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# Unpacking autonomy for empirical comparative investigation

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## ABSTRACT

Teacher autonomy has been a topic of growing interest over recent decades. However, what teacher autonomy means remains work in progress. Drawing from existing conceptualisations, which consider teacher autonomy as a multidimensional and context-dependent phenomenon this paper presents an analytical device applicable in international comparative studies. The conceptualisation is presented in the form of a matrix, which distinguishes different domains and levels of teacher autonomy. A sample of existing research is then utilised to demonstrate how the matrix can assist in cumulative knowledge building. The article demonstrates how the matrix can be applied, in particular, to empirical comparative research.

## KEYWORDS

Teacher autonomy; control; comparative research

## 1. Introduction

Reflecting wider national and global education trends, research into teacher autonomy has gained momentum over the past decade or so. The ways in which teacher autonomy (among other things) has been offered as a key ingredient in Finland's success in PISA (Sahlberg, 2011) and the teachers matter movement, which promotes the importance of the individual teacher on student performance (Hattie, 2011), are cases in point. Two international research reviews (Parker, 2015; Wilches, 2007) summarise studies that illustrate the positive impact teacher autonomy has on various aspects of teachers' work. These studies show that teachers' perceived autonomy is seen to correlate positively with, for example, perceived self-efficacy, work satisfaction, empowerment, and a positive work climate. On the other hand, teacher autonomy seems to correlate negatively with staff turnover and risk of burn out (Parker, 2015; Wilches, 2007).

Cribb's and Gewirtz's (2007) and Gewirtz's and Cribb's (2009) influential work in which they 'unpack autonomy and control in education' offers a sophisticated conceptualisation of the multidimensional nature of teacher autonomy, and has served as a starting point for our work. It proposes control and autonomy as dichotomously opposite categories: autonomy associated with positive connotations and control with negative connotations. Despite these and some other rigorous conceptualisation emerging in the field, we argue that Wilches' observation from over a decade ago remains relevant:

Yet, for a variety of reasons and despite its widespread use, the meaning of teacher autonomy and its implications for schooling and school stakeholders remain opaque. First of all, the lack

of correlation among theorists within and across subject areas has resulted in a notable inconsistency in the use of the concept [...]. Second, although teacher autonomy has been connected to a number of theories including professional development, teacher decision-making, teacher efficiency, and empowerment, this relationship still remains unclear [...]. (Wilches, 2007, p. 246)

Such lack of conceptual clarity as well as the multidimensional nature of teachers' work offer a starting point for our study. *In this article, building from existing conceptualisations that acknowledge teacher autonomy as a multidimensional phenomenon, we propose an analytical device, that, following Wilches' recommendation, brings existing conceptualisations together in the form of an analytical matrix, that can be applied in teacher autonomy studies.* Our suggestion is a product of an extensive empirical research project on the nature of teacher autonomy from a comparative perspective involving teachers from different national contexts, which provides us with the resources for robust conceptual development and empirical application (Paulsrud & Wermke, 2019; Salokangas & Wermke, 2020; Salokangas, Wermke, & Harvey, 2019, 2020; Wermke, Olason Rick, & Salokangas, 2019).

The article is structured as follows. Drawing on existing conceptualisations of teacher autonomy, we offer a definition of teacher autonomy presented in the form of an analytical matrix. The matrix stresses in particular the multidimensional nature of teacher autonomy and its dependence on the contexts in which it evolves. We then demonstrate how the matrix may be applied to organise existing research, and how different studies may relate to one another. We also demonstrate how the matrix can be utilised in empirical studies by showing how it was applied to a comparative qualitative interview study concerning German and Swedish teachers' autonomy.

## 2. Defining teachers' professional autonomy

The aim of this paper is conceptual, building from a body of existing conceptual work on teacher autonomy. Our work began with a literature search, using the databases of *EBSCO Education Source* and *Google Scholar*, which we triangulated with searches in *Scopus* and *Web of Science*. We conducted a systematic literature search in order to capture as many of the existing papers as possible. However, although we draw from a significant body of literature— mostly theoretical contributions to teacher autonomy debate— this is not an extensive research review of the literature such as Wilches (2007) and Parker (2015).

Our search was guided by the following definition. Relevant research on teacher autonomy is defined as research papers that in their *title, abstract or keywords* contain both of the words *teacher* and *autonomy* and related terms. Such terms are *teachers' decisionmaking, discretion, and freedom of teaching*. We did not include research on teacher professionalism more broadly where teacher autonomy (or synonyms) is not explicitly mentioned in the title, keywords or abstract. Therefore it is possible that we may not have found all existing work on teacher autonomy, since the topic is closely related to a body of work on teacher professionalism. Moreover, we did not include research on autonomy support by teachers, that is, research investigating teachers' activities to foster students' self-directed and self-constructing learning. The exclusion of *autonomy support* research literature illustrates that our interest is in teachers' professional autonomy, and more specifically, their professional role and practice. In other words, the focus is not on how teachers can work towards making

their students into autonomous individuals, which is what the *teacher autonomy support* literature emphasises.

Our search resulted in ca. 100 papers. We studied the theory discussed in these papers carefully in order to synthesise existing ideas, with an aim to build from these existing conceptualisations and develop a more comprehensive conceptualisation of teacher autonomy. Based on our reading we agree with Wilches (2007) and Parker (2015) in that the conceptual work concerning teacher autonomy is ongoing. Also, somewhat simplistic normative assumptions, which view teacher autonomy as positive and control as negative, are often associated with teacher autonomy research. This is a starting point for this article, which steers away from such presumptions and engages with the conceptual and empirical complexities associated with the phenomenon. However, when we delve into the conceptual references that various papers on teacher autonomy draw from, we see various interesting approaches to conceptualising teacher autonomy. In the following sections, we draw from a body of existing work that defines teacher autonomy as a context-dependent and multidimensional phenomenon, with a particular focus on Gewirtz's and Cribbs (2009) and Cribbs & Gewirtz's (2007) work.

