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

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Abstract: The study examined the level of autonomy among basic school teachers in the Central Region of Ghana and the effect of teacher demographic characteristics on the level of teacher autonomy. The explanatory sequential design was adopted. Using the systematic sampling technique, a total of 315 basic school teachers were sampled for the quantitative phase of the study whilst 12 teachers were sampled for the qualitative phase through the purposive sampling technique. Eighteen (18) Likert-scale items were adapted from Pearson and Hall and used for the quantitative phase. A semi-structured interview guide was designed to collect data to further elaborate on 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. It further established that teacher autonomy is affected by gender positively 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 organize in-service programmes aimed at informing basic school teachers on the extent of autonomy that they have in the process of implementing the curriculum.

Keywords: *Autonomy, curriculum, teaching experience.*

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Introduction

Prior to the later part of the 20th 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), and 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. Later, local authorities who had been denied the opportunity to engage in education had unprecedented power over the curriculum, economic matters and classroom exercise (Osei & Brock, 2006). Specifically, related to the education sector, the Ministry of Education (MoE) began to consider strategies for decentralizing the Ghanaian education system during the 1980s. The MoE performed a feasibility study of curricular decentralization in 1986 after years of casual debates about the prospects of establishing a part of the national curriculum intended to achieve that objective. A programme outline was prepared and piloted in three regions. In 1987, the Local Content Curriculum (LCC) was passed. It became a separate sub-section of the national curriculum and was enforced throughout the nation in schools.

All government and private junior high schools were advised to create local classes that would provide learners with an awareness of their local culture, fundamental abilities and income-generating abilities (GoG, 1986). The MoE encouraged schools to produce LCC classes in accordance with the distinctive circumstances of the societies they served. The guidelines for the program needed all junior high schools to allocate 20 percent of the curriculum to local subjects. Teachers were also pressed by local officials to craft original lessons and to experiment with innovative pedagogies as they translated lesson plans into learning activities. The LCC, therefore, sought to ensure that classroom teachers were entrusted with the responsibilities of creating tighter links between curricular and local conditions. Although teachers may differ in terms of how they interpret how the curriculum can match the local context, there was a general consensus

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that the LCC should be able to localize the centrally planned curriculum. This was a way of ensuring that the curriculum caters for the country's diverse ethnic background (Osei & Brock, 2006).

External organizations may not be able to satisfy individual learners and local communities' distinctive needs. In order to better assist learners in special situations, educators are often empowered to create their own professional choices rather than being compelled to follow externally imposed choices (LaCoe, 2006; Vieira, 2007). The more autonomy educators have, the more probably they are to feel professionally empowered (Ingersoll, 1997; Pearson & Moomaw, 2005; Skinner, 2008). Kumaravadivelu (2001) says autonomy of teachers involves a fair degree of expertise and trust on the part of educators in wanting to construct and enforce their own concept of practice that is sensitive to the particularities of their academic situations and receptive to the opportunities of their socio-political circumstances.

Husband and Short (1994) believe that autonomy provides teachers the capacity to regulate their daily schedules, teach as they like, have the liberty to make choices and create curriculum thoughts. These conceptualizations of the term 'autonomy' bring to mind the two types of the concepts theorized by Pearson and Hall (1993), to include general autonomy and curricular autonomy. General autonomy relates to choices on school norms and on-the-job discretion, whereas curriculum autonomy relates to the choice of operations, equipment, techniques and instruction sequencing (Pearson & Hall, 1993). It is also possible to call these two kinds of autonomy organisational and pedagogical independence (Friedman, 1999). While pedagogical autonomy involves problems ranging from curriculum growth to addressing students and their problems or their parents, organizational decision-making is related to distributed leadership, such as 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) discovered that students in Turkey were limited by the curriculum intended by the Ministry of Education, and the pre-service learning preparation they had earlier received. Reflective journals were used to assist create the autonomy and decision-making abilities of educators to overcome these constraints. 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 many restrictions on the curriculum even when the state agencies wanted to grant them autonomy. In South Africa, Ramatlapana and Makonye (2012) disclosed that the prescriptive nature of the curriculum as supported by the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) sometimes jeopardized the autonomy of educators in carrying out 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 a 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. Despite these contextual variables, teacher autonomy studies are often either quantitative in nature or secondary focused on teacher autonomy (Salokangas & Wermke 2016). How educators perceive their autonomy, however, is perhaps more fluid and extends 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?

