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

Special issue editors
Wieland Wermke & Maija Salokangas
NordSTEP
Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy (NordSTEP) is a peer reviewed Open Access Journal which aims to analyze and discuss educational policy-making, implementation and impact. It offers an arena for theories on educational policy, as well as policy and evaluation analyses from different points of view. In particular historical and comparative studies are welcome. The journal examines the relationship between educational policy, educational practice and educational sciences and sheds light on important debates and controversies within the field, making it a valuable resource for researchers, educators, policy makers, administrators, and graduate students.

PUBLICATION INFORMATION
Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy (eISSN 2002-0317) is published under the Open Access model and is therefore free for anybody to read and download, and to copy and disseminate for educational purposes. Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy is published three times a year, in March, July, and November. Issues are published online only. All articles will be assigned a DOI number (Digital Object Identifier) whereby they become searchable and citable without delay.

To submit manuscripts and for more information, see www.nordstep.net
For information on back issues, reprints, and advertisements please contact info@co-action.net

Typeset by Datapage (India) Private Limited, Chennai, India
Printed and bound by Hobbs the Printer, Southampton, UK

ADVISORY BOARD
Peter Dahler-Larsen, University of Copenhagen, Denmark
Roger Dale, University of Bristol, United Kingdom
Stefan Hipmann, University of Vienna, Austria
Professor Peter Meussen, Oslo University, Norway
Barbara Schulte, Lund University, Sweden
Karen Swayne, University of Minnesota, United States
Giia Steiner-Khamsi, Columbia University, New York, United States
Michael Uljens, Åbo Akademi University, Finland
Geoff Whitel, University of Newcastle, Australia, Australia

GENERAL EDITORS
Daniel Pettersson, (Chief Editor), University of Gävle, Sweden
Petter Aasen, Buskerud and Vestfold University College, Norway
Eva Forsberg, Uppsala University, University of Gävle, Sweden

FOUNDING EDITOR
Ulf P. Lundgren, Sweden

EXECUTIVE EDITOR
Wieland Warmer, Uppsala University, Gävle University, Sweden

ASSOCIATE EDITORS
Göran Fransson, University of Gävle, Sweden
Elisabet Nihlfor, Uppsala University, Umeå University
Tine Sophie Prestø, Buskerud and Vestfold University College, Norway
Henrik Romain, Uppsala University, Sweden

The paper used in this publication contains pulp sourced from forests independently certified to the Forest Stewardship Council® (FSC®) principles and criteria. Chain of custody certification allows the pulp from these forests to be tracked to the end use (see www.fsc-uk.org).
Special Issue: Autonomy in education: theoretical and empirical approaches to a contested concept

Special issue editors
Wieland Wermke & Maija Salokangas

CONTENTS

Editorial
Autonomy in education: theoretical and empirical approaches to a contested concept
Wieland Wermke & Maija Salokangas

Section I: Theoretical and multidisciplinary approaches to autonomy in education

The nature of autonomy
Gerald Dworkin

Autonomy and street-level bureaucrats’ coping strategies
Evert Vedung

Three forms of professional autonomy: de-professionalisation of teachers in a new light
Magnus Frostenson

Section II: Empirical approaches to autonomy in education

Shifts in curriculum control: contesting ideas of teacher autonomy
Solvi Mausethagen & Christina Elde Molstad

Local educational actors doing of education – a study of how local autonomy meets international and national quality policy rhetoric
Andreas Bergh

Metamorphoses of pedagogical autonomy in German school reforms: continuities, discontinuities and synchronicities illustrated by empirical studies on school development planning, school profiling and school inspection
Martin Heinrich

Innovation and autonomy at a time of rapid reform: an English case study
Ruth McGinity

Teacher autonomy in the era of New Public Management
Ulf Lundström

Negotiating learner autonomy: a case study on the autonomy of a learner with high-functioning autism
Sara Sjödin
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 multidimensionality 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 & Solve 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
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 partly draw upon 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 Molstad and Solvi 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 Mølstad 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 Mølstad 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 Mølstad, 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 Frostenson’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, Evetts’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.