### **2.1. Acknowledging the importance of context**

Schools are complex social systems in which multiple actors such as teachers, school management, students and parents operate in hierarchical and heterarchical structures and networks. In order to tackle questions concerning teacher autonomy we must acknowledge the social and structural complexity that surrounds teachers' work. Ballou (1998, p. 105) defines autonomy as 'the quality or state of being self-governing'. For her, autonomy is the capacity of an agent to determine their own actions through independent choice within a system of principles and laws to which the agent is dedicated.

Indeed, if we consider teachers work at a local level, we observe that teachers working in different schools operate under different control regimes, which inevitably has implications on teacher autonomy. In addition to school level, local and national level control also influences and steers teachers' work. Mølstad's (2015) and Mølstad and Mausethagen's (2015) studies, which involved interviewing different actors, i.e. administrators, principals and teachers, at different levels in the Norwegian and Finnish school systems, demonstrate this and stress the importance of remaining sensitive to the layered contexts in which teachers are embedded. Comparative work focussing on Finnish and Canadian teachers (Paradis, Lutovac, Jokikokko, & Kaasila, 2019, 2018) points to similar dynamic. These studies show how nation-specific and local (i.e. municipal) steering traditions shape teachers' autonomy, and pinpoint the interrelatedness of various actors at various levels in a school system as a condition for understanding teacher autonomy.

This leads us to Frostenson's (2015) work concerning the multidimensional nature of teachers' work. He puts forward three dimensions of autonomy: a *professional dimension*, which refers to autonomy of teachers as a professional group; a *faculty or staff dimension*, which emphasises the autonomy of staff at school level, including the principal and the whole teaching staff; and finally, an *individual dimension*, which refers to the autonomy that the individual teacher has. All dimensions can differ and must therefore be discussed separately. Frostenson's (2015) sophisticated distinction is useful as it renders visible the fragmentation of teaching professions. Examples of studies examining teacher autonomy

at professional level are for example Wills' and Sandholtz's (2009) study on pressures the profession faces under increased accountability measures and Helgøy and Homme's (2007) comparative work on changes in the nature of the profession in Norway and Sweden. The staff dimensions of teacher autonomy has been studied by, for example, Ingersoll (1996) with a focus on school-level practices and teachers collective decision-making. Finally the individual dimension has been studied by, for example, Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2014) from a psychological perspective.

Furthermore, Wermke and Forsberg (2017) have presented a two-differential understanding of autonomy from a governance perspective, including an *institutional dimension*, connoting the collective autonomy of an occupation to have and sustain certain criteria: a strong boundary, academic credentials, a self-governing professional body, or a code of ethics. Secondly, there is a *service dimension*, connoting the autonomy of both the individual teacher practice in the classroom and also the practice of the school. While the former approaches the phenomenon from a practical perspective, referring to different levels in which teachers' autonomy can be shaped, the latter takes a governance perspective, investigating how the state governs public schooling by distributing autonomy to teachers in different ways.

Raaen (2011) employs Foucault's understanding of frankness (*parrhesia*) and discusses how freely teachers can actually operate as professionals in a mass schooling system. Here, autonomy is seen as freedom in decision-making in relation to the function of the professional role and the structure in which they act: 'A well-functioning and independently-acting professional will typically accommodate to an institutional setting, and act as expected in that setting. External control of how professionals use their time at work contributes to the regulation of their activities' (Raaen, 2011, p. 628). Drawing on Foucault, however, these professionals act only *as if* they were free. 'Individuals have made the society's disciplinary techniques and ruling ways of thinking very much their own and, by doing so, have come to believe and behave *as if* they were free and autonomous' (Foucault, 1986 quoted in Raaen, 2011, p. 628). In other words, the autonomy of individuals is only *perceived* autonomy. This is why, we argue, that a clear distinction between the concept of teacher autonomy and teacher empowerment is needed. Where autonomy refers to teacher agency and its structural framing, empowerment refers to a process aiming to increase teachers' personal or professional power (Bogler, 2005). Also drawing on Foucault, Lawson (2004) further illuminates the concept of teacher empowerment, not to be confused with teacher autonomy. Teacher empowerment often refers to, according to Lawson, handing over responsibilities from the government to teachers. However, Lawson argues that empowerment discourse leads to a system of self-governance by individuals, which from a Foucauldian perspective can be seen as a system of discipline. Finally, our work relates to teacher agency. From our perspective, teacher autonomy is understood as something that is actively exercised, rather than passively received. This definition is closely related to Priestley's, Robinson's, and Biesta's (2015) understanding of the concept teacher agency, which also includes a view of the concept as involving the capacity of formulating possibilities for action and the exercise of choice. In other words, autonomy allows us to understand teachers' professional work in different contexts, whereas empowerment refers to activities that are needed to support teachers to achieve a state of autonomy.

## 2.2. Cribb and Gewirtz's contribution to teacher autonomy research

As mentioned earlier, teachers' work is complex, not only because it is embedded in varied contexts but also because the tasks teachers are involved in serve various purposes. Therefore, in order to gain sharper insights into the phenomenon at hand, we must acknowledge the multidimensional nature of teachers' work. Cribb's and Gewirtz's conceptual work (2007, 2009) offers a helpful starting point as it emphasises the multidimensional nature of agency autonomy. In what follows we use their work as a foundation from which we develop our conceptualisation of teacher autonomy as a multidimensional phenomenon. First of all, their work is fundamental in the way it states the importance of exploring the different dimensions of both agency autonomy and agency control. Our conceptualisation draws directly from this aspect of their work, as we also argue that in order to understand the nuances of teacher autonomy it is paramount to explore not only the areas in which teachers may exercise autonomy but also the ways in which, by whom and how their autonomy is controlled. How we utilise this distinction will be explained later (in section 3) in more detail as we demonstrate the matrix.

