

## **Autonomy in Teachers of Family and Consumer Sciences: Factors Contributing to Educational Decision Making**

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*This exploratory study examined Family and Consumer Sciences (FACS) teachers' perceptions of autonomy and factors influencing such perceptions. Participants were 84 FACS teachers in Illinois. Findings included (1) higher scores in both general and curriculum autonomy were positively related to independent planning/teaching methods ( $p < .001$  and  $p < .05$ , respectively); (2) higher general autonomy scores were positively related to use of FACS resources ( $p = .05$ ); (3) higher curriculum autonomy scores were negatively related to the influence of people outside the immediate educational setting (e.g., parents) ( $p < .05$ ). Overall, independent planning/teaching methods and use of FACS resources facilitated teaching autonomy, while input from people outside the immediate educational setting was perceived as a deterrent to autonomy.*

*Keywords: curriculum decision making; family and consumer sciences; teaching autonomy; teaching methods; teaching resources*

Family and Consumer Sciences (FACS) teachers make complex decisions regarding curriculum development and implementation. For example, teachers make decisions with regard to the content that will be taught, activities in which students will engage, how student learning will be assessed, and classroom management (Burden & Byrd, 2007). It is the responsibility of teachers to make such educational decisions as well as to implement some decisions based on their own professional judgment (Danielson, 1996). It may be assumed, therefore, that the majority of teachers' work is carried out independently; that is, for the most part, teachers act autonomously with regard to both curriculum development and implementation.

Teacher autonomy may be defined as the extent to which a teacher makes independent educational decisions (Pearson & Hall, 1993). The notion of FACS teachers as being fully autonomous, however, is contradicted by what teachers sometimes say about their own practice. Over the past decade, anecdotal evidence has indicated that a number of factors have contributed to teachers' curriculum decisions, but it also suggested teachers' autonomy was limited in making such decisions. FACS teachers have stated, for instance, that "my principal wants me to teach" a particular topic or that "all of our FACS teachers planned this together and I must teach it on this specific day." They have made statements such as, "I planned my lessons to follow the chapters in the textbook." And, in more recent years, teachers have stated that "academic standards direct what I do" in FACS courses. Statements such as these raise an important question thus far unanswered in the literature: Do FACS teachers have autonomy in making educational decisions, and if so, what influences this autonomy?

The purpose of this exploratory study was to identify FACS teachers' perceptions of their teaching autonomy and the relationship of selected factors (i.e., people within the educational context, planning and teaching methods; textbooks and curriculum materials, use of educational standards, and use of assessment data) in making curriculum decisions. Nationwide, the impact

of FACS teachers' decision making is important-- such decisions have impacted over five million adolescents annually (Werhan & Way, 2007). The ability to "justify, plan and implement" curriculum is set forth as a standard in the National Standards for Teachers of FACS (National Association of Teacher Educators of Family and Consumer Sciences [NATEFACS], 2004, p.2). Within the profession, FACS professionals need to identify the competencies and assessment criteria related to this national standard and determine the role these components play in its implementation. In doing so, FACS teachers may further define the role of autonomy in achieving this standard. An examination of curriculum decision making as related to autonomy will contribute to this knowledge.

### **Review of Literature**

Autonomy is important to individuals both in their roles as FACS professionals and as teachers. As FACS professionals, Marjorie Brown stated "...we are able to reflect upon action... and then act professionally out of our own knowledgeable, considered judgment about what is good to do, what is appropriate to do under the circumstances" (Brown, 1980, pp. 31-32). According to Glatthorn (1987), if teaching is to be regarded as a profession, then teachers need to have some degree of independent decision making. In addition, teacher autonomy is a necessity as long as schools are organized into a "collection of separate classrooms, each with one teacher in command" (Glatthorn, 1987, p. 77). Based on these perspectives, teacher autonomy is an essential component of FACS education. Teachers, however, may receive mixed messages about the extent to which they really should be autonomous (Monson & Monson, 1993). Current research does not facilitate full understanding of FACS teachers' perceptions of autonomy, nor of the influencers on educational decision making related to curriculum planning and instruction.