References


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

Citation: NordSTEP 2015, 1: 28841 - http://dx.doi.org/10.3402/nstep.v1.28841

5


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.
The concept of autonomy has assumed increasing importance in contemporary moral and political philosophy. Philosophers such as John Rawls, Thomas Scanlon, Robert P. Wolff and Ronald Dworkin have employed the concept to define and illuminate issues such as the characterisation of principles of justice, the limits of free speech and the nature of the liberal state.

In the most recent formulation of the foundations of his theory of justice, Rawls makes clear – what was implicit in his book – that a certain ideal of the person is the cornerstone of his moral edifice. A central feature of that idea is the notion of autonomy.

The main idea of Kantian constructivism . . . is to establish a connection between the first principles of justice and the conception of moral persons as free and equal . . . [T]he requisite connection is provided by a procedure of construction in which rationally autonomous agents subject to reasonable constraints agree to public principles of justice. (Rawls, 1980, p. 554)

Scanlon's defense of a Millian principle of free speech relies also on a view of what powers autonomous persons would grant to the state.

I will defend the Millian principle by showing it to be a consequence of the view that the powers of a state are limited to those that citizens could recognize while still regarding themselves as equal, autonomous, rational agents. (Scanlon 1972, p. 215)

Ronald Dworkin, in his article on Liberalism, does not use the word ‘autonomy’, but in discussing the idea of treating people as equals, he is arguing for equal respect for the autonomy of citizens.

According to Dworkin, the liberal theory of equality supposes that political decisions must be, so far as is possible, independent of any particular conception of the good life, or of what gives value to life. Since the citizens of a society differ in their conceptions, the government does not treat them as equals if it prefers one conception to another, either because the officials believe that one is intrinsically superior or because it is held by the more numerous or more powerful group (Dworkin, 1978, p. 127).

Wolff’s essay, In Defense of Anarchism, is devoted to the task of demonstrating that a citizen cannot retain his or her autonomy and at the same time be under any obligation to obey the commands of the state simply because they are the commands of the state.

The autonomous . . . man may do what another tells him, but not because he has been told to do it . . . by accepting as final the commands of the others, he forfeits his autonomy . . . a promise to abide by the will of the majority creates an obligation, but it does so precisely by giving up one’s autonomy. (Wolff, 1970, p. 41)
Bruce Ackerman, in his *Social Justice in the Liberal State*, speaks of

respect for the autonomy of persons as one of the four main highways to the liberal state. [...] It is, in short, not necessary for autonomy to be the only good thing; it suffices for it to be the best thing that there is. (Ackerman, 1980, pp. 368–369)

It is clear that either as interpretations of the idea of liberty and equality, or as additions to them, the notion of autonomy plays a central role in current normative philosophical work. It is also apparent that, unlike the concepts of liberty and equality, it has not received careful and comprehensive philosophical examination.

Proceeding simultaneously, and as far as I can tell, relatively independently, the idea of autonomy has emerged as a central notion in the area of applied moral philosophy, particularly in the biomedical context. All discussions of the nature of informed consent and its rationale refer to patient (or subject) autonomy. Conflicts between autonomy and paternalism occur in cases involving civil commitment, lying to patients, refusals of life-saving treatment, suicide intervention and patient care.

Whether or not this is the same concept that appears in the more theoretical discussions remains to be seen, but we have some reason to believe that philosophical scrutiny will be of more than just theoretical interest.

One more warning by way of introduction. It would be unwise to assume that different authors are all referring to the same thing when they use the term ‘autonomy’. By way of illustration, consider the following brief catalogue of uses of the term in moral and political philosophy.

