EDITORIAL

Autonomy in education: theoretical and empirical approaches to a contested concept

Autonomy is a widely used concept in education policy and practice. The etymology of the concept derives from the Greek *autonomos* 'having its own laws' (Oxford Dictionaries, 2015). As such, the debates around the concept circulate around individuals' or groups' ability and capacity to self-rule, and the governance and/or constraints, which limit such a capacity. However, autonomy has also been widely contested in philosophy, and as suggested by Rawls (1980), for example, the concept has been defined in a variety of ways. In educational research too, the concept has been debated from varying viewpoints, as, for example, scholars engaged in education history (Smaller, 2015), education sociology and policy (Ball, 2006; Apple, 2002), legal issues (Berka, 2000) and pedagogy (Reinders, 2010; Little, 1995) have all problematised and defined its meaning in relation to education.

When applied to educational practice, this nuanced and complex concept may indeed mean a variety of things. Take school-level autonomy as an example. Schools are complicated social systems in which multiple actors operate in different roles, and in which one's scope of action may affect the decision-making capacity of that of others. The question of who in a school community may possess autonomy (e.g. the teachers, the principals, or the learners) has fundamental implications for the ways in which the school operates. Also, the matters over which the members of the school community enjoy autonomy have important implications for what school autonomy means in practice. If we consider teacher autonomy more closely, it becomes apparent that teacher autonomy is often understood in terms of a dichotomous pairing of constraint vs. freedom (Wermke & Höstfält, 2014). It could be argued that teacher autonomy is *always* about constraint, and drawing from Gewirtz's and Cribb's (2009) work, we suggest focussing on the ways in which autonomy is constrained, as well as the matters over which autonomy is enjoyed and by whom. Therefore, teacher autonomy should be distinguished from other forms of autonomy, for example, school or local autonomy. Indeed, increased school autonomy, or local autonomy, as witnessed, for example, in relation to the *Friskola* movement in Sweden or *Academies* movement in England, does not automatically grant to teachers an increased scope

of action (Kauko & Salokangas, 2015; Salokangas & Chapman, 2014; Wermke & Höstfält, 2014).

Moreover, the teacher autonomy debate has been influenced by and reflects wider global education trends and international comparisons. Indeed, autonomy has been a central concept in education policy in Nordic countries (Frostenson, 2012) as well as elsewhere (Caldwell, 2008; Glatter, 2012). Recently, this could be seen, for example, in relation to 'PISA envy', and the ways in which Finland's consistent success in PISA has been explained, at least partly, through its highly educated and autonomous teaching workforce (Lopez, 2012; Stenlås, 2011). However, as the contributions in this issue highlight, international comparisons concerning teacher autonomy must remain sensitive to the national and local contexts in which teachers operate, and consider what autonomy actually means for teachers in those settings (Salokangas & Kauko, in press; Wermke, 2013).

It is these complexities, inherent in the concept of autonomy, as well as its practical applications, that this edited collection was set to discuss and offer contributions to varied discourses concerning this important, widely debated, and contested concept. The special issue is divided into two sections. The first section presents three invited essays that offer theoretical perspectives on autonomy. The first two, by Gerald Dworkin and Evert Vedung, respectively, are not educational *per se*, but offer important conceptual contributions to the discussion. The third essay by Magnus Frostenson discusses the multi-dimensionality of the concept with a focus on education and teaching. The second section comprises empirical studies that discuss the concept of autonomy in different national and local contexts. The articles report on research conducted in Norway (Christina Elde Mølstadt & Sølvi Mausethagen), Germany (Martin Heinrich), Sweden (Sara Maria Sjödin, Andreas Bergh, Ulf Lundström) and England (Ruth McGinity).