While little is known about what influences the level of autonomy felt by teachers, much research has focused on the relationship between teachers' perceptions of autonomy and their job satisfaction. For example, White (1992) determined that an increase in teachers' perceptions of their decision making had a direct relationship to positive job satisfaction. Archbald and Porter (1994), however, found that teachers' control over curriculum decision making had no impact on job satisfaction. Similarly, Pearson and Moomaw (2005) found little connection between curriculum decision making and job satisfaction, but did find that greater job satisfaction was associated with a high degree of perceived empowerment and professionalism.

It has been noted that the perceptions of autonomy in educational decision making varies among teachers. Based on an analysis of U.S. Department of Education data, Forster and D'Andrea (2009, p.32) found that that 71% of public school teachers perceived a "great deal of control" in selecting teaching techniques. In contrast, a "great deal of control" was perceived by only 36% of public school teachers with regard to selecting subject matter content, and 32% in selecting textbooks and instructional material (Foster & D'Andrea, 2009, p. 32).

It is not entirely clear what influences teachers' autonomy in making educational decisions. Some potential areas of influence are the people within the educational setting and the organizational structure of the school itself (Glatthorn, 1997; Lindahl, 2008). For instance, if the principal has authoritative power and the school functions as a hierarchical organization, then teachers are compelled to follow curriculum directives. Conversely, if the principal supports a more collegial organizational structure with leadership that supports collaborative work, then curriculum development and implementation are more likely to be a collaborative effort (Glatthorn, 1997; Lindahl, 2008; Piercey, 2010).

Collaborative efforts have been reported in FACS education within schools, as well as at regional and state levels, as key components of the examination, development and implementation of curriculum (Lichty & Johnson, 2006; Mimbs, 2005; Montgomery, Brozovsky & Lichty, 1999; Montgomery & Way, 1997; Vail & Mandiloff, 1995). Collegial collaboration is also essential to the development of professional autonomy itself. “Professional autonomy is exercised in the context of a professional community that collaboratively develops a shared consensus of what constitutes appropriate and effective professional practice” (Hyslop-Margison, & Sears, 2010, p. 7).

It is not fully apparent in what ways other people, such as parents or students, impact teachers’ autonomy in educational decision making. Meaningful parent involvement is recognized as being important to student success (Christenson, 2010). In FACS education, Ndon and Brun (1998) also identified parent involvement as essential to enhancing student learning. In many school settings parents have multiple opportunities to interact with teachers through both informal methods (e.g., conversations within or outside of the school setting) or formal methods (e.g., parent-teacher conferences or curriculum committees) which both may ultimately impact teachers’ educational decisions (Wanat, 2010). Johnson (1990) and Pauley (1996) reported needs assessments which included responses from parents, students and other community members, with regard to what subject matter should be taught in FACS classrooms. Since teachers have daily contact with students, it is expected that students will directly influence teacher’s educational decisions on both a short- and long-term basis. Due to the nature of their work, teachers in close proximity to students are in the best position to respond to students’ needs, but can do so appropriately only if teacher autonomy is allowed (Glatthorn, 1987).

Other potential influencers of teachers’ autonomy and educational decision making are textbooks and curriculum materials. Historically, textbooks have directed ways in which teachers think about subject matter and ways to implement it in the classroom (Callison, 2003). Textbooks and workbooks often are viewed negatively when they become the only learning activities in which students engage. Teachers may rely too much on textbooks, workbooks and other pre-packaged curriculum materials when they have increased demands or responsibilities (Apple, 1993), but textbooks and related materials are still important. Teachers may use textbooks to help organize information for the students as well as for themselves (Fan & Kaeley, 2000; Schug, 1997). Ideally, teachers should examine textbooks and curriculum materials and select them in rational ways with regard to how and when such documents are used (House & Taylor, 2003; Roellke, 2003).

