni & Dampson, 2008). The Table further reveals that majority (54.6%) of the teachers are in the 31-40 years age bracket whilst a few of them (7.6%) are between 51-60 years. This result is indicative that majority of the teachers are in an active age bracket with a reasonable number of years to serve, further suggesting that when teachers are given opportunity to take certain decisions in relation to their professional duties, their commitment and satisfaction to the classroom may increase. Regarding the teaching experience of teachers, the results indicate that 35.2% of the teachers have taught for 6-10 years, only 28(8.9%) have taught beyond 20 years. From this result, it is evident that majority of the teachers are fairly experienced on their job to

take professional decisions.

**RQ1: What is the effect of teacher demographic characteristics (gender, age and teaching experience) on the level autonomy among basic school teachers in the Central Region of Ghana?**

The intent of the first research question, therefore, was to measure the effect of demographic characteristics (gender, age and teaching experience) on the level autonomy among basic school teachers in the Central Region of Ghana. In order to measure the effect of demographic characteristics, a Linear Regression and t-test were performed. The result is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2. Effect of Teacher Demographic Characteristics on their Autonomy**

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	2.472 ***	.065		38.166	.000
Age	-.098 ***	.022	-.208	-4.573	.000
Teaching Experience	-.136 ***	.014	-.448	-9.716	.000
Number of Observations	314				
R <sup>2</sup>	.443				
Adjusted R-Squared	.437				
F	82.304				
P	.000				

Dependent Variable Reflective Practice

P-Values in parenthesis: \*  $P < 0.00$ , \*\*  $P < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $P < 0.01$

A multiple linear regression was calculated to predict teacher autonomy based on age and teaching experience. The F statistic in the entire model is statistically significant ( $p = 0.000$ ). This means that the model could be used to determine how gender, age and teaching experience predict the level of teacher autonomy. A significant regression equation was found ( $F(3, 311) = 82.304, p < .05$  with an  $R^2$  of .443). This also means that teacher demographic characteristics (age and teaching experience) explain 44.3% of the variation in the dependent variable (autonomy). This implies that there are other factors that account for 55.7% of teacher autonomy. The teachers' predicted autonomy is equal to  $2.472 - .136$  (Teaching Experience)  $-.098$  (Age)  $+.348$  (Gender), where teaching experience was measured as 1 = 0-5years, 2 = 6-10years, 3 = 11-15years, 4 = 16-20years, 5 = 21 and above years. Age was measured as 1 = 20-30years, 2 = 31-40years, 3 = 41-50 years 4 = 51-60 years and gender was coded 1 = Male, 2 = Female.

The results imply that gender, age and teaching experience predict teacher autonomy significantly. It, however, presupposes that age and teaching experience predict teacher autonomy negatively whilst gender predicts teacher autonomy positively. Interestingly, the results mean that the novice teachers enjoy more autonomy than the experienced teachers. Though this is quite surprising, it is understandable. Experienced teachers are often tasked to prepare final year students for external examinations and other educational activities in the school. In these instances, they experience a lot of control from external agencies outside the school unlike the novice teachers who normally teach the introductory or lower classes. The findings refute the findings of earlier studies (Burden, 1981; Rosenholtz & Simpson, 1990) that found relationship between teacher experience and age correlating with teacher autonomy. With the insistence of



collaborative decision making and new roles for teachers, there is the likelihood that both novice and experience as well as young and old teachers would equally become autonomous (Pearson & Hall, 1993).

In order to test whether differences exist in terms of the autonomous level of male and female teachers, independent sample t-test was conducted. The result is presented in Table 3.

**Table 3. Difference between Male and Female Teachers Autonomy**

Gender	M	SD	T	Df	p
Male	2.38	0.26	-1.892	21	.072
Female	2.67	0.45			

$p > 0.05$

From Table 3, it can be observed that there is a difference between male and female teachers in relation to autonomy. This is evident from the mean values recorded, mean of males ( $M = 2.38$ ,  $SD = 0.26$ ) and mean of females ( $M = 2.67$ ,  $SD = 0.45$ ). This implies that female teachers seem to have more autonomy than their male colleagues by mere comparison of the mean values. Thus, the level of autonomy of the females exceeds that of the males by .23.