Section I: theoretical and multidisciplinary approaches to autonomy in education

We begin section I with a reprint of a classical piece on autonomy, the introductory chapter of Gerald Dworkin's (USA) *The Theory and Practice of Autonomy*, 'The Nature of Autonomy' (Dworkin, 1988). This philosophical work has been particularly inspiring for Anglo-American

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researchers, but remains less frequently cited in Nordic and continental European educational research. As such, his contribution provides an excellent starting point for the collection. Moreover, we hope that this article assists us in promoting the necessity of discussing the phenomenon in terms of applicable definitions. This is a problem we have come across in our previous work in the area, as the debates concerning what in fact autonomy is or is not remain heated. However, as Dworkin points out, the problem is not new:

> It is apparent that, although not used just as a synonym for qualities that are usually approved of, 'autonomy' is used in an exceedingly broad fashion. (Dworkin, 2015)

From this vantage point, Dworkin formulates a theory of the autonomy of the individual. He reminds us that the concept has several dimensions, including the analytical, normative and even ideological, all of which should be taken into consideration when discussing autonomy.

Autonomy is related to laws and rules set either by others or by the autonomous subject themselves. This raises questions concerning one's responsibilities for one's actions; the consequences of autonomy from others; and the ways in which an autonomous citizen can exist in relation to the state, both in terms of freedom and constraints. At the end of his essay, Dworkin suggests that the definition of autonomy should begin from a distinction between autonomy and *liberty* or *freedom*, which provides a particularly useful starting point for this special issue.

> [...] autonomy is conceived of as a second-order capacity of persons to reflect critically upon their first-order preferences, desires, wishes and so forth and the capacity to accept or attempt to change these in light of higher-order preferences and values. By exercising such a capacity, persons define their nature, give meaning and coherence to their lives, and take responsibility for the kind of person they are. (Dworkin, 2015)

The second essay offers an administrative perspective on autonomy, as political scientist Evert Vedung (Sweden) explains the nature of autonomy by approaching it in terms of the discretion emerging in street-level bureaucracy. This approach is rather practical, focussing on the ways in which autonomy takes form in professional interactions within organisations. Vedung puts forward several strategies that illuminate the relations between the scope of action given to the professional and possible action of the professional in service. These considerations draw partly on Lipsky's work on *Street Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services* (2010/1980). This conceptualisation has been influential, as it has contributed to research on, for example, upper secondary teachers in Sweden (Fredriksson, 2010). As such, his

article provides conceptual tools for empirical investigations on autonomy as an organisational phenomenon.

In the third invited essay, economist Magnus Frostenson (Sweden) suggests a three-dimensional conceptualisation of autonomy for educational research: a *professional dimension* which regards autonomy as characteristic of teachers as a professional group, a *faculty or staff dimension* which emphasizes the autonomy of a school organisation, including the principal and the whole teaching staff, and finally an *individual dimension*, which refers to the autonomy of an individual teacher. As such he acknowledges schools as complex social systems in which one individual's and/or group's autonomy affects the autonomy of others. This is where the three invited essays meet, in the questions concerning the different, albeit interrelated and even symbiotic levels of autonomy of the individual, the organisation/group and the wider system.

Finally, utilising his own conceptual considerations, Frostenson makes another important point suggesting that, particular prominent discourses on autonomy can and should be challenged. He proposes that New Public Management (NPM), which in recent years has been seen – for good reasons – as a threat to the autonomy of educational practitioners, organisations and also learners, has not contributed to an overall loss of autonomy for all those involved in education. Looking at schools and their management in particular, he illustrates the complexity of the phenomenon.

> In understanding school management and its consequences, it is not just only the philosophies, instruments, controls and other aspects that are of interest. The individual principal or manager will most likely be important. If a principal is a *primus inter pares*, for example an esteemed colleague with experience from the school, another micro-level climate will probably prevail in the school in comparison to a case where a former military officer or person from business is employed as the principal. (Frostenson, 2015)

Section II: empirical approaches to autonomy in education

The articles in this section are empirical in nature, reporting on studies that examine what autonomy means for actors operating in various national and local contexts. Section II begins with the works of Christina Elde Mølstadt and Sølvi Mausethagen (Norway) and Andreas Bergh (Sweden), which discuss autonomy from the perspective of the complex interrelations of different actors at different levels of policy and practice in the respective national contexts. The following two articles, by Martin Heinrich (Germany) and Ruth McGinity (England), focus on school-level autonomy. Finally, Ulf Lundström (Sweden) offers an examination of teacher autonomy

and Sara Maria Sjödin (Sweden) perspectives to learner autonomy.