[The law in thus implementing its basic commitment to man’s autonomy, his freedom to and his freedom from, acknowledge(s) how complex man is. (Goldstein, 1978, p. 252)

To regard himself as autonomous in the sense I have in mind, a person must see himself as sovereign in deciding what to believe and in weighing competing reasons for action. (Scanlon, 1972, p. 215)

As Kant argued, moral autonomy is a combination of freedom and responsibility; it is a submission to laws that one has made for oneself. The autonomous man, insofar as he is autonomous, is not subject to the will of another. (Wolff, 1970, p. 14)

(Children) finally pass to the level of autonomy when they appreciate that rules are alterable, that they can be criticized and should be accepted or rejected on a basis of reciprocity and fairness. The emergence of rational reflection about rules ... central to the Kantian conception of autonomy, is the main feature of the final level of moral development. (Peters, 1972, p. 130)

I am autonomous if I rule me, and no one else rules. (Feinberg, 1980, p. 161)

Human beings are commonly spoken of as autonomous creatures. We have suggested that their autonomy consists in their ability to choose whether to think in a certain way insofar as thinking is acting; in their freedom from obligation within certain spheres of life; and in their moral individuality. (Downie & Telfer, 1971, p. 301)

A person is “autonomous” to the degree that what he thinks and does cannot be explained without reference to his own activity of mind. (Dearden, 1972, p. 453)

[A]cting autonomously is acting from principles that we would consent to as free and equal rational beings. (Rawls, 1971, p. 516)

I, and I alone, am ultimately responsible for the decisions I make, and am in that sense autonomous. (Lucas, 1966)

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. It is used sometimes as an equivalent of liberty (positive or negative in Berlin’s terminology), sometimes as equivalent to self-rule or sovereignty, sometimes as identical with freedom of the will. It is equated with dignity, integrity, individuality, independence, responsibility and self-knowledge.

It is identified with qualities of self-assertion, critical reflection, freedom from obligation, absence of external causation and knowledge of one’s own interests. It is even equated by some economists with the impossibility of interpersonal comparisons. It is related to actions, beliefs, reasons for acting, rules, the will of other persons, thoughts and principles. About the only features held constant from one author to another are that autonomy is a feature of persons and that it is a desirable quality to have.

It is very unlikely that there is a core meaning which underlies all these various uses of the term. Autonomy is a term of art and will not repay an Austinian investigation of its ordinary uses. It will be necessary to construct a concept given various theoretical purposes and some constraints from normal usage.

I shall begin by discussing the nature of autonomy. Given the various problems that may be clarified or resolved with the aid of a concept of autonomy, how may we most usefully characterise the concept? I use the vague term ‘characterise’ rather than ‘define’ or ‘analyse’ because I do not think it possible with any moderately complex philosophical concept to specify necessary and sufficient conditions without draining the concept of the very complexity that enables it to perform its theoretical role. Autonomy is a term of art introduced by a theorist in an attempt to make sense of a tangled net of intuitions, conceptual and empirical issues and normative claims. What one needs, therefore, is a study of how the term is connected with other notions, what role it plays in justifying various normative claims, how the notion is supposed to ground ascriptions of value, and so on – in short, a theory.
A theory, however, requires conditions of adequacy; constraints we impose antecedently on any satisfactory development of the concept. In the absence of some theoretical, empirical or normative limits, we have no way of arguing for or against any proposed explication. To say this is not to deny the possibility we may end up some distance from our starting point. The difficulties we encounter may best be resolved by adding or dropping items from the initial set of constraints. But without some limits to run up against, we are too free to make progress.

I propose the following criteria for a satisfactory theory of autonomy:

**Logical consistency**
The concept should be neither internally inconsistent nor inconsistent (logically) with other concepts we know to be consistent. So, for example, if the idea of an uncaused cause was inconsistent and autonomy required the existence of such a cause, it would fail to satisfy this criterion.

**Empirical possibility**
There should be no empirically grounded or theoretically derived knowledge which makes it impossible or extremely unlikely that anybody ever has been, or could be, autonomous. Thus, a theory which required as a condition of autonomy that an individual’s values not be influenced by his or her parents, peers or culture would violate this condition. It is important to note that this condition is not designed to beg the question (in the long run) against those, such as Skinner, who deny the possibility of autonomy. I am attempting to construct a notion of autonomy that is empirically possible. I may fail. This might be due to my limitations. If enough people fail, the best explanation may be that Skinner is correct. Or he may be correct about certain explications and not others. It would then be important to determine whether the ones that are not possible are the ones that are significant for moral and political questions.