The results of the t-test, however, show that there is no statistically significant difference in the autonomy of the female teachers ( $M = 2.67$ ,  $SD = 0.45$ ) and male teachers ( $M = 2.38$ ,  $SD = 0.26$ );  $t(313) = -1.892$ ,  $p = 0.72$  (two tailed). This situation might have occurred as a result of the seeming inability of the teachers to experience in full the degree of autonomy conferred on them by the education system in Ghana. Both male and female teachers seem to be at par in terms of how they make decisions concerning educational matters at the school level. The findings of this study align with that of Pearson and Hall (1993) who found the perceptions of teaching autonomy did not differ by gender.

### **RQ2: What perception do basic school teachers in the Central Region of Ghana hold about their autonomy?**

This research question intended to examine how basic school teachers in the Central Region of Ghana perceive their autonomy in the school. The perception of the teachers' autonomy was measured on a four-point Likert scale question format adapted from Pearson and Hall (1993) and analysed with means and standard deviations as presented in Table 4.4.

**Table 4. Perception Basic School Teachers in the Central Region of Ghana hold of their Autonomy**

Statement	Mean	SD
In my teaching, I use my own guidelines and procedures.	1.9	1.0
In my situation, I have little say over the content and skills that are selected for teaching	2.2	1.1
My teaching focuses on those goals and objectives I select myself	2.8	1.2
What I teach in my class is determined for the most part by myself	2.0	.97
The materials I use in my class are chosen for the most part by me	2.5	.96
The content and skills taught in my class are those I select	2.3	.96
I am free to be creative in my teaching approach	3.1	.50
The selection of student-learning activities in my class is under my control.	3.0	.91
Standards of behaviour in my classroom are set primarily by me	2.7	.95
My job does not allow for much discretion on my part	2.3	.88
The scheduling of use of time in my classroom is under my control	2.2	1.1
I seldom use alternative procedures in my teaching.	2.4	.90
I follow my own guidelines on instruction	2.4	.83
In my situation, I have only limited latitude in how major problems are solved	2.3	.78
In my class, I have little control over how classroom space is used	1.8	.88
The evaluation and assessment activities used in my class are selected by others	2.1	.95
I select the teaching methods and strategies I use with my students	3.0	.86
I have little say over the scheduling of use of time in my classroom	2.4	.88
Mean of Means/Average Standard Deviation	2.4	.92

Source: Field Data, 2018 Key= Mean < 2.0 = Negative; Mean > 2.0 = Positive

From Table 4.4, it is evident that the teachers' perception of their autonomy is fairly positive (Mean = 2.4, SD = .92), not far away from the mid-point value. This means that the teachers, to some extent, recognize the fact that the curriculum used in the basic schools is just prescriptive in nature and grants them the freedom to further readjust the curriculum to satisfy a certain school and learner context. The interview conducted collaborated the views of the teachers which were expressed through the questionnaire. For instance, during interviews, the teachers expressed mixed feelings with regard to their autonomy in the school. As one teacher intimated:

*I design my lessons, I select my own teaching techniques and set my own questions based on the syllabus that has been designed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NaCCA).*

Another teachers said:

*“Though I am able to make some changes in the curriculum, I still feel enough pressure to strictly teach to a test to ensure students perform at appropriate levels. I don't consider myself as enjoying any autonomy. This extreme pressure not only hinders my autonomy, but also impacts my self-confidence and my belief that I am capable of being an education professional”.*

Another teacher maintained:

*Our autonomy as teachers continue to be lessened as a result of the increased levels of accountability and standardization of curriculum and instruction. Nowadays, increased tracking and rating of schools,*

*which has created a trickle-down effect of stricter guidelines and expectations for administrators, teachers, and students. However, I am still able to make some minor changes to the centrally planned curriculum to suit the local context.*

The fairly high level of autonomy enjoyed by the basic school teachers in the Central Region of Ghana is expected. This is because, the teachers are held accountable for producing high grades for themselves, the students, and the school in general. The demands for accountability imposed on teachers from different stakeholders such as parents, students and the government will obviously affect their perceived autonomy in the classroom (Prichard & Moore, 2016), and may in turn induce a perceived loss of control and loss of a feeling of professionalism (Perryman, Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2011). Overall, the findings imply that although the curriculum makes certain room for teacher autonomy, it appears that the micro-management of the educational enterprise by parents, community members, and district educational authorities may undermine the autonomy of teachers in the classrooms (Wright, 2018).

**RQ1: What is the level of autonomy among basic school teachers in the Central Region of Ghana?**

Research question two sought to examine the level of autonomy among basic school teachers in the Central Region of Ghana. The level of autonomy which was measured on a four-point Likert scale questionnaire adapted from Pearson and Hall (1993) and analysed with means and standard deviations is presented in Table 4.5.

