

## Collective Autonomy and Agency – Andy Hargreaves

*An edited transcript of a conversation we had with Andy at the Beating Heart of Educational Transformation Middle Leadership prototype from last week.*

“So a traditional idea in any profession is autonomy and it's a part of being a professional.

Autonomy means you're not just following rules.

You're not just dealing with a standardised script.

That you have judgement, you have knowledge, you have expertise and drawing on evidence as well as experience.

It's your role really as professionals to have autonomy and to exercise autonomy with the kids you know best, your patients, when you're in medicine or with your clients, when you're in law.

So autonomy is one of the defining characteristics of being a professional.

And I would say, related to that, if people start to over prescribe things for you, whether that's a government department or whether that's a principal, then it is infringing on that autonomy in a very significant way.

For instance, because if you're over do explicit teaching, so everybody has to approach explicit teaching in exactly the same way with all the kids all the time, then then there's a fundamental threat to the sense of who you are as professionals.

So the first thing is that word autonomy.

The problem, historically, I think, and even now sometimes teachers see their autonomy as individual autonomy. It's, you know,

*I'm the teacher here, I know what I'm doing. You're the parent so stay out of this and you're another colleague - You can't really tell me what to do because I'm a professional.*

So there are whole norms of what, many years ago, a University of Berkeley Professor Judith Warren Little called non-interference. That there's a deep-seated norm that no teacher can walk into any other teacher's class and tell them how to teach or tell them what to do, or even pass judgement on whether they're teaching well or badly. For instance, small example, if they're being sarcastic with their students.

So the problem, if we overdo autonomy, it not only honours teachers' judgements as professionals on their expertise, but it also allows poor practice and inconsistent practice.

You know what happens:

- when the behavioural norms vary from one class to another,

- when one teacher grades quite differently from another teacher,
- when the primary schools treat assessment totally differently from the secondary schools.

We've learned over time that when there is this culture of individualism - Autonomy becomes individualism - It actually doesn't make practice any better because our teachers don't learn from other teachers. Sharing good practice is not enough. We need to challenge each other a little bit in in our practice as well.

And so we need this other thing called Collective alongside autonomy.

And we know from the literature on collaboration that, in general, when teachers collaborate, they get more support. They get better feedback. They get ideas. They expand their practice. They're more likely to take risks because it's the group taking risks. It's not the individual going out on a limb compared to everybody else.

People worry when you have the collective side that you'll lose your autonomy, but you don't.

You trade your autonomy.

It means you have a bit more autonomy from the bureaucracy so you don't have people telling you what to do all the time or leaning on you or narrowing the curriculum.

But the trade is you have less autonomy from each other so you have some kind of consistency, some kind of coherence, some kind of agreement on things like assessment or inclusion.

So collective autonomy respects professional judgement but, as increasingly we see in other professionals, it's collective professional judgement, not just idiosyncratic and individual judgement.

Also, the collaborating can't just be about sharing practice because you can share bad ideas as well as share good ideas. We need to challenge, question and push each other to be the best we can be to together."