Supporting Teacher Autonomy

According to self determination theory, intrinsic motivation requires the fulfillment of three psychological needs: competence, autonomy and relatedness(Deci & Ryan, 2008). Intrinsic motivation plays a significant role in workplace wellbeing, job satisfaction and retention, as well as performance(Worth & Van den Brande, 2020, p.6). If we want our teachers and school staff to be successful and well at work, supporting autonomy is essential. According to Jack Worth, lead economist at the National Foundation for Educational Research(NFER) in the UK, teacher autonomy is defined by how much influence teacher's feel they have over certain aspects of their work and how much voice they have in how school level decisions are made(Doherty, 2020). Despite the benefits of autonomy for wellbeing, in a recent NFER report teachers were 16 to 20 percent less likely than other professionals to report having 'a lot' of influence over how and when they complete job tasks and responsibilities(Worth & Van den Brande, 2020). Additionally, 38 percent of teachers surveyed reported little to no influence over professional development goals (Worth & Van den Brande, 2020).

School leaders play a key role in promoting teacher and staff autonomy. Worth and Van den Brande(2020) recommend that school leaders "incorporate a teacher autonomy lens to regular reviews of teaching and learning policies" and expand ways for teachers and staff to be more involved in school decision-making and organizational development (p.4). In an autonomy-centered episode of the Transformative Principal podcast, one principal shared that school administrators can support teacher autonomy by giving teachers and staff opportunities to be creative and try new things without fear of failure or being penalized on administrative reports(Jones, 2015). Giving teachers the flexibility to change and adapt their teaching and classroom management methods is key to supporting autonomy (Jones, 2015). In recent studies, providing teachers with autonomy over professional development goals has had the most significant results at improving teacher motivation and job satisfaction (Worth & Van den Brande, 2020).

Materials:	Varies
Duration:	Varies
Implementation:	Suggestions include: • Provide teachers with a list of potential professional development opportunities they can choose from during the school year. • Involve teachers and staff in school decision-making and seek their input and feedback more frequently. • Encourage teachers to try new things and different teaching methods without fear of penalization. • While school-wide behavioral rules may be necessary in some cases, encourage and allow teachers to set some of their own classroom rules. • Encourage, but do not mandate, collaboration(Smith, 2017). There are many other ways to foster autonomy that may not be found on this list. In order to create a positive learning environment for both students and staff, it is important to set guidelines and also give staff many opportunities for choice and involvement in school and professional development (Smith, 2017).

Does it work?

In one study, 300 teachers in Florida were asked to complete the Teacher Autonomy scale, as well as additional surveys regarding job satisfaction, professionalism and empowerment (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005). Teachers who reported a greater general sense of autonomy at work also reported higher levels of professionalism and empowerment in the workplace. Greater curriculum autonomy was associated with decreased job stress (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005). These results were consistent among teachers in both primary and secondary schools (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005).

A more recent study analyzed multiple surveys and reports regarding autonomy and job satisfaction of teachers in the UK. It was found that teacher autonomy over classroom standards and rules was associated with greater job satisfaction (Worth & Van den Brande, 2020). While autonomy over classroom management was generally high among teachers, around 30 percent reported little to no autonomy of student assessment and feedback. Additionally, when school staff (teachers, admin, etc.) have autonomy over professional development goals, they show improvements in job satisfaction and motivation (Worth & Van den Brande, 2020). According to Worth and Van den Brande (2020), "increasing teachers' reported influence over their professional development (PD) goals from 'some' to 'a lot' is associated with a nine-percentage-point increase in intention to stay in teaching" (p.4).

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