Drawing further on their conceptualisation Cribb and Gewirtz (2007) and Gewirtz and Cribb (2009) suggest that in order to understand the phenomenon of autonomy we should pay attention to the locus of autonomy and control: as in who in a school is autonomous, and who may exercise control. For teacher autonomy research the *loci* is the teacher (individual or group) but, as discussed earlier in relation to the multiple contexts surrounding teachers' work, the *loci* of control can be a number of sources at local and national level (school management, peers, parents, local governance, government legislation, etc.). Secondly, they highlight the importance of identifying the *domains* of autonomy and control referring to matters over which the agent may be autonomous or controlled. This is an important point, as empirical research concerning teachers' work is often framed around pedagogical or educational practice involving, for example, teaching, planning, assessment and curricular work. This can be found in earlier research: for example, Pearson and colleagues (e.g. Pearson & Moomaw, 2006) have produced and validated an item battery (*Teacher Autonomy Scale, TAS*) which was developed to measure teachers' perceived working autonomy. They suggest a two-dimensional construct of teacher autonomy, in which autonomy is understood as teachers' authority over *a) curriculum questions concerning the freedom to choose content and goals*, and *b) teaching in general, concerning methods and time management in the classroom*.

The same approach guides the work of Friedman (1999), although his study, which is based on Israeli teachers, begins to pose questions concerning organisational autonomy. Indeed, although educational issues are at the heart of teachers' work, their practice also encompasses other issues, which adds to the conceptual complexity of the phenomenon. Ingersoll's work (1996, 2003) which focuses on American teachers' autonomy and control demonstrates the ways in which, in addition to the educational domain, teachers' work encompasses also a strong social domain. This refers to the variety of social functions associated with teachers' work, such as grouping of students or disciplinary actions that are not pedagogical or educational by nature but rather serve social purposes. Wilches' review (2007), as well as work on school autonomy (for example, Lubienski, 2003; Salokangas & Ainscow, 2017), also acknowledges the different domains of teachers work, reminding us about the administrative work taking place in schools. Indeed,

teachers may be involved in administrative work related to school functioning, such as time-tabling or allocation of resources. Furthermore, teachers may be involved in developmental work involving, for example, strategic planning of the future directions of the school and their own professional development etc. (Salokangas et al., 2019). The extent to which teachers are autonomous and/or controlled in different domains of their work raises fundamental questions for teacher autonomy studies (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2009).

Gewirtz and Cribb (2009) emphasise also the importance of identifying *modes* of autonomy and control, referring to the ways in which autonomy and control may be exercised. This resonates again with Ingersoll's (1996) work, as he demonstrated how teachers act in schools in various ways: for example, by being autonomous in routine questions, but not necessarily in strategic questions. Therefore, Ingersoll's (2003) and our own empirical work (Salokangas & Wermke, 2020; Wermke et al., 2019) encourages us to propose that it is important for empirical studies to explicitly query from teachers what issues they feel to be important for their profession/practice, and the extent to which they may contribute to those decisions. Teachers may be subject to varying modes of control – for example, direct interventions such as inspection practices – by school management or national actors, or formal policy can be seen as different types of control or, as Helgøy and Homme (2007) put it, forms of input controls (such as targeting or resources) or output controls (performance measurement, ranking, league tables).

Acknowledging the different dimensions of teachers' work helps us to observe how teachers' professional autonomy is not a monolithic on/off phenomenon but rather something dynamic by nature. Research on school autonomy (Salokangas & Ainscow, 2017) has already demonstrated how school-level autonomy may change over time due to, for example, changes in local and national administration. Although little is known about the dynamic nature of teacher autonomy, it is not immune to such changes either. Reasons stemming from within the profession (professional bodies and organisations, teaching unions, etc.) may also drive changes that have implications for teacher autonomy. Further empirical research concerning the dynamic nature of teacher autonomy is warranted and, in such investigations, the conceptual tools put forward in this article will assist in engaging with nuances.

### 3. Towards a conceptual model of teacher autonomy

Drawing on the above-mentioned considerations of teachers' professional autonomy, in this section we make conceptual suggestions about the ways in which the work already conducted could inform future work in the area. More specifically, by drawing from existing conceptualisations and developing them further, we present a matrix, which offers an analytical tool for future studies in the field. Then we demonstrate how the matrix can be utilised when reading and organising existing literature in the field, as well as a tool that can be utilised in data analysis. Drawing on the literature presented, we argue that teacher autonomy is multidimensional and context dependent by nature. Indeed, not every aspect discussed here should be, or even could be, a focus of all teacher autonomy studies, but rather, we suggest that, for a better understanding of the phenomenon, it is important for researchers working in the area to be knowledgeable of the multidimensional nature of the concept, and in their studies to show an awareness of the different domains of teachers' work.