National education initiatives, such as *No Child Left Behind*, can ultimately reduce teacher autonomy (Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2010). Due to such initiatives, significant emphasis has been placed on the achievement of academic standards (e.g., math, science, reading) and the integration of such standards into non-academic areas (including FACS) (Pederson, 2007). National standards for middle and high school level FACS education, while voluntary, have provided further curriculum direction for some teachers (Faircloth, Smith & Hall, 2001; Smith, Hall & Jones, 2005; National Association of State Administrators for Family and Consumer Sciences, 2008).

Autonomy is an essential component to the profession of teaching (Glatthorn, 1987). It is important that FACS education teachers are autonomous in educational decision making (Brown, 1980). There appear to be numerous factors, however, which influence FACS teachers’ autonomy (Callison, 2003; Christenson, 2010; Pederson, 2007; Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2010).

Based on the body of knowledge about teacher autonomy, the concept of autonomy is an essential part of professionalism. Autonomy involves not only personal judgments, but also a continuous process of evaluation of professional ethics and standards. Whether FACS teachers perceive that internal and/or external constraints limit their level of autonomy has not been studied. This exploratory project was designed to assess these perceptions.

### **Method**

The purpose of this study was to examine Illinois FACS teachers' perceptions of autonomy and factors impacting such perceptions. Within the state of Illinois, there is no mandated state FACS curriculum or FACS standards for middle or secondary level students. School districts maintain local control over educational decisions. The level of FACS teacher autonomy, then, may vary from one district to another.

A survey questionnaire was mailed to a random sample of 200 FACS teachers in the Chicago suburbs. A follow-up post card reminder was sent after two weeks. The questionnaire included three sections: (1) a teaching autonomy scale (Pearson & Hall, 1993) (18 items), (2) factors influencing curriculum decisions (persons in the educational context, social structures used in planning and teaching, textbooks and curriculum materials, use of standards and assessment data), (28 items) and (3) teacher background and demographic variables (10 items).

The teaching autonomy scale included two subscales: general autonomy and curriculum autonomy (Pearson & Hall, 1993). General autonomy was defined as "classroom standards of conduct and personal on-the-job decision making." Curriculum autonomy was defined as the "selection of activities and material and instructional planning and sequencing" (Pearson & Hall, 1993, p. 175). Example items from the teaching autonomy scale included:

- What I teach in my class is determined for the most part by me.
- The content and skills taught in my class are those I select.
- In my situation I have little say over the content and skills that are selected for teaching.
- My job does not allow for much discretion on my part.

The possible responses were modified from Pearson and Hall's (1993) original survey (four-point scale ranging from "1-Definitely True" to "4- Definitely False") to seven-point Likert-type items (ranging from "1- Strongly Agree" to "7-Strongly Disagree"). In the final data analysis, some items were reverse coded so that attributes indicating greater autonomy received a higher score.

Items developed for this study to identify factors which influenced FACS teachers' autonomy included: To what extent have the following persons or groups influenced your planning and teaching? To what degree have the following curriculum materials influenced your planning and teaching? Seven-point Likert-type items also were used with possible response choices ranging from "1-Strong influence" to "7-No influence." Responses were recoded so that attributes indicating a greater influence received a high number. Teacher background and demographic information included grade levels taught, number of years teaching, age of the teacher, and school size.

In order to reduce the data to a smaller number of underlying dimensions, principal components factor analyses with varimax rotations were performed on the items making up each of the following sets of influencers of teachers' autonomy: people, methods, printed resources,

use of standards, and use of assessment data. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measures were at least .5 for all factor analyses, indicating satisfactory sampling adequacy for each. Bartlett's tests for sphericity for each of the factor analyses were significant at  $p < .01$ , indicating strong relationships among the variables. The factors produced for each of the influencer constructs were used as separate variables to determine their relationships to perceptions of general and curriculum autonomy.