We see here how the constraints operate as a system. It would not be legitimate to reject a proposed explication of autonomy on the grounds that we know that nobody is autonomous in that sense if that sense were the very one people have appealed to when deriving normative claims.

**Value conditions**
It should be explicable on the basis of the theory why, at the least, people have thought that being autonomous was a desirable state of affairs. A strong constraint would require that the theory show why autonomy is not merely thought to be a good, but why it is a good. A still stronger constraint would require that the theory show why, as Kant claimed, autonomy is the supreme good. Because I do not intend my theory as an explication of Kant’s views, and because it is plausible to suppose that there are competing values which may, on occasion, outweigh that of autonomy, I do not adopt the strongest constraint.

As an additional constraint, I suggest that the theory not imply a logical incompatibility with other significant values, that is, that the autonomous person not be ruled out on conceptual grounds from manifesting other virtues or acting justly.

**Ideological neutrality**
I intend by this a rather weak constraint. The concept should be one that has value for very different ideological outlooks. Thus, it should not be the case that only individualistic ideologies can value autonomy. This is compatible with the claim that various ideologies may differ greatly on the weight to be attached to the value of autonomy, the trade-offs that are reasonable, whether the value be intrinsic, instrumental and so forth.

**Normative relevance**
The theory should make intelligible the philosophical uses of the concept. One should see why it is plausible to use the concept to ground a principle protecting freedom of speech, or why Rawls uses the idea of autonomous persons as part of a contractual argument for certain principles of distributive justice. One may also use the theory in a critical fashion to argue that a theory which argues from a notion of autonomy to the denial of legitimate state authority has gone wrong because it uses too strong a notion of autonomy.

**Judgemental relevance**
The final constraint is that the explication of the concept be in general accord with particular judgments we make about autonomy. These judgments may be conceptual: for example, one may believe that autonomy is not an all-or-nothing concept but a matter of more or less. The judgments may be normative, for example, that autonomy is that value against which paternalism offends. The judgments may be empirical, for example, that the only way to promote autonomy in adults is to allow them as children a considerable and increasing degree of autonomy.

I do not believe, however, that one can set out in advance a ‘privileged’ set of judgments which must be preserved. If the judgments do not hang together, then any of them may have to be hanged separately.

These are the criteria. It is possible that no concept of autonomy satisfies them all. Just as Kenneth Arrow discovered there was no social welfare function satisfying certain plausible constraints, we may find there is no concept satisfying ours. That itself would be an interesting discovery and would raise the question of whether we ought to drop or weaken some of the constraints or, perhaps, abandon the idea of autonomy.

What is more likely is that there is no single conception of autonomy but that we have one concept and many
conceptions of autonomy – to make use of a distinction first introduced by H.L.A. Hart and developed by Rawls. The concept is an abstract notion that specifies in very general terms the role the concept plays. Thus, a certain idea of persons as self-determining is shared by very different philosophical positions. Josiah Royce speaks of a person as a life led according to a plan. Marxists speak of man as the creature who makes himself; existentialists of a being whose being is always in question; Kantians of persons making law for themselves. At a very abstract level, I believe they share the same concept of autonomy. But when it comes to specifying more concretely what principles justify interference with autonomy, what is the nature of the ‘self’ which does the choosing, what the connections between autonomy and dependence on others are, then there will be different and conflicting views on these matters. This filling out of an abstract concept with different content is what is meant by different conceptions of the same concept.

I intend to present a view that provides specifications for most of these questions, but since I believe that the value of a particular conception is always relative to a set of problems and questions, I want first to indicate the range of issues that I see as relevant to the conception I shall develop.

Autonomy functions as a moral, political and social ideal. In all three cases, there is value attached to how things are viewed through the reasons, values and desires of the individual and how those elements are shaped and formed.

As a political ideal, autonomy is used as a basis to argue against the design and functioning of political institutions that attempt to impose a set of ends, values and attitudes upon the citizens of a society. This imposition might be based on a theological view, secular visions of a good society, or the importance of achieving excellence along some dimension of human achievement. In each case, the argument favouring such imposition is made independently of the value of the institutions as viewed by each citizen. Those favouring autonomy urge that the process of justification of political institutions must be acceptable to each citizen and must appeal to considerations that are recognised to be valid by all the members of the society.