In the first empirical article, Elde Mølstadt and Sølvi Mausethagen discuss the ways in which shifts in curriculum policy towards a more product-oriented curriculum have affected teacher autonomy in Norway. The article employs two interview data sets, one covering local actors at the school and municipal level, and the other at national level, including participants from the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training. Including the perspectives of stakeholders operating on different levels of education allows Mølstadt and Mausethagen to provide a rich account of the perceived effects of the curriculum reform on teachers work.

The article provides three perspectives on teacher autonomy, including, firstly, pedagogical freedom and the absence of control; secondly, the will and capacity to justify practices; and thirdly, local responsibility. These varying viewpoints emerge from data and highlight the multidimensional rather than dichotomous nature of teacher autonomy. As the authors put it:

> Attending to the interrelatedness among ideas of teacher autonomy, as well as the relationship between autonomy and accountability (through dimensions such as individual versus collective autonomy, internal versus external control, and national versus local governance), can provide a more comprehensive understanding of teacher autonomy. In this regard, dichotomous conceptions of autonomy are insufficient to grasp the complexity of recent educational reforms. (Mausethagen and Mølstadt, 2015)

This is an important contribution for the issue at hand, and resonates with Frostenson's and Dworkin's contributions.

Andreas Bergh provides an empirical exploration of the tensions between local and national policy discourses and enactments in Swedish local settings. The article presents a fascinating dialogue between the local interpretation, and national and international discourses of marketisation, and more specifically the rhetoric of quality policy. As such, the article offers an important contribution to the Swedish as well as wider international education policy discourses.

The data comprise interviews with a variety of local actors including local politicians, civil servants, school leaders and teachers. As the article draws from Bergh's earlier research (2010), it exhibits a certain empirical depth in terms of timeframe and shift on focus from policy texts to interviews on doing education. Conceptually, the work draws from Koselleck's (2002) work on horizon of expectation, and space of experience, as well as Cribb's and Gewirtz's (2007) work on autonomy and control. The latter allows Bergh to discuss questions of whose autonomy is under consideration, over what matters they are

autonomous, and finally who the agents of control are and in what ways their agency is exercised at local level. The conceptualisation, as well as the data utilised, builds a bridge to Frostenson's argument, presented earlier in this issue, concerning the varying character of professional autonomy at local levels. Indeed, the empirical data Bergh presents and the discussion that follows, portray an image of a local setting underpinned by complex social relations in which national policy is interpreted and translated, and in which the autonomy of one and/or some affects the autonomy of others.

Martin Heinrich employs interview and survey data from a large-scale study on school inspections in Germany. He discusses school autonomy in relation to school governance on one hand, and learner and teacher autonomy on the other. Of particular interest here are his conceptual contributions concerning distinctions of and interrelations between school autonomy, teacher autonomy and learner autonomy. The conceptual considerations are located in the context of the German education system, and in doing so the author also reminds the reader of the importance of remaining sensitive to the specific features of the education system on focus. This is further illustrated in the comparisons between the German and the Anglo-American pedagogical thought traditions, influenced by reformed pedagogy on the one hand and Taylorism or pragmatism on the other.