## Results

Research findings are based on the data from returned useable surveys, representing a 42% ( $n = 84$ ) response rate. Almost 52% ( $n=44$ ) of the teachers were over the age of 50; all teachers were female. Respondents were well educated: 30% ( $n= 25$ ) held a BS degree; 70% ( $n = 59$ ) held an MS degree.

The number of years of teaching experience varied among respondents. Approximately 30% ( $n=25$ ) had taught 1- 9 years; 39% ( $n=32$ ) had taught 10-19 years, and 31% ( $n = 26$ ) had taught from 20-40 years. Over 92% ( $n= 76$ ) of the FACS teachers worked full-time. Approximately 29% ( $n=24$ ) of the teachers taught FACS at the middle school level (6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade), 70% ( $n=59$ ) taught at the high school level. Only one teacher taught at both middle and high school levels. Teachers worked in schools with varying sizes of student populations. Approximately 63% ( $n=53$ ) of the teachers worked in schools with a population of up to 1,999 students. The remaining 37% ( $n = 31$ ) of teachers worked in schools with a student population ranging from 2,000 students or more.

Possible scores on the general autonomy subscale could range from 12-84; scores for this sample ( $n = 81$ ) ranged from 52-84. The mean score (standard deviation) was 70.9(7.8), indicating high perceived levels of general autonomy. Curriculum autonomy subscale scores could range from 6-42, and for this sample, the range was 23-42. The mean score (SD) was 34.1(5.5), indicating that perceived curriculum autonomy was high overall.

Factor analysis of the items making up the influencer construct, people, produced three factors that together explained 69% of the variance in people as influencers. The factors were labeled, Middle Circle, Outer Circle, and Inner Circle. Factor 1, Middle Circle, consisted of principal, school curriculum coordinator, and department chair, and accounted for 28% of the variance. Factor 2, Outer Circle, was made up of teachers (other than FACS), community and school board members, and parents. This factor explained 27% of the variance. The third factor, Inner Circle, was made up of FACS teachers and school district curriculum coordinator, and explained 14% of the variance in people as influencers (See Table 1).

Table 1  
*Factor Analysis for People as Influencers*

| Items                                    | Factor Loadings |              |              |
|------------------------------------------|-----------------|--------------|--------------|
|                                          | Middle Circle   | Outer Circle | Inner Circle |
| Principal                                | .81             |              |              |
| School curriculum coordinator            | .80             |              |              |
| Department chair or coordinator          | .79             |              |              |
| Teachers in other academic subject areas |                 | .87          |              |
| Teachers in other career/technical areas |                 | .79          |              |
| Community members (other than parents)   |                 | .67          |              |
| School board members                     |                 | .61          |              |
| Parents                                  |                 | .51          |              |
| FACS teachers                            |                 |              | .83          |
| District curriculum coordinator          |                 |              | .67          |
| Eigenvalues                              | 4.42            | 1.32         | 1.12         |
| % Variance explained                     | 27.73           | 26.76        | 14.01        |
| Total % Variance explained = 68.49       |                 |              |              |

The factor analysis for items making up the construct of methods as influencers produced two separate factors that explained 88% of the variance in methods. The first factor, Individual Methods, was made up of individual teaching and individual planning, and accounted for 46% of the variance in methods. The second factor, Team Methods, was made up of team planning and team teaching, and explained 42% of the variance in methods as influencers. (See Table 2)

For the construct, printed resources as influencers, two factors emerged that together explained 67% of the variance in printed resources. Factor 1, FACS Resources, which accounted for 34% of the variance, comprised FACS curriculum/resource guides and FACS textbooks and materials. The second factor, Outside Resources, was made up of resource guides from other subjects and FCCLA or FHA-HERO resources. This factor explained 33% of the variance in printed resources. (See Table 3.)