In particular, then, autonomy is used to oppose perfectionist or paternalistic views. It is also related to what Ronald Dworkin refers to as the notion of equal respect. A government is required to treat its citizens neutrally, in the sense that it cannot favour the interests of some over others. This idea is used by Dworkin to argue for the existence of various rights.

Conceptions of autonomy are also used, by Wolff and others, to argue for the illegitimacy of obedience to authority. The emphasis in this argument is on the individual making up his or her mind about the merits of legal restrictions. This use of autonomy seems much closer in content to the ideal of moral autonomy. As a moral notion – shared by philosophers as divergent as Kant, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Royce, Hare and Popper – the argument is about the necessity or desirability of individuals choosing or willing or accepting their own moral code. We are all responsible for developing and criticising our moral principles, and individual conscience must take precedence over authority and tradition. I am not defending this line of reasoning, but it is certainly a body of thought which makes use of the notion of autonomy and has a corresponding set of problems connected with responsibility, integrity and the will. A theory of autonomy must throw some light on these problems, even if it does not accept (all of) the proposed solutions.

Finally, we have a set of issues concerning the ways in which the non-political institutions of a society affect the values, attitudes and beliefs of the members of the society. Our dispositions, attitudes, values and wants are affected by the economic institutions, the mass media, the force of public opinion, the social class and so forth. To a large extent, these institutions are not chosen by us; we simply find ourselves faced with them. From Humboldt, Mill and DeToqueville to Marcuse and Reismann, social theorists have worried about how individuals can develop their own conception of the good life in the face of such factors, and how we can distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate ways of influencing the minds of the members of society.

While Marxists have been most vocal in raising the issues of ‘false consciousness’ and ‘true versus false needs’, it is important to see that the question is one which a wide range of social theorists must address. For it is a reasonable feature of any good society that it is self-sustaining in the sense that people who grow up in such a society will acquire a respect for and commitment to the principles which justify and regulate its existence. It is very unlikely that the development of such dispositions is something over which individuals have much control or choice. Socialisation into the norms and values of the society will have taken place at a very young age. It looks, then, as if we can only distinguish between institutions on the basis of what they convey, their content, and not on the basis that they influence people at a stage when they cannot be critical about such matters. It looks, therefore, as if autonomy in the acquisition of principles and values is impossible.

In all three areas – moral, political and social – we find that there is a notion of the self which is to be respected, left unmanipulated and which is, in certain ways, independent and self-determining. But we also find certain tensions and paradoxes. If the notion of self-determination is given a very strong definition – the unchosen chooser, the uninfluenced influencer – then it seems as if autonomy is impossible. We know that all
individuals have a history. They develop socially and psychologically in a given environment with a set of biological endowments. They mature slowly and are, therefore, heavily influenced by parents, peers and culture.

How, then, can we talk of self-determination?

Again, there seems to be a conflict between self-determination and notions of correctness and objectivity. If we are to make reasonable choices, then we must be governed by canons of reasoning, norms of conduct, standards of excellence that are not themselves the products of our choices. We have acquired them at least partly as the result of others’ advice, for example, teaching – or, perhaps, by some innate coding. In any case, we cannot have determined these for ourselves.

Finally, there is a tension between autonomy as a purely formal notion (where what one decides for oneself can have any particular content), and autonomy as a substantive notion (where only certain decisions count as retaining autonomy whereas others count as forfeiting it). So the person who decides to do what his or her community, guru or comrades tells him or her to do cannot on the latter view count as autonomous. Autonomy then seems in conflict with emotional ties to others, with commitments to causes, with authority, tradition, expertise, leadership and so forth.

What I shall try to do now is introduce a conception of autonomy that satisfies the criteria set out at the beginning and that is (1) relevant to the moral, political and social issues mentioned above; (2) possible to achieve; and (3) able to avoid the difficulties and problems just enumerated.

