

■ ALBERT P'RAYAN

Child: I like my science teacher very much.

Mother: Why?

C: She makes the class very interesting.

M: Interesting? What does she do?

C: She tells stories, cracks jokes, gives us interesting projects...

M: Isn't she supposed to teach?

C: She does teach, but not in a mechanical way. She is a creative teacher. That's why I have scored good marks in the monthly test.

M: But, you met with an accident and you didn't write the test. How did you get marks for the test you didn't write?

C: Since I couldn't write the test with my hand, the teacher asked me whether I would like to answer the questions orally. I said yes. I did well and scored good marks.

M: Incredible. She must be a wonderful teacher.

I would say, "Wow, she must be an autonomous teacher." How many students in India are blessed with such wonderful teachers? How many educational institutions in India give teachers the freedom to teach and assess the performance of students creatively, and allow the teachers to make autonomous decisions?

A few weeks ago, I was invited to give a guest lecture on 'learner autonomy', as part of a faculty development programme at an institute of tertiary education. I highlighted the need for giving freedom to students to make decisions and discussed how educational institutions can help students develop their autonomy. After the session was over, a young teacher asked me whether teacher autonomy was a prerequisite for learner autonomy. A thought-provoking question!

What does it mean to be an autonomous teacher? Is teacher autonomy intrinsically linked to learner autonomy? Do teachers in India enjoy academic freedom? How important is professional autonomy?

Independence

Teacher autonomy refers to the professional independence of teachers in educational institutions. Teachers who are autonomous have the overall responsibility for the courses they teach. Having carried out the needs analysis of the learners, they decide what to teach, how to

teach, what teaching aids and materials to use in the classroom, what assignments to give, what and when to test, and how to assess the performance of students. Their academic freedom allows them to be more creative and, as a result, more effective in the classroom. But autonomy always goes with accountability and responsibilities. Autonomous teachers are proactive, reflective, creative, effective and productive. They prepare students for an intellectually challenging and socially responsible life. This implies that autonomous teachers

give importance to learner autonomy too.

Why is it necessary?

Why is it important to be an autonomous teacher? Teachers have an important role to play in the emotional and intellectual formation of their students. Technological revolutions can bring about changes in the way teachers teach, but their role can never be taken over by machines and gadgets. As the internationally best-selling author and well-known speaker Barbara Coloroso has rightly stated, "If kids come to us from strong, healthy, function-

ing families, it makes our job easier. If they do not come to us from strong, healthy, families, it makes our job more important." In the twenty-first century, many students do not come from strong, healthy, functioning families and so it makes teachers' job more important. They can play a significant role in their students' lives only if they are allowed to think creatively and exercise their freedom responsibly.

Teachers have always been held in high esteem and teaching has been considered a noble profession though, of late, many

members of the teaching community doubt whether it is still viewed as a noble profession. When teachers function like programmed robots, carry out mechanical activities, cease to be thinking professionals and lose their academic freedom, they will become uninteresting and irrelevant to the student community and teaching will cease to be a noble profession.

Are teachers empowered?

In many educational institutions, teachers are not allowed to be creative nor encouraged to be innovative. They are not decision-

makers but executors of the decisions made and dictated by "bosses" who are blind to reality. I had an interesting encounter with a teacher employed in a private school. The day when all Indian newspapers carried news reports and opinion articles on the right to privacy verdict pronounced by a nine-judge Supreme Court bench, the teacher and I discussed the historic judgment. When I asked her whether she would discuss the right to privacy issue with her students, she said, "We teachers are not allowed to discuss anything other

than subject-related matters in the classroom. We need to strictly follow our lesson plans..." "How about using a newspaper article on the topic as a reading comprehension passage in English class?" I asked her. "We have no freedom to do that. We can't go beyond the syllabus," she replied. Alas! This person is just a sample of millions of teachers whose wings of academic freedom have been clipped.

In India, there are many good educational institutions where students and teachers do enjoy academic freedom but this is just a drop in an ocean compared to the numerous schools which focus only on marks/grades and prepare students only for exams and not for life. Terms such as autonomy, creativity, innovation and professional development are not found in their lexicon.