Table 2  
*Factor Analysis for Methods as Influencers*

| Items                              | Factor Loadings    |              |
|------------------------------------|--------------------|--------------|
|                                    | Individual Methods | Team Methods |
| Individual teaching                | .96                |              |
| Individual planning                | .95                |              |
| Team planning                      |                    | .92          |
| Team teaching                      |                    | .92          |
| Eigenvalues                        | 1.83               | 1.69         |
| % Variance explained               | 45.58              | 42.50        |
| Total % Variance explained = 88.08 |                    |              |

Table 3  
*Factor Analysis for Printed Resources as Influencers*

| Items                                | Factor Loadings |                   |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------|-------------------|
|                                      | FACS Resources  | Outside Resources |
| FACS curriculum or resource guides   | .89             |                   |
| FACS textbooks and related materials | .75             |                   |
| Other curriculum or resource guides  |                 | .80               |
| FCCLA or FHA-HERO resources          |                 | .76               |
| Eigenvalues                          | 1.68            | 1.02              |
| % Variance explained                 | 34.03           | 33.40             |
| Total % Variance explained = 67.44   |                 |                   |

The factor analysis performed on the construct of standards as influencers produced two factors explaining 83% of the variance in standards. The first factor, FACS Standards, consisted of national, school district, and state FACS standards, and accounted for 48% of the variance in the construct. The second factor, Academic Standards, was made up of school and state academic standards. It explained 35% of the variance in standards as influencers. (See Table 4)

Table 4  
*Factor Analysis for Standards as Influencers*

| Items                              | Factor Loadings |                    |
|------------------------------------|-----------------|--------------------|
|                                    | FACS Standards  | Academic Standards |
| National FACS standards            | .90             |                    |
| School district FACS standards     | .87             |                    |
| Illinois FACS standards            | .87             |                    |
| School district academic standards |                 | .92                |
| Illinois academic standards        |                 | .86                |
| Eigenvalues                        | 3.12            | 1.06               |
| % Variance explained               | 48.63           | 34.75              |
| Total % Variance explained = 83.38 |                 |                    |

Factor analysis for the items making up the construct, assessment data influencers, produced two factors that together explained 72% of the variance. The first factor, External Assessment Data, consisted of school data, such as reading, writing, and math scores, and employment/labor statistics. This factor accounted for 38% of the variance in assessment influencers. The second factor, Internal Assessment Data, accounted for 34% of the variance, and was made up of FACS program assessment data and student assessment data. (See Table 5)

Table 5  
*Factor Analysis for Assessment Data as Influencers*

| Items                               | Factor Loadings |               |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------|---------------|
|                                     | Internal Data   | External Data |
| School data                         | .87             |               |
| Employment/labor data or statistics | .81             |               |
| FACS program assessment data        |                 | .88           |
| Student assessment data             |                 | .73           |
| Eigenvalues                         | 1.96            | .90           |
| % Variance explained                | 48.94           | 22.56         |
| Total % Variance explained = 71.50  |                 |               |

To explore relationships between each of the influencer factors and both general autonomy and curriculum autonomy of FACS teachers, Pearson correlations were performed. General autonomy was positively related to individual methods,  $r(79) = .39, p < .001$ , and FACS resources,  $r(77) = .22, p = .05$ . Curriculum autonomy was negatively related to outer circle influencers,  $r(68) = -.26, p < .05$ , and positively related to individual methods,  $r(80) = .27, p < .05$ . None of the other influencer factors were related to either general autonomy or curriculum autonomy.

### Discussion and Implications for Future Research

Overall, FACS teachers in the current study perceived themselves as autonomous in making educational decisions. Teacher autonomy was defined as consisting of general autonomy (e.g., classroom standards of behavior and on-the-job decision making) and curriculum autonomy (e.g., planning and implementing curriculum) (Pearson and Hall, 2003). Teachers who hold some degree of independent decision making (i.e., autonomy) are believed to be professionals who make justifiable and meaningful educational decisions (Brown, 1980, Glatthorn, 1987). In this study, teachers perceived themselves to be engaged in autonomous decision making, a finding that suggests that teachers view themselves as professionals.