The central idea that underlies the concept of autonomy is indicated by the etymology of the term: autos (self) and nomos (rule or law). The term was first applied to the Greek city state. A city had autonomia when its citizens made their own laws, as opposed to being under the control of some conquering power.

There is then a natural extension to persons as being autonomous when their decisions and actions are their own; when they are self-determining. The impetus for this extension occurs first when questions of following one’s conscience are raised by religious thinkers. Aquinas, Luther and Calvin placed great stress on the individual acting in accordance with reason as shaped and perceived by the person. This idea is then taken up by the Renaissance humanists. Pico della Mirandola expresses the idea clearly in his ‘Oration on the Dignity of Man’.

God says to Adam:

> We have given thee, Adam, no fixed seat, no form of thy very own, no gift peculiarly thine, that ... thou mayest ... possess as thine own the seat, the form, the gift which thou thyself shalt desire ... thou wilt fix the limits of thy nature for thyself ... thou ... art the molder and the maker of thyself. (Kristeller, 1947, pp. 100–101)

The same concept is presented by Berlin under the heading of ‘positive liberty’:

> I wish to be an instrument of my own, not other men’s acts of will. I wish to be a subject, not an object ... deciding, not being decided for, self-directed and not acted upon by external nature or by other men as if I were a thing, or an animal, or a slave incapable of playing a human role, that is, of conceiving goals and policies of my own and realizing them. (Berlin, 1969, p. 131)

But this abstract concept only can be understood as particular specifications are made of the notions of ‘self’, ‘my own’, ‘internal’ and so forth. Is it the noumenal self of Kant, or the historical self of Marx? Which mode of determination (choice, decision, invention or consent) is singled out? At what level is autonomy centred – individual decision, rule, values or motivation? Is autonomy a global or a local concept? Is it predicated of relatively long stretches of an individual’s life or relatively brief ones?

Let me begin by considering the relationship between the liberty or freedom of an individual and his or her autonomy. Are these two distinct notions? Are they linked, perhaps, in hierarchical fashion so that, say, interference with liberty is always interference with autonomy, but not vice-versa? Are they, perhaps, merely synonymous?

Suppose we think of liberty as being, roughly, the ability of a person to do what he or she wants, to have (significant) options that are not closed or made less eligible by the actions of other agents. Then the typical ways of interfering with the liberty of an agent (coercion and force) seem to also interfere with his or her autonomy (thought of, for the moment, as a power of self-determination). If we force a Jehovah’s Witness to have a blood transfusion, this not only is a direct interference with his or her liberty but also a violation of his or her ability to determine for himself or herself what kinds of medical treatment are acceptable to him or her. Patient autonomy is the ability of patients to decide on courses of treatment, choose particular physicians and so forth.

But autonomy cannot be identical to liberty for, when we deceive a patient, we are also interfering with his or her autonomy. Deception is not a way of restricting liberty. The person who, to use Locke’s example, is put into a cell and convinced that all the doors are locked (when, in fact, one is left unlocked) is free to leave the cell. But because he or she cannot – given his or her information – avail himself or herself of this opportunity, his or her ability to do what he or she wishes is limited. Self-determination can be limited in other ways than by interferences with liberty.

Both coercion and deception infringe upon the voluntary character of the agent’s actions. In both cases, a person will feel used, will see himself or herself as an instrument of
another’s will. His or her actions, although in one sense his or hers because he or she did them, are in another sense attributable to another. It is because of this that such infringements may excuse or (partially) relieve a person of responsibility for what he or she has done. The normal links between action and character are broken when action is involuntary.

Why, then, should we not restrict our categories to those of freedom, ignorance and voluntariness? Why do we need a separate notion of autonomy? One reason is because not every interference with the voluntary character of one’s action interferes with a person’s ability to choose his or her mode of life. If, as is natural, we focus only on cases where the person wishes to be free from interference, resents having his or her liberty interfered with, we miss an important dimension of a person’s actions.