Drawing from conceptual work that acknowledges different dimensions of teacher autonomy, we distinguish teacher autonomy along three horizontal dimensions:

*classroom, school, and profession.* (1) With the *classroom dimension*, we refer to the scope of action teachers have in their classroom work. Studies with such a focus examine the *micro context* in which a teacher operates and the scope of action (s)he has as an individual professional. This relates to Frostenson's (2015) conception of teachers' individual autonomy and Wermke's & Forsberg's (2017) idea of service autonomy. *Examples of such studies would include, for example, teacher's choice of taught content and methods.*

(2) The second dimension is the school as the arena in which teacher autonomy is formed. Frostenson (2015) refers to this as the staff or faculty dimension, while we call it the *school dimension*. Such studies focus on the local contexts within which teachers operate and tend to see schools as complicated social systems in which multiple actors, i.e. not only teachers, operate in different roles, and in which one's autonomy may foster or inhibit the autonomy of others. Research on teacher cooperation and collegiality (see overview by Kelchtermans, 2006) as well as studies focusing on teachers' relations with parents are an example. Here, we warn against confusing teacher autonomy with local autonomy, or school autonomy, associated with, for example, the Swedish *Friskola* movement, and the English *Academy* movement, as the latter does not automatically equip teachers with increased autonomy (Salokangas & Ainscow, 2017; Salokangas & Chapman, 2014).

(3) Finally, there is a *professional dimension* of teacher autonomy – as proposed by Frostenson (2015), referring to the overall group of teachers. Autonomy is discussed as an asset of the teaching profession in relation to others, with a reference to teachers' academic knowledge base, status, education, and so forth. How teachers relate to other actors in the school system, such as textbook publishers, unions, school inspectorates and so forth, are central issues.

This horizontal dimension is complemented by a *vertical dimension*, which refers to different domains in which teachers operate. We propose four different domains particularly in relation to the work of Cribb and Gewirtz (2007), Wilches (2007), Ingersoll (2003), and Friedman (1999), as well as the classic study by Rosenholtz (1989) concerning the teachers' workplace. Our definition of the domains as presented below might be partly disputable and there may be overlap between different categories. However, our grid points first of all to the multidimensionality of teacher autonomy, and the discriminatory power of the domains must be investigated in further empirical research. Furthermore, as we present later in section 3.2. our definition was validated by a group of experienced teachers from four different countries as relevant to their country contexts.

(a) Firstly, by *educational domain* we refer to matters related to activities and responsibilities related to teaching and learning, including but not limited to *planning, instruction/delivery* and *assessment/evaluation*.

(b) From a sociological point of view, education and schools more specifically play a crucial role in the socialisation of students. We call this the *social domain*. Examples of such processes would include, for example, *grouping students*, either randomly or based on their gender, ability or developmental stage. Another example of socialisation would be *disciplining of students*, and the extent to which teachers contribute in the actual act of disciplining, as well as in developing *school-level discipline policies*. A third example would be the treatment of *students with special needs*.

(c) *Developmental domain* refers to decisions that relate to identifying and steering the school towards a 'vision' or a plan of action. The concerns regarding the extent to which teachers are involved in developing the school, and in steering the direction of the school



in matters such as: professional *development* of staff, development of overall school subject specialisation, or other strategic functions serve as examples.

(d) Finally, by *administrative domain*, we refer to the administrative work taking place in schools that facilitates learning and other possible activities, distinguishing the educational and administrative duties of teachers. Decision-making concerning, for example, *timetabling*, use of *resources* or *teachers' pay* or *work* or *office space* could be examples of administrative functions teachers may or may not be involved in.

Our matrix contains 12 different cells (see [Figure 1](#)), which enable the analysis of data on teacher autonomy. The matrix is indeed analytical by nature. The borders of the cells might not be straightforward in the actual practice of teachers, and the cells might split processes that span across different dimensions of teacher autonomy. For example, teachers' involvement (or lack thereof) in devising school-level policies, may have administrative, educational, social or developmental functions. This is precisely why we argue that the matrix is applicable, as it helps to separate and analyse the conflated phenomenon of autonomy and show relationships between different dimensions.

We argue that analysing teacher autonomy with the matrix helps to make various patterns of autonomy visible. For example, teachers might have or experience a particular quality or quantity of autonomy. Their autonomy can be categorised by applying the matrix to particular domains of teachers' work (*educational, administrative, social, developmental*) and in relation to different levels (*classroom, the school, the teaching profession*). Regarding the nature or quantity of the decisions that are possible, categories such as *strategic* or *routine* or *extended* or *restricted* (Salokangas et al., 2019; Wermke & Forsberg, 2017; Wermke

Domain  Level	<b>Education (a)</b>  <i>(lesson planning, delivery and evaluation)</i>	<b>Social (b)</b>  <i>(discipline policies, tracking, special needs)</i>	<b>Development (c)</b>  <i>(formal professional development)</i>	<b>Administration (d)</b>  <i>(scheduling, timely and financial resources)</i>
<b>Classroom (1)</b>  <i>(relations to students and teaching content)</i>				
<b>School (2)</b>  <i>(relations to principals, colleagues, parents)</i>	Teacher perceived autonomy/autonomy in significant domains of their profession and regarding at different levels Context variance (schools, municipalities, countries)			
<b>Profession (3)</b>  <i>(relations to the state, and other actors in school system and society)</i>				

**Figure 1.** Teacher autonomy as multidimensional construct.

et al., 2019) can be used. The device can also be used to compare different configurations of how teachers in various contexts experience professional decision-making and control, in the sense of Ingersoll (2003). Teachers may be asked in which of the dimensions they have individual, collegial or professional discretion or which other actors in the school system have power to make significant decisions in different dimensions. As such, the matrix helps to reveal multiple possible configurations. For example, autonomy in the classroom, both social and educational, might present a greater challenge for teachers in one context than developmental and administrative autonomy. Furthermore, these dimensions are related to different school system levels. Teachers in some contexts might have or experience autonomy in certain domains in their classroom, but in the school-level work their autonomy may be restricted. Or the teaching profession's autonomy in one context is extended, but both in schools and in classrooms is restricted. In another context, teachers as a professional group may not experience autonomy due to the influence of different actors in the school system, but at the school level, individual teachers have extended autonomy. The device helps all of these examples to become visible.