**Table 5. Level of Autonomy from the Perspective of the Teachers**

Statement	Mean	SD
Curriculum autonomy		
In my teaching, I use my own guidelines and procedures.	1.9	1.0
In my situation, I have little say over the content and skills that are selected for teaching	2.2	1.1
My teaching focuses on those goals and objectives I select myself	2.8	1.2
What I teach in my class is determined for the most part by myself	2.0	.97
The materials I use in my class are chosen for the most part by me	2.5	.96
The content and skills taught in my class are those I select	2.3	.96
Mean of Means/Average Standard Deviation	2.3	1.0
General teaching autonomy		
I am free to be creative in my teaching approach	3.5	.50
The selection of student-learning activities in my class is under my control.	3.0	.91
Standards of behaviour in my classroom are set primarily by me	2.7	.95
My job does not allow for much discretion on my part	2.3	.88
The scheduling of use of time in my classroom is under my control	2.2	1.1
I seldom use alternative procedures in my teaching.	2.6	.93
I follow my own guidelines on instruction	2.4	.83
In my situation, I have only limited latitude in how major problems are solved	2.3	.78
In my class, I have little control over how classroom space is used	1.8	.88
The evaluation and assessment activities used in my class are selected by others	2.1	.95
I select the teaching methods and strategies I use with my students	3.2	.86
I have little say over the scheduling of use of time in my classroom	2.4	.88
Mean of Means/Average Standard Deviation	2.5	.87

Source: Field Data, 2019 Key= Mean < 1.5 = Low; Mean 1.5 – 2.4 = Moderate; Mean = > 2.5 = High

Autonomy is important if teachers are going to remain in the profession. Many reasons were cited for teachers leaving the profession (Kremer & Hofman, 1981), and a measure of general autonomy could provide administrators insight into identifying those teachers who are more satisfied with their jobs and professional identity; such identification, in turn, may result in job turnover. The overall mean = 2.5, SD = .92 shows that the level of teacher autonomy is fairly high; although their general autonomy (Mean = 2.5, SD = .87) seems higher than their curricular autonomy (Mean = 2.3, SD = 1.0). This means that the teachers are limited when it comes to taking decisions about the content as well as other aspect of the school curriculum. It was, therefore, not surprising that the teachers felt they are being controlled too much. Instead, they preferred that policy makers grant them autonomy in some areas of the school system even if not in areas such as deciding on the aims of education. In the interview for example, one teacher had this to say:

*I believe that if I have more discretion in determining what and when to teach, I am in a better position to cater for students needs by adjusting the curriculum to suit their context. I think this is a bit different from what policymakers have in their minds. As you know, the national curriculum has specified content knowledge to be addressed in each subject in detail, which constrains teachers' autonomy.*

In support, another teacher remarked:

*Once everything in the curriculum is predetermined outside the school, my business as a teacher is just to implement whatever is in there. It would, therefore, be appropriate if classroom teachers are given the opportunity to make some decisions in the schools they find themselves.*

Evidently, the teachers seem not to be much aware of the extent of autonomy granted by the nature of Ghana's curriculum enactment processes. As it stands, there appears to be a gap between the length of autonomy granted by the school curriculum and the length of autonomy exercised in reality by the teachers. In effect, the teachers exercise limited autonomy in relation to the potential teacher autonomy. This can be attributed to the perceived centralized and top-down policy implementation in which teachers are considered as class performers who have little say in making major decisions (Behroozi & Osman, 2016). In this sense, teachers are often employed as technicians required to teach mechanically to meet expected students' outcomes, rather than as professionals to provide unique insight according to the diversity in the classrooms (Robertson & Jones, 2013).

From the quantitative data, the teachers agreed that their teaching focuses on the goals and objectives they select themselves (Mean = 2.8, SD = 1.2), they choose materials they use in their classes (Mean = 2.5, SD = .96) with limited say over the content and skills that are selected for teaching (Mean = 2.2, SD = 1.1). This means that whereas the teachers identify specific lesson objectives and teaching materials, whatever they teach the learners are within the prescriptions and framework of the curriculum. This is quite expected because basic school teachers have to prepare their lesson plans with guidance from the centrally-planned curriculum. This finding is further amplified by the interview data. For instance, one teacher said:

*I only use the curriculum as a guide to prepare my notes. I develop instructional objectives myself.*

Another teacher mentioned:

*As far as the content to be taught in the classroom is concerned, I do not have any role in its selection. My only role is to implement it. That is why I have control over the objectives I formulate as well as the resources I use in the implementation.*

The teachers reckoned that they have the mandate to improvise in situations where the materials supplied by the education agencies might not adequately support instructions that have been designed by the teachers. It needs to be mentioned that the curriculum suggests the methods, teaching activities and resources for each lesson and, also, embolden teachers to be contextually innovative in designing the learning environment the supports learning.