FACS teachers' perceptions of autonomy were influenced by independent curriculum development and implementation. Significant relationships were found between higher autonomy scores (both general and curriculum autonomy) and individual planning and teaching methods. The ability to plan and teach independently further affirms that the FACS teachers in this study perceived themselves as professionals who engage in autonomous decision making. In this regard, the FACS teachers in this study, at least in part, meet the expectation to "justify, plan and implement" curriculum as set forth in the National Standards for Teachers of FACS (NATEFACS, 2004, p.2). It remains unclear, however, which underlying philosophical orientations were used by FACS teachers to justify their educational decisions.

It has become an expectation that teachers work together either in teams or collaborative groups (Danielson, 1996). In this study, there was no significant relationship between teachers' perceptions of their autonomy and team planning and teaching methods. It has been reported, however, that group and collaborative efforts support the examination and development of curriculum in FACS (e.g. Lichty & Johnson, 2006; Montgomery, Brozovsky & Lichty, 1999). It also has been noted that collegial collaboration is important to the development of autonomy

(Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2010), but based on the findings of the current study, the role of collaborative methods used to develop and implement FACS education in facilitating teachers' autonomy is still unclear.

FACS teachers' perceptions of autonomy also were influenced by textbooks and curriculum materials. Teachers with a higher score on the general autonomy scale were positively influenced by the use of FACS resources, such as textbooks and curriculum guides. This would suggest that such teachers are using FACS resources to guide their educational decision making, as has been found by Schug (1997) and Fan and Kaeley (2000) in other subject areas. It also suggests that teachers do not perceive that use of textbooks and other resources limit autonomous decision making.

The perception of autonomy of FACS teachers also was influenced by other people within the educational context. A significant negative relationship was found between teachers with greater autonomy and influences of other people (teachers in other subject areas, community members, and parents). For participants in this study, the influence of other people was viewed as limiting to teachers' autonomy. Researchers need to explore this finding further to determine why the impact of other people is perceived as a deterrent to teaching autonomy. If others, especially parents, are to be involved in the educational process in meaningful ways, then a balance must be struck between teachers' roles as autonomous educational decision makers and collaborative partners with constituents outside the immediate educational environment.

No significant relationship was found between FACS teachers' perceptions of autonomy in educational decision making and standards or assessment data. While it is believed that emphasis on academic standards and the integration of these standards into all subject areas can potentially reduce teacher autonomy (e.g. Pederson, 2007; Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2010) this was not indicated in the current study. In a societal context, it is expected that use of assessment data, such as those derived from standards-based assessment, will be at the foundation of educational decisions, yet this was also not found to be related to teachers' perceptions of autonomy. Further research needs to be conducted to explore ways that the use of FACS standards and assessment data can facilitate educational decisions.

The current study has shed light on FACS teachers' perceptions of autonomy and educational decision making. There remains, however, a gap in our understanding of the degree of autonomy that is appropriate. That is, what is the balance between autonomous decision-making and following mandatory directives? Many educational decisions are made through school, state or national policies or legislation, and therefore teachers cannot be fully autonomous. Instead, teachers need to be able to balance autonomy with demands from other entities at all levels of the educational process. FACS teachers need to be recognized as professionals who are capable of making autonomous decisions related to curriculum planning and implementation. Teacher educators need to continue to teach autonomous decision making for both FACS pre- and in-service teachers. In addition, further emphasis should be placed on establishing and maintaining professional relationships among people within and outside of the school setting.

Future research is needed to explore underlying philosophical orientations guiding educational decision making, and to better understand the interplay between teacher autonomy and collaboration with people outside the immediate educational environment. For example, researchers could examine reasons that disparity exists between the perceptions of FACS teachers and people outside the immediate school setting about the curriculum. Perhaps input from administrators and policy makers would shed more light on the topic of teacher autonomy

as a part of professionalism, and factors that constrain or enhance educational decision making. Future research also could include perspectives from a variety of sources, such as parents, community members, and school board members.

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