### ***3.1. Teacher autonomy as a multidimensional construct: approaches taken in existing research***

We do not suggest that research on teachers' professional autonomy should always investigate all the (many) aspects of autonomy but rather that it should be aware of the complex nature of the phenomenon. We argue further, that this matrix can contribute to a cumulative knowledge-building, by enabling us to organise and analyse the (empirical) findings of studies on the phenomenon in different contexts.

In order to demonstrate this, in this section we use our device to organise a small sample of papers on teacher autonomy. These papers were chosen as examples as they have the greatest bibliometric impact in our corpus. We used the citation-tracking function of the Scopus database, i.e. a function that shows how often an individual paper is cited. The purpose of this exercise is only to demonstrate the applicability of our device. Including only the most cited sources in international research, prominently focussing on teacher autonomy as a phenomenon, will serve this purpose. In other words, our aim is not to cover the field in the form of a literature review, but rather present how the device can be employed for practical research. Drawing on different international studies on the phenomenon of autonomy and organising these papers in our matrix contributes to a meta-analytical understanding of teacher autonomy's multidimensional character. Since we only aim to exemplify the matrix' usability, we refer to the research at a certain point in time. The research landscape will indeed change as time passes (Table 1).

The first paper in the citation ranking, by Wills and Sandholtz (2009), drawing on US data, emphasises the notion that teacher autonomy is jeopardised in the era of accountability and standards-based testing, and thereby the quality of teaching is also jeopardised. The paper casts light on professional issues of teacher autonomy at the very core of teaching, in classroom practice. The authors argue that autonomy is subtly constrained by intensification of administrative workload with direct impact on the educational work, both by back-wash effects in instruction and the time constraints of instructional planning. Consequently, this study contributes to our understanding of the relationship between administrative workload and the professional autonomy of teachers.

**Table 1.** Five papers on teacher autonomy with the most citations in Scopus (status August 2018).

Paper	Citations in Scopus' journals
Wills, J. S., & Sandholtz, J. H. (2009). Constrained Professionalism: Dilemmas of Teaching in the Face of Test-Based Accountability. <i>Teachers College Record</i> , 111(4), 1065–1114	53
Skaalvik, E. M., & Skaalvik, S. (2014). Teacher self-efficacy and perceived autonomy: Relation with teacher engagement, job satisfaction and emotional exhaustion. <i>Psychological Reports</i> , 114(1)	43
Ingersoll, R. M. (1996). Teachers' Decision-Making Power and School Conflict. <i>Sociology of Education</i> , 69(2), 159–176	43
Helgøy, I., & Homme, A. (2007). Towards a New Professionalism in School? A Comparative Study of Teacher Autonomy in Norway and Sweden. <i>European Educational Research Journal</i> , 6(3)	33
Pearson, L. C., & Moomaw, W. (2006). Continuing Validation of the Teaching Autonomy Scale. <i>Journal of Educational Research</i> , 100(1), 44–51.	19

The second paper shows that perceived autonomy is a reasonably good predictor of well-being and engagement at work. The paper investigates the relationship between self-efficacy, motivational factors, job satisfaction and emotional exhaustion, and teachers' autonomy (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014). The paper draws on findings from Norwegian teachers, but its international prominence shows that scholars from other national contexts have considered the data useful. Employing our matrix, it can be argued that the authors contribute to research on teacher autonomy at classroom level by focussing on individual teachers' perceived self-efficacy: that is, on the extent or strength of teachers' belief in their own ability to complete the task of instruction, and commitment to their job. The emphasis is on educational work with students at the classroom level, as the discussion focuses on teaching methods and practices etc.

The paper by Ingersoll (1996) focuses on processes of control within American schools that operate under different forms of leadership. Ingersoll's main findings, as described earlier, distinguish between different domains of autonomy in teachers' professional day-to-day life: (a) the collective influence over aspects of school policy, here meaning codes of conduct in the social life of schools, and (b) the actual classroom work. Consequently, two different aspects of teacher autonomy over social matters, and how they relate to each other, are in focus. The paper also shows how different forms of leadership in different schools shape teacher autonomy.

The fourth piece in our list is a paper by Helgøy and Homme (2007), which compares Swedish and Norwegian educational reform in relation to teacher autonomy. This paper helps us to understand teachers' educational and administrative autonomy (such as salary questions) as issues which project consequences at different levels. The authors pinpoint professional cultures of individualism and collectivism, which become visible at the school level and as assets of a national teaching profession, but also have a significant impact on teachers' educational classroom autonomy.

Finally, the last paper by Pearson and Moomaw (2006), drawing on US data, contributes to the field by presenting empirical material on the relationship between teacher autonomy and the well-being of teachers. As described earlier, a two-dimensional scale is proposed (curriculum and general teacher autonomy), both of which measure an individual teacher's autonomy in classroom practice, in terms of choice of content, methods and teaching material. Here, autonomy is seen to correlate positively with motivation and satisfaction, and negatively with

<i>Domain</i>	<b>Education (a)</b>	<b>Social (b)</b>	<b>Development (c)</b>	<b>Administration (d)</b>
<i>Level</i>	<i>(lesson planning, delivery and evaluation)</i>	<i>(discipline policies, tracking, special needs)</i>	<i>(formal professional development)</i>	<i>(scheduling, timely and financial resources)</i>
<b>Classroom (1)</b> <i>(relations to students and teaching content)</i>	<i>Ingersoll 1996</i> <i>Pearson&amp;Moomaw 2006</i> <i>Skaalvik&amp;Skaalvik 2014</i>			
<b>School (2)</b> <i>(relations to principals, colleagues, parents)</i>		<i>Ingersoll 1996</i>		<i>Helgøy &amp; Homme 2007</i>
<b>Profession (3)</b> <i>(relations to the state, and other actors in school system and society)</i>	<i>Wills &amp; Sandholtz 2009</i>			<i>Wills &amp; Sandholtz 2009</i>  <i>Helgøy &amp; Homme 2007</i>

**Figure 2.** Application of the teacher autonomy device to the five most cited papers focusing on teacher autonomy.

stress (i.e. traits on the individual level). However, the authors also propose an aspect of the autonomy given to teachers at professional level, which has a significant impact in this respect.