Consider the classic case of Odysseus. Not wanting to be lured onto the rocks by the sirens, he commands his men to tie him to the mast and refuse all later orders he will give to be set free. He wants to have his freedom limited so that he can survive. Although his behaviour at the time he hears the sirens may not be voluntary – he struggles against his bonds and orders his men to free him – there is another dimension of his conduct that must be understood. He has a preference about his preferences, a desire not to have or to act upon various desires. He views the desire to move his ship closer to the sirens as something that is no part of him, but alien to him. In limiting his liberty, in accordance with his wishes, we promote, not hinder, his efforts to define the contours of his life.

To consider only the promotion or hindrance of first-order desires – which is what we focus upon in considering the voluntariness of action – is to ignore a crucial feature of persons, their ability to reflect upon and adopt attitudes towards their first-order desires, wishes and intentions.

It is characteristic of persons, and seems to be a distinctively human ability, that they are able to engage in this kind of activity. One may not just desire to smoke but also desire that one not have that desire. I may not just be motivated by jealousy or anger but may also desire that my motivations be different (or the same).

A person may identify with the influences that motivate him or her, assimilate them to himself or herself, view himself or herself as the kind of person who wishes to be moved in particular ways. Or, he or she may resent being motivated in certain ways, be alienated from those influences, prefer to be the kind of person who is motivated in different ways. In an earlier essay, I suggested that it was a necessary condition for being autonomous that a person’s second-order identifications be congruent with his or her first-order motivations (Dworkin, 1976). This condition, which I called ‘authenticity’, was to be necessary but not sufficient for being autonomous.

I now believe that this is mistaken. It is not the identification or lack of identification that is crucial to being autonomous, but the capacity to raise the question of whether I will identify with or reject the reasons for which I now act. There are a number of considerations that tell against my earlier view.

First, autonomy seems intuitively to be a global rather than a local concept. It is a feature that evaluates a whole way of living one’s life and can only be assessed over extended portions of a person’s life, whereas identification is something that may be pinpointed over short periods of time. We can think of a person who today identifies with, say, his or her addiction, but tomorrow feels it as alien and who continues to shift back and forth at frequent intervals. Does he or she shift back and forth from autonomy to non-autonomy?

Second, identification does not seem to be what is put in question by obvious interferences with autonomy. The person who is kept ignorant, lobotomised, or manipulated in various ways (all obvious interferences with autonomy) is not having his or her identifications interfered with, but rather his or her capacity or ability either to make or reject such identifications.

Third, there seems to be an implication of the position that is counterintuitive. Suppose that there is a conflict between one’s second-order and first-order desires. Say one is envious but does not want to be an envious person. One way of becoming autonomous is by ceasing to be motivated by envy. But another way, on the view being considered here, is to change one’s objections to envy, to change one’s second-order preferences.

Now there may be certain limits on the ways this can be done that are spelled out in the other necessary condition which I elaborated: that of procedural independence. So, for example, it would not do to have oneself hypnotised into identifying with one’s envious motivations. But even if the procedures used were ‘legitimate’, there seems to be something wrong with the idea that one becomes more autonomous by changing one’s higher-order preferences.

Fourth, this view breaks the link between the idea of autonomy and the ability to make certain desires effective in our actions. In this view, the drug addict who desires to be motivated by his or her addiction, and yet who cannot change his or her behaviour, is autonomous because his or her actions express his or her view of what influences he or she wants to be motivating him or her. This seems too passive a view. Autonomy should have some relationship to the ability of individuals, not only to scrutinise critically their first-order motivations but also to change them if they so desire. Obviously, the requirement cannot be as strong as the notion that ‘at will’ a person can change his or her first-order preferences. Indeed, there are certain sorts of inabilities of this nature that are perfectly compatible with autonomy. A person who cannot affect
his or her desires to act justly or compassionately is not thought by that fact alone to be non-autonomous. Perhaps, there is still the idea that if justice were not a virtue or that if, in a given case, hardness and not compassion were required, the agent could adjust his or her desires. Susan Wolf (1980) has suggested the requirement that a person ‘could have done otherwise if there had been good and sufficient reason’ (p. 159).