Data gathered on the general autonomy of teachers suggest that the teacher's creativity in the implementation of the curriculum is never superimposed by external agencies such as Circuit Supervisors and Educational Authorities in the region. The results show that these external agencies neither select student-learning activities for the classroom teachers (Mean = 3.0, SD = .91) nor determine the standard of behaviours students should exhibit in the classroom (Mean = 2.7, SD = .95). From the results, the teachers also disagreed that they have little control over how their classroom spaces are used (Mean = 1.8, SD = .88). This was further confirmed through the interview with the teachers. For example, one teacher remarked:

*This is my class. I decide which behaviours are exhibited by the students in as much as it does not contravene the rules of Ghana.*

In support, another teacher said:

*As a teacher, I have to control the behaviours students show in the classroom. I cannot wait for people outside the school to come and tell me which behaviours are appropriate or otherwise*

This is a clear indication of the high level of autonomy that classroom teachers enjoy in Ghana irrespective of the fact that the country's educational system is centralized. Another evidence to show that the basic school teachers' general autonomy is high (the general autonomy is  $M=2.5$ , not far away from the mean. The respondents, for example agreed with the statement "I select the teaching methods and strategies I use with my students" (Mean = 3.2, SD = .86). These results presuppose that the uniformity that the educational authorities seek to achieve may not materialize. However, the teacher's innovativeness and creativity are not stifled by the educational system. Evidently, the teachers have been empowered through the educational system to select democratic pedagogies that would enhance the teaching of their subject matter. Through the interview, one teacher mentioned:

*I consider the students before I choose any pedagogy that I would use to teach. In fact, I sometimes discuss with the students before I select any teaching method.*

Another teacher mentioned:

*The nature of the curriculum allows me to cooperatively plan and*

*select teaching methods that are appropriate at the level of my students. Sometimes I don't even consider the prescribed teaching methods.*

Granting of autonomy through the curriculum also means that the classroom teachers have been empowered to make decisions in the schools and classrooms that would inure to the benefit of the teachers as well as the students. As indicated by Erss (2018), teacher autonomy ensures critical thinking on the part of the teachers to solve pedagogic dilemma's they encounter in the schools.

Results from the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) buttress the assumption that there is lack of uniformity in teaching and learning in the basic schools. Whereas some teachers may adopt appropriate pedagogies to make their subject matter comprehensible to the learners, other teachers may not. The cascading effect is that some teachers are not harnessing the full benefits of autonomy in the classroom. This may undermine the realization of the potential benefits of teacher autonomy. Irrespectively, the general autonomy of the teachers implies that the basic school teachers may bring to bear creativity and critical thinking skills which are essential elements in the classroom (Pearson & Moomaw, 2006). The findings of this study contradict that of Strong and Yoshida (2014) that there is an apparent high level of autonomy for teachers within their individual classrooms.

### **Conclusions and Implications for Policy and Practice**

The study has established that the teacher's level of autonomy is fairly high. However, the teachers' general autonomy is higher as compared to their curricular autonomy. The study further revealed that teachers' autonomy is significantly affected by gender, age and teaching experience. It is concluded that the teachers are not exercising the full length of the autonomy that the education system confers on them, which could undermine their creativity and innovativeness in the classroom. In view of these findings and the conclusions drawn, it is recommended that the Ghana Education Service (GES) should periodically organize programmes that are targeted at conscientising the basic school teachers about the extent of autonomy that they have in the process of enacting the curriculum. Again, teachers need to feel supported, encouraged by GES and other stakeholders to believe that they have the power to make decisions in their own classroom, and be empowered to make the positive difference in the lives of their students. Teachers must not allow constraints placed on them to disempower them, but rather they must empower themselves by finding the outlets to speak up and share their area of expertise. With regard to the demographic characteristics of the teachers, it is recommended that school activities should be planned in a manner that encourage full exercise of autonomy irrespective of one's age or teaching experience.

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