In [Figure 2](#) these five studies focussing on different dimensions of teacher autonomy are located in the matrix, in order to demonstrate how they contribute to the field.

In conclusion, this very brief analysis of a small sample of empirical studies shows that by employing the matrix systematically, we can organise research findings like pieces of a puzzle and contribute to our understanding of teacher autonomy, and identify gaps in research. For example, our small exemplary sample demonstrates that educational autonomy is a key theme for the most cited papers. The extent to which this reflects the field of studies in general would be interesting. Furthermore the extent to which teacher autonomy is treated as an individual, staff or school level phenomenon in the field would provide valuable insights to cumulative knowledge building. All of this poses questions for future research.

### **3.2. Application of the multidimensional model in teacher autonomy research**

In terms of empirical application, we explain here how engagement with the matrix at different stages of our empirical study enhanced sense-making of the topic. This paper draws from a large-scale international study focusing on teacher autonomy in four countries (Germany, Sweden, Finland and Ireland). Altogether 104 lower secondary level

teachers were interviewed, individually or in groups, and the researchers spent two to three weeks in schools in all four countries observing teachers' work. Furthermore, an expert group of two to five teachers and teacher educators per country contributed at various stages of the project in the conceptual and empirical sense-making.

The matrix became an important tool for us at two stages of the study. Firstly, when making sense with the expert teacher group of the somewhat differing nature of teachers' work in these four countries; and secondly, during data analysis. To begin with the former, the expert group met at four workshops, each two days long. Involvement of the expert group with members from all participating countries followed recommendations by Broadfoot, Osborn, Gilly, and Bucher (1993) on how to conduct cross-national studies, as the group helped us to interrogate and address linguistic and conceptual challenges posed by our international comparative approach. In particular, the expert group meetings helped us to ensure that our conceptualisation, the matrix, was relevant and valid within the various national contexts. The matrix was discussed in two different workshops with the expert teachers, the process in which the matrix reached its current form. Of the particular features, the levels (individual, staff, and professional) and domains (educational, social, administrative, and developmental), were validated by the international expert teacher group without any serious critique. Where the discussions became heated was in relation to what qualifies as, for example, social rather than pedagogical, or administrative.

Teachers from different country contexts had somewhat different views concerning how teachers' decisions should be categorised. For example, extended conversation took place around the question of whether teachers' decisions concerning students' special needs qualify as educational, or social. Our sense-making process with the expert group teachers is explained in more detail elsewhere (Salokangas & Wermke, 2020) but it is worthwhile to note that after a rigorous process the matrix as present in this article was validated by teachers, experts from four different countries as relevant and comprehensive for teachers working within their country contexts.

Where the matrix also became useful was in the analysis of findings. As an example here we demonstrate how it helped us to analyse 15 German and 10 Swedish teacher interviews as presented in earlier publications (Wermke et al., 2019, other findings from our comparisons are published in Salokangas et al., 2019; Salokangas & Wermke, 2020; Salokangas et al., 2020). Following Ingersoll's (2003) suggestion, we asked teachers who, in their view, make the most important decision in the different dimensions of their work. We also asked them who they think controls their work. For the sake of illustration, one interesting citation looked like this:

A great deal of the responsibility (regarding social questions) is on the teacher teams but also on the collegium, where you agree on the rules, how to maintain them and what the control function is [...]. (Swedish teacher)

Discussions with German teachers typically looked like this:

Iris: And then there is also the syllabi developed in our school (school curriculum), which means a lot of control, for example, in the subject German, which we both teach, the syllabi expect so many subjects to be taught, that it is actually impossible to manage, at least if you have any ambition of being thorough.

Maike: Of course.

Iris: ... you are, however, not allowed to say this. Otherwise you get in trouble.

I: With whom?

Iris: With the head of the subject department.

I: So, the head of the subject department is an institution of control?

Maïke: At this school it might differ between different subjects.

Employing our device, German and Swedish teachers' perceived autonomy can be understood in the following way: teachers interviewed in Germany and Sweden value autonomy in various domains and dimensions differently, despite many similarities. In instruction, i.e. educational autonomy domain, they perceive themselves to be very autonomous, in particular in relation to choices of content and method. Autonomous work in the classroom arena is also seen as the core of the teaching profession. Overall, German teachers perceive themselves to be significantly involved in more areas of their work, and they refer much more to decisions which are to be made, whereas their Swedish colleagues are more concerned about control.

In both the German and the Swedish cases, the classroom can be seen as a sacred space for teachers' decision-making and the core of their profession (Figures 3 and 5). Parents are associated with a significant control function in instances such as grades and behavioural