> In the pedagogical process, which is considered to be a dialectic process within the medium of autonomy and heteronomy, the inevitable result of the autonomous nature of the child is the *autonomy of the teacher*. Teacher autonomy appears necessary in order to handle the dialectical nature of this process. This freedom of the teacher is itself tied to the manoeuvring room institutionally provided within a given educational system. As a consequence, the *autonomy of the school as an institution* becomes necessary. (Heinrich, 2015)

From this conceptual starting point, Heinrich presents a historical analysis of the development of school autonomy in Germany and offers several fertile ideas for analyses of autonomy in different contexts. For example, what he calls 'grey area autonomy' when referring to innovations that are forced to move to grey areas of the law to identify and secure niches for reform-oriented teaching in daily practice. Furthermore, Heinrich's historical account of the developments in the German education system steers our attention to the transformable nature of autonomy in education. In line with Frostensson's argument earlier, Heinrich shows how autonomy as scope of action can shift between levels, away from teachers to 'the merely collectively claimable autonomy of the whole teaching staff within an organisation development framework and, from there, to *school autonomy* which, eventually, does not even count as *autonomy of the*

individual school as an organisation any longer but only as *autonomy of the school as an institution of the state'* (Heinrich, 2015). Finally, and resonating with Lundström's and Bergh's contributions, Heinrich shows how NPM as an instrument of school governance has impacted educational autonomy.

Ruth McGinity provides a case study of an English school that has undergone a conversion into an academy school. Academies emerged in England over a decade ago as an attempt to address educational underachievement. Although the academies programme has undergone significant changes since the first academies opened in 2003, what has underpinned these schools is considerable autonomy from local authority control, the national curriculum, and teaching pay and conditions. Since the introduction of the Academies Act in 2010, over half of English secondary schools have either voluntarily converted to academies or been forced into conversion. Following a neo-liberal logic, and somewhat parallel to the Swedish *Friskola* movement, the supporters of the programme have claimed that increasing the autonomy of academies enables local actors to innovate in their educational and managerial practice (Adonis, 2012; DfE, 2010).

The article discusses how the increased autonomy associated with these schools to foster 'innovations' is interpreted and put in practice in the case academy, and the consequences of these 'innovations' for students. On the one hand, the story the author tells shows that the case academy's leadership articulates autonomy as a prerequisite for innovation, and innovation as prerequisite for survival in the local school markets. From this perspective, the neo-liberal logic seems to be working. On the other hand, autonomy may also, as McGinity suggests, affect students from lower socio-economic backgrounds in possibly unintended ways. This is an important contribution to the special issue, and actually echoes some reported developments in Sweden (Lundahl, 2011).

> Such an approach, as argued, indicates alignment with a logic of practice structured by the tendencies of a centralised, regulatory and marketised education system, which is focussed more on ways in which schools should remodel themselves using entrepreneurial methods than on committed discussions around how an atomised, diverse and increasingly privatised system can continue to work hard to reduce the increasing gap between high and low attainment between the richest and the poorest students in order to tackle the (re)production of advantage and disadvantages. (McGinity, 2015)

In conclusion, this article illustrates empirically how changes in the scope of action at local levels may result in both intended and unintended consequences. As such, McGinity's contribution resonates with Lundström's and with Heinrich's work on the potential dangers of school autonomy.

Ulf Lundström's article provides an account of Swedish teachers' perceptions concerning implications of education policy reforms on their professional autonomy during the past few decades. The argument is based on a considerable body of interview data, gathered over a decade from around 120 Swedish upper secondary school teachers working in different types of schools. This is a significant contribution to the edited collection at hand, as the article provides a historical account, from the perspective of teachers themselves, of the ways in which NPM-related reforms have affected their work and their scope for action. As the author puts it: *Perceived 'truths' about lived experience can be disputed, but they are still important for understanding policy enactment as well as professional action and development* (Lundström, 2015).