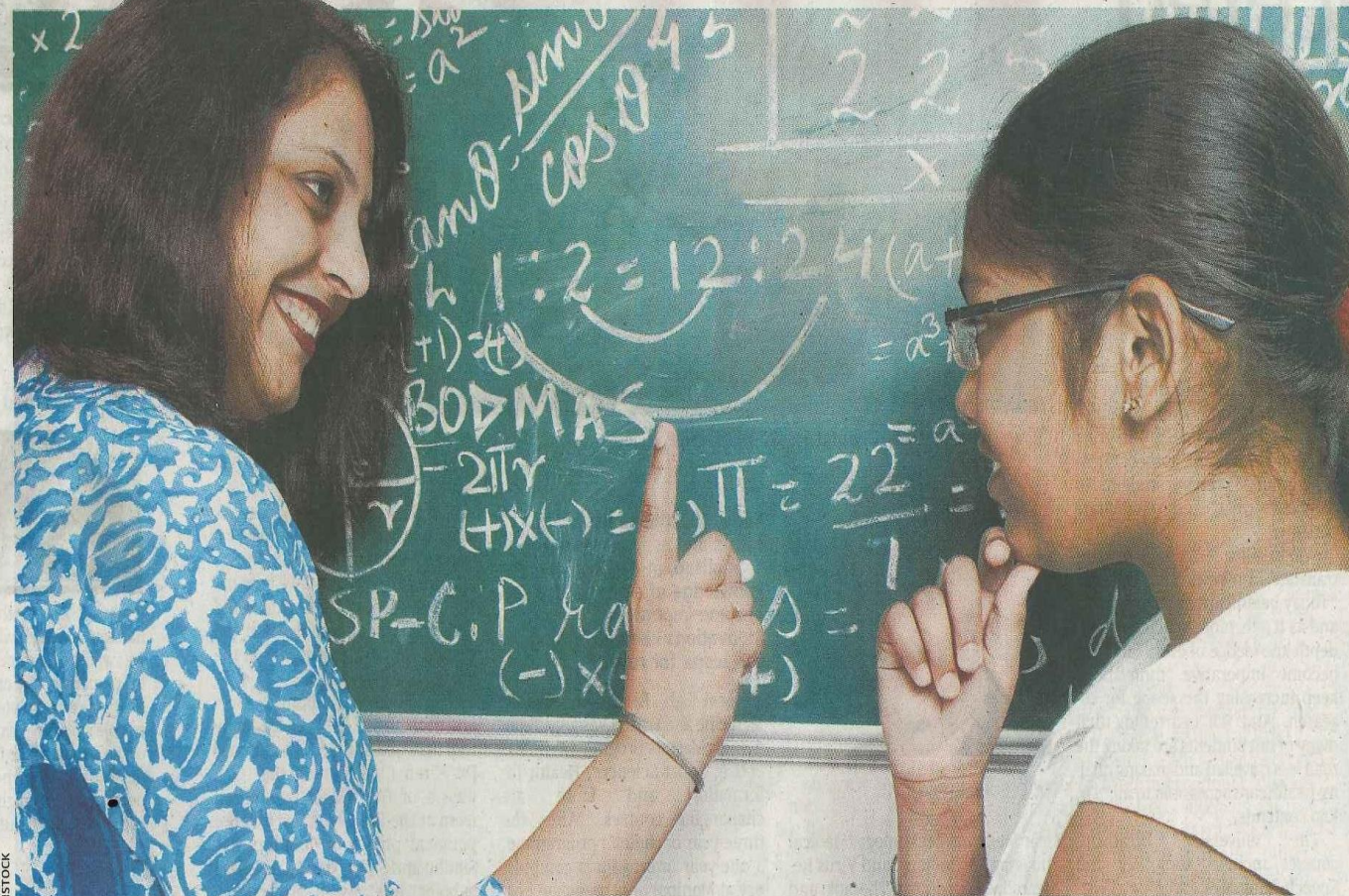
Innovation

To improve the quality of teaching, educational institutions should promote innovative teaching and create open learning environments. As teachers are key players in education, they should be given more freedom and greater responsibilities. If teachers are involved in decision-making processes, they are likely to be more enthusiastic about teaching and more involved in their professional development.

Our society needs proactive, creative, effective, productive and reflective teachers. These adjectives imply that only those who have a great deal of autonomy can become such teachers. Some might misuse the freedom given to them but autonomy combined with accountability and responsibilities will make the teacher stay on the right track.

Professional freedom is the key to professional development. Institutes of higher education that want their faculty to focus on their professional development should pave the way for professional freedom. Teacher autonomy can promote learner autonomy. Yes, teacher autonomy is intrinsically linked to learner autonomy. Only a teacher who is an independent thinker can make learners independent.

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At liberty: Promote innovative teaching and open learning environments.

Professional autonomy matters

The quality of education hinges on granting teachers more freedom. As we celebrate our teachers, we need to ask if they enjoy autonomy