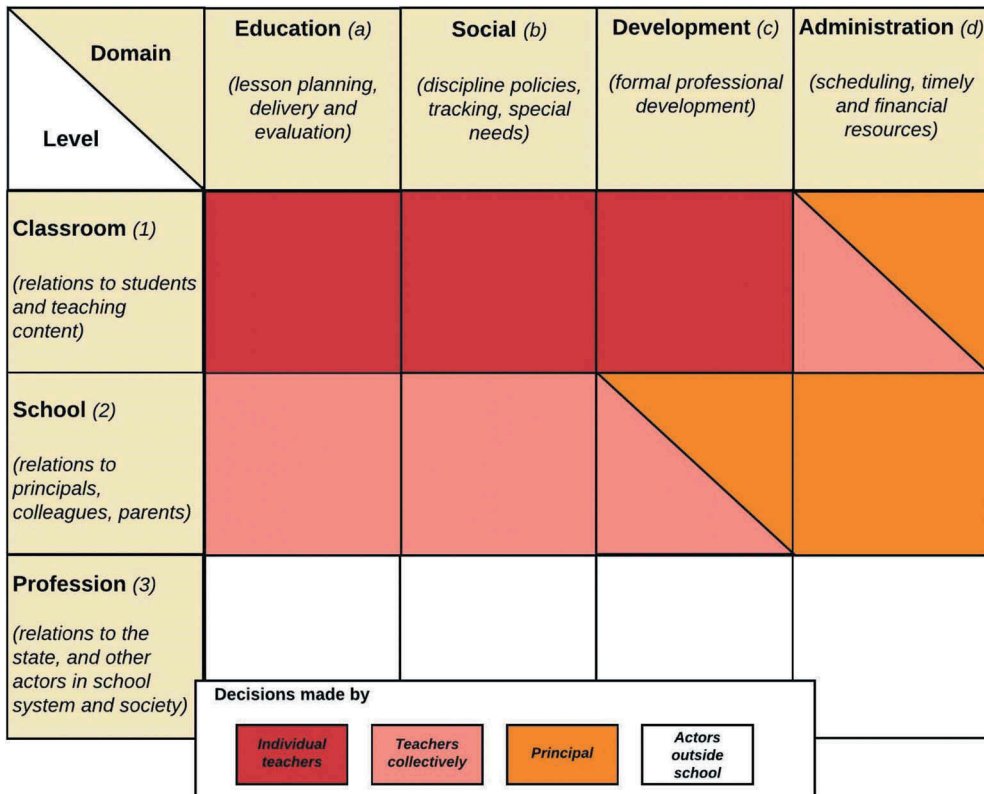


Figure 3. German teachers' perceptions of who makes decisions in which dimension.

patterns by the teachers in both countries, but there are school-related differences, in particular in relation to the socio-demographic background of the students. In the Swedish data, parents from higher social backgrounds voice more opinions regarding their children’s education and tend to question teachers’ decisions more often.

The results of teachers’ work, but not the methods, are controlled, since it is the results that count. One issue to note is that the dimensions in which teachers exercise their own decision-making are not the ones that are most intensively controlled. For example, Swedish teachers are highly controlled in the educational domain at both a school and a professional level as well as in the social domain at a school level; meanwhile, they have very little individual autonomy in these areas. The relation of perceived control and real consequences is also very ambivalent, since there are practically no real consequences. For a teacher to forfeit their permit to teach or to lose their job requires extreme causes. In both instances (Figures 4 and 6) the developmental domain is controlled very little or not at all, though German teachers have a higher degree of autonomy in this dimension and they also take part in more professional development, something that for Swedish teachers can be practically non-existent.

In Germany, the school level is the focal level of autonomy from a decision-making perspective. Here collegial decision-making is of great importance, since all decision-making is based on so-called *conferences*. For example, there are school conferences, subject conferences and grading conferences (in which teachers discuss end-of-term grades). There

Domain \ Level	Education (a) <i>(lesson planning, delivery and evaluation)</i>	Social (b) <i>(discipline policies, tracking, special needs)</i>	Development (c) <i>(formal professional development)</i>	Administration (d) <i>(scheduling, timely and financial resources)</i>
<b>Classroom (1)</b> <i>(relations to students and teaching content)</i>	Grades/results by parents and principal; examinations by subject groups/ subject heads	Student behaviour by parents	Amount of hours taken	
<b>School (2)</b> <i>(relations to principals, colleagues, parents)</i>	Existence of quality assurance processes (such as school internal curriculum) by school inspectorate			
<b>Profession (3)</b> <i>(relations to the state, and other actors in school system and society)</i>	Teacher education through state examination			

**Control**

High intensity	Low intensity	No control
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Figure 4. German teachers’ perception of the intensity and agency of control.

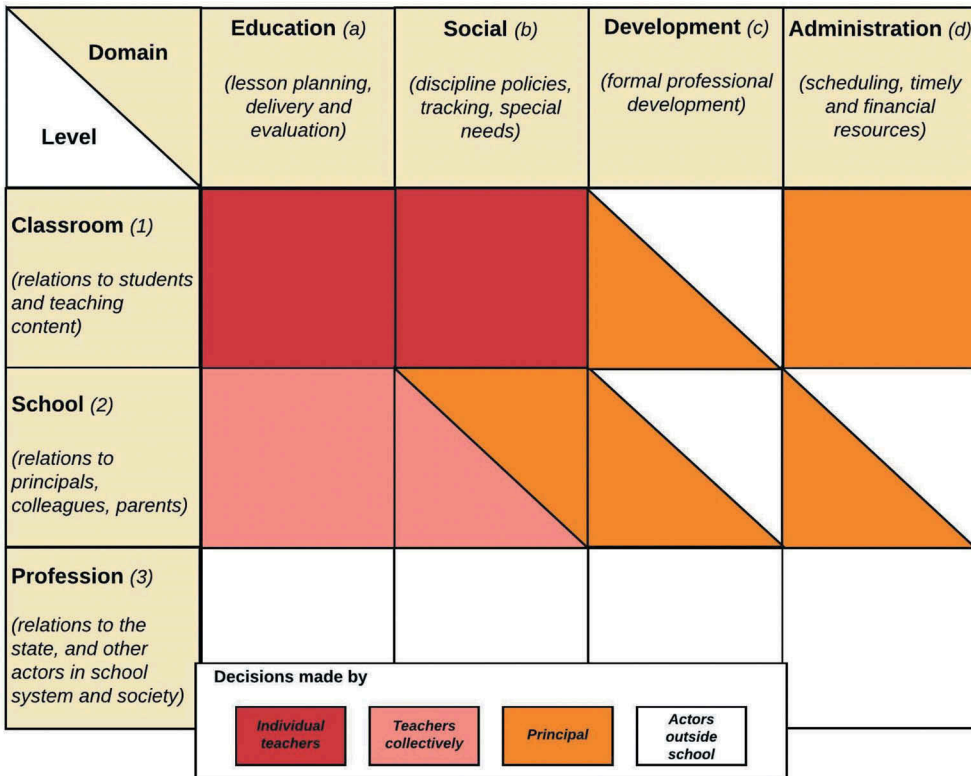


Figure 5. Swedish teachers' perceptions of who makes decisions in which dimension.