Furthermore, connecting the findings to, in particular, Apple's (2007) work, which describes teacher autonomy shifting from licensed to regulated, Evett's (2009a, 2009b) conceptualisations of occupational and organisational professionalism, as well as policy enactment research (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012), the developments in Sweden discussed in this article are linked to international literatures. The findings presented complement well the extensive research that has been undertaken in particular in the USA and England, and help to identify the ways in which the Swedish experience of NPM has positioned teachers and their work within metericised, marketised and managerialist discourses. Lundström's work can be understood through the lens of Vedung's considerations on street-level bureaucracy as professionals are expected to adjust to the scope of action given to them. However, it would be interesting to discuss this from the perspective that Frostensen offers, as these two contributions provide somewhat differing angles on the debate surrounding the effects of NPM on teachers' autonomy.

The last article, by Sara Maria Sjödin, is an in-depth longitudinal case study to the lived experiences of an individual student, Alice, with high-functioning autism. Sjödin's article provides a fascinating example of the insights that can be garnered from a hermeneutic study of the individual autonomy of a learner, and especially a learner with notable special education needs, navigating the formal education system in Sweden. The longitudinal nature of this study, combined with its careful examination of the various interpretations of Alice's experiences of school and learning gathered from Alice herself as well as numerous education professionals who work with her, offers a rich empirical account of the individual autonomy of a learner. This is an important perspective to the edited collection at hand and, alongside McGinity's contribution, is the only one that discusses the learners' perspective. Also, considering the fact that the focus of the article is on Alice as an individual learner and on her scope of action, Sjödin's article offers empirical perspectives on Dworkin's theoretical observations. What

is Alice's scope of action? How is it determined, and by whom? How is it considered appropriate for Alice at different times considering the changing nature of her needs? These are universal questions concerning autonomy, control and power that resonate with issues raised by Dworkin. Another interesting perspective on this is that of German Bildung, as put forward by Heinrich in this collection. In this tradition, true learner autonomy is the most desirable educational goal, and only possible if the teacher is also autonomous. Bearing in mind Lundström's study on Swedish teachers, who are engaged in a struggle for their autonomy, it is reasonable to ask how much scope of action Swedish teachers actually have in order to cope with learners' individual needs.

In conclusion, the special issue shows that there are a plethora of approaches to examining autonomy in education, both theoretical and empirical. Moreover, although the articles in this issue present studies from different national and local contexts, as a collection they discuss the multidimensionality of the concept and illustrate how, in educational settings in which numerous actors with a multitude of interests operate, the autonomy of one individual and/or group has consequences for that of others. As such, this issue highlights the importance of context when studying the autonomy of individuals or groups, and provides opportunities to engage with different educational traditions. It also offers conceptual tools for investigating autonomy in education. For example, Dworkin's and Lipsky's perspectives (whose work in this issue is discussed by the political scientist Vedung), which are more extensively cited in Anglo-American research, have the potential to inform continental European discourses around autonomy. Equally, Frostenson's Nordic and Heinrich's German perspectives have the potential to contribute to Anglo-American discourses. Furthermore, the empirical studies from different countries cast light on the complexities inherent in local settings and the nature of autonomy of actors operating in these settings. Although valuable accounts are provided from different national and local contexts, possible comparisons are left to the discretion of the reader. Indeed, there is a need for further comparative research that investigates autonomy in different national contexts, in order to develop a better understanding of what autonomy really means for educators, learners, managers and administrators in different national contexts.

Wieland Wermke
Department of Education,
Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden
University of Gävle, Gävle, Sweden
wieland.wermke@edu.uu.se

Maija Salokangas
School of Education, Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland
salokam@tcd.ie

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Wieland Wermke, PhD, is senior lecturer at Uppsala University, department of education, and at Gävle University, faculty of education and economy in Sweden. His research focus on teacher professionalism and school governance from a comparative perspective employing quantitative methodology.

Maija Salokangas is Assistant Professor in the School of Education at Trinity College Dublin, Ireland. Prior to this she conducted her PhD research in the University of Manchester, England, focusing on autonomy and innovation in English academy schools. Broadly stated, Maija's research interests concern the interplay between education policy and practice, social justice, ethnography and comparative research.