Theoretical Framework

The study adopted the Self Determination Theory (SDT) which was expanded by Ryan and Deci (1985). The theory assumes that people can be proactive and involved or, alternately, passive and alienated, mainly as a function of the social circumstances under which they evolve and operate. As a result, The Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as a human motivation and personality macro theory concerns the intrinsic development trends and innate psychological needs of individuals. The theory is about the motive behind decisions that individuals make without outside impact 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 freely involved on the basis of one's values and interests; these people interpret their actions as an inner location of causality. Their behavior in this situation relies on external pressure, benefits, or other external components. Controlled behaviors are characterized by the locus of causality externally perceived. Low-autonomous people perceive less private decision and initiative and their behavior is a reaction to stress, internal expectations or self-imposed pressure from others.

Deci (1971) holds that the provision of extrinity rewards to intrinsically motivated behaviour, as they become less interested, undermines intrinsic motivation. Initially driven behavior is governed by external incentives, undermining its autonomy. Studies (Amabile, DeJong & Lepper, 1976) have shown that other external variables, such as deadlines that limit and control, also reduce inherent motivation. Situations that offer autonomy as opposed to removing it also have a comparable connection 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 the 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.

Methods

This study adopted a 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. This design was considered the most appropriate for the study because it allowed for the collection and analysis of quantitative dataset followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data. Again, this design was considered the most appropriate as the researchers sought to explain the quantitative results by exploring certain results in more detail or using follow-up interviews to better understand the results from the questionnaire. The data were integrated during interpretation. The population of the study comprised all primary school teachers in the Central Region of Ghana. According to the Human Resource Division of the Ghana Education Service [GES] (2018), there are 1240 primary school teachers in the Central Region. Out of this number, a total of 315 primary 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 (see Table 1 for sample features). 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 on purpose.

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 the 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 4.1 provides a description of the demographic characteristics of the respondents

Table 4. 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Variable	Sub-scale	N	%
Gender	Male	165	52.4
	Female	150	47.6
Age	20-30 yrs	47	14.9
	31-40 yrs	172	54.6
	41-50 yrs	72	22.9
	51-60 yrs	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 were males whilst 150(47.6%) were females, suggesting that the teacher gender gap was closing, given previous research evidence (Afful-Broni & Dampson, 2008). The Table further reveals that majority (54.6%) of the teachers were in the 31-40 years age bracket whilst a few of them (7.6%) were between 51-60 years. This result was indicative that majority of the teachers were in an active age bracket with a reasonable number of years to serve, further suggesting that when teachers were 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 was 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 primary 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 4.2.

Table 4.2. Effect of Teacher Demographic Characteristics on Their Autonomy

	Unstandardized Coefficients B	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
(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^2	.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 was 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 and 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 were other factors that account for 55.7% of teacher autonomy. The teachers' predicted autonomy was equal to 2.472 - .136 (Teaching Experience) -.098 (Age) +.348 (Gender), where teaching experience was measured as 1 = 0-5 years, 2 = 6-10 years, 3 = 11-15 years, 4 = 16-20 years, 5 = 21 and above years. Age was measured as 1 = 20-30 years, 2 = 31-40 years, 3 = 41-50 years 4 = 51-60 years, and gender was coded as 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 4.3. 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 was 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 was 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 the 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 primary school teachers in the Central Region of Ghana hold about their autonomy?

This research question intended to examine how primary 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 4.4. Perception Primary 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 was 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 teacher said:

> *"Though I am able to make some changes in the curriculum, I still feel enough pressure to strictly teach for 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).

4.1.3 RQ1: What is the level of autonomy among primary 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 4.5. 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 essential if teachers are to remain in their chosen profession. Many reasons have been quoted for teachers who are leaving the profession (Kremer & Hofman 1981). Understanding these reasons may give managers an insight

into defining those teachers that are more satisfied with their employment and their professional identity. This identification, in turn, could lead to work turnover. The overall mean which was 2.5, SD = .92 shows that the level of teacher autonomy was 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 were limited when it comes to making decisions about the content as well as other aspects of the school curriculum. It was, therefore, not surprising that the teachers felt they are being controlled too much. Instead, they preferred that policymakers 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 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 a 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 primary 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 was fairly high. However, the teachers' general autonomy was higher as compared to their curricular autonomy. The study further revealed that teachers' autonomy was significantly affected by gender, age and teaching experience. It was concluded that the teachers were 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. The results further imply that teachers may not be in the position to utilize the discretionary powers conferred on them through the centrally planned curriculum. In the short term, teachers may achieve the objectives of their instruction in the classroom. However, the aim of education may not be achieved in the long-term as students may be forced to consume whatever content produced by the teachers. Students are likely not be become creative and innovative enough as a direct consequence of the rigidity with which teachers implement the curriculum 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 empowering the primary 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 encourages the full exercise of autonomy irrespective of one's age or teaching experience. The major limitation of the study had to with the generalizability of the findings. The fact remains that the relatively defined sample from the Central Region of Ghana might not be large enough to permit the generalisation of the results to other regions in Ghana or to other countries in Africa. As such, the findings of the study are generalized to only the population of the study.

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