are many control technologies but no formal consequences; however, there can certainly be informal ones if a teacher fails to perform his or her work to an acceptable standard.

The Swedish school system is quite heavily controlled at the professional level through standardised testing. This is seen as a yardstick that student results should not deviate from. Teachers also report of pressures from the media, the research community and different policies, since, due to Sweden's decline in PISA results, the pressure to deliver good results is strong. The marketisation of the school system has led to significant differences in intra-school control regimes between private and municipality schools in terms of collegial control.

#### 4. Discussion and concluding remarks

As stated as the starting point of this paper, conceptualisations of teacher autonomy are work in progress. The problem is that if the conceptual work is playing catch-up with empirical research, the term might become, in a Kosselleckian sense (Kosselleck, 1979/2004), plastic, referring to a situation in which the term autonomy means different things depending on who uses it. Such a lack of conceptual engagement may lead to conceptual fuzziness, affecting again the outcomes of empirical research. All of this poses considerable challenges to cumulative knowledge building. Here, we see the most significant contribution of our conceptual work presented.



Domain Level	Education (a) <i>(lesson planning, delivery and evaluation)</i>	Social (b) <i>(discipline policies, tracking, special needs)</i>	Development (c) <i>(formal professional development)</i>	Administration (d) <i>(scheduling, timely and financial resources)</i>
<b>Classroom (1)</b> <i>(relations to students and teaching content)</i>	Results (not methods) by principal, grades by parents	Student care/well being by parents		
<b>School (2)</b> <i>(relations to principals, colleagues, parents)</i>	Results by superintendent ( <i>huvudman</i> )	Student care/ well being by school inspectorate		Budget by superintendent
<b>Profession (3)</b> <i>(relations to the state, and other actors in school system and society)</i>	Ranking tables of schools/ municipalities (control via media, state etc.)			

**Control**

High intensity	Low intensity	No control
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Figure 6. Swedish teachers' perceptions of the intensity and agency of control.

Through summarising existing conceptualisations of teacher autonomy as a multi-dimensional construct, and taking them a step further through developing an analytical matrix, this paper contributes to the field by offering a nuanced and sophisticated analytical device for teacher autonomy studies. While rigorous and illuminating conceptualisations have emerged in the field this is the first attempt (to our knowledge) to bring these conceptualisations together in order to offer a more comprehensive and nuanced conceptual device. Furthermore, it was important for us to contribute to the work of the international research community, and offer tools applicable to international comparative studies. As important as understanding teacher autonomy in single country contexts is, the field remains lacking in international comparative work. At a time when teacher autonomy is debated in national policy in many countries, further conceptually rigorous comparative research is sorely needed. Finally, an important strength of the device is that it was validated by a group of expert teachers from four different countries, who helped us to ensure that it was relevant for their country contexts. Further work in the field is needed to reflect how applicable the matrix is in other country contexts.

In line with Cribb and Gewirtz's (2007) suggestion, we point out that research on teacher autonomy must clarify in detail the loci in focus. Furthermore, questions concerning the ways in which autonomy in certain dimensions impacts the autonomy in other dimensions are important avenues for further research. Our device, which draws from a literature review as well as empirical work, will hopefully provide a very practical tool for such future investigations. Like Diane Arbus, an iconographic twentieth-century

photographer observed, 'the more specific you are, the more general it'll be' (Arbus & Arbus, 1972, p. 1). Our own examples, albeit shortly presented, hopefully illustrate how we have further unpacked teacher autonomy using our analytical matrix.

According to Wilches (2007), when investigating teacher autonomy, it is important to distinguish between teachers' experienced and perceived autonomy and contextual factors that shape teachers' scope of self-governance. This is an important consideration for future research in the field. From the point of view of teachers' perceptions, the issue of autonomy is a *perceived* scope of action which enables them to carry out the necessary actions and exercise control over professional duties. Greater scope of action does not mean that teachers experience a greater degree of autonomy, since greater responsibility or discretion requires greater skills and resources. Teachers' experiences of autonomy is an internal factor, which is why teachers' perceptions of autonomy should be examined in the light of internal *and* external factors that influence teacher behaviour.

In many empirical teacher autonomy studies, perceived autonomy is mostly seen as a predictor of different factors, such as job satisfaction, intention to change jobs, self-efficacy, job stress, feeling of empowerment and so forth (e.g. Pearson & Moomaw, 2006; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014). In line with Wilches (2007), we argue that such correlations might also be seen in a converse manner, meaning that individual beliefs and predispositions may predict or moderate how individual teachers perceive or experience autonomy. Referring to Raanen's contribution to the debate, there may also be autonomy mindsets, where teachers in particular contexts may believe that they are autonomous, even if they are not. For example, it would be interesting to investigate questions such as whether external validation (global attention) to Finnish teachers' autonomy has contributed to Finnish teachers' perceptions of their work. Do, for example, Finnish teachers consider themselves to be more autonomous than their Swedish colleagues, even though the differences are not very significant (Paulsrud & Wermke, 2019)?

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