The idea of autonomy is not merely an evaluative or reflective notion, but includes as well some ability both to alter one’s preferences and to make them effective in one’s actions and, indeed, to make them effective because one has reflected upon them and adopted them as one’s own.

It is important both to guard against certain intellectualist conceptions of autonomy as well as to be candid about the ways in which people may differ in their actual exercise of autonomy. The first error would be to suppose that my views imply that only certain types or classes of people can be autonomous. If we think of the process of reflection and identification as being a conscious, fully articulated and explicit process, then it will appear that it is mainly professors of philosophy who exercise autonomy and that those who are less educated, or who are by nature or upbringing less reflective, are not, or not as fully, autonomous individuals. But a farmer living in an isolated rural community, with minimal education, may without being aware of it be conducting his or her life in ways which indicate that he or she has shaped and moulded his or her life according to reflective procedures. This will be shown not by what he or she says about his or her thoughts, but in what he or she tries to change in his or her life, what he or she criticises about others, the satisfaction he or she manifests (or fails to) in his or her work, family and community.

It may be true, however, that there is empirical and theoretical evidence that certain personality types, social classes or cultures are more (or less) likely to exercise their capacity to be autonomous. I do not suppose that the actual exercise of this capacity is less subject to empirical determination than, say, the virtue of courage. To the extent that this is borne out by the evidence, we must be on guard against the tendency to attribute greater value to characteristics which are more likely to be found in 20th-century intellectuals than in other groups or cultures.

To return to our original question of the relation between autonomy and liberty, I would claim that the two are distinct notions, but related in both contingent and non-contingent ways. Normally, persons wish to act freely. So, interfering with a person’s liberty also interferes with the ways in which he or she wants to be motivated, the kind of person he or she wants to be and, hence, with his or her autonomy. But a person who wishes to be restricted in various ways, whether by the discipline of the monastery, regimentation of the army, or even by coercion, is not, on that account alone, less autonomous. Further, I would argue that the condition of being a chooser (where one’s choices are not defined by the threats of another) is not just contingently linked to being an autonomous person but must be the standard case from which exceptions are seen as precisely that – exceptions. Liberty, power and control over important aspects of one’s life are not the same as autonomy but are necessary conditions for individuals to develop their own aims and interests and to make their values effective in the living of their lives.

Second-order reflection cannot be the whole story of autonomy. For those reflections, the choice of the kind of person one wants to become may be influenced by other persons or circumstances in such a fashion that we do not view those evaluations as being the person’s own. In ‘Autonomy and Behavior Control’, I called this a failure of procedural independence.

Spelling out the conditions of procedural independence involves distinguishing those ways of influencing people’s reflective and critical faculties which subvert them from those which promote and improve them. It involves distinguishing those influences such as hypnotic suggestion, manipulation, coercive persuasion, subliminal influence and so forth, and doing so in a non-ad hoc fashion. Philosophers interested in the relationships between education and indoctrination, advertising and consumer behaviour, and behaviour control have explored these matters in some detail, but with no finality.

Finally, I wish to consider two objections that can be (and have been) raised to my views. The first is an objection to introducing the level of second-order reflection at all. The second is why should we stop at the second level and is an infinite regress not threatened.

The first objection says that we can accomplish all we need to by confining our attention to people’s first-order motivation. After all, in my own view of the significance of procedural independence, we have to find a way to make principled distinctions among different ways of influencing our critical reflections, so why not do this directly at the first level. We can distinguish coerced from free acts, manipulated from authentic desires and so forth. My reply is that I think we fail to capture something important about human agents if we make our distinctions solely at the first level. We need to distinguish not only between the person who is coerced and the person who acts, say, to obtain pleasure, but also between two agents who are coerced. One resents being motivated in this fashion, would not choose to enter situations in which threats are present. The other welcomes being motivated in this fashion chooses (even pays) to be

---

1 I am indebted to an unpublished manuscript, ‘Autonomy and External Influence’, of John Christman for his ideas on these points. For further discussion, see Thalberg (1978) and Friedman (1986).
threatened. A similar contrast holds between two patients, one of whom is deceived by his or her doctor against his or her will and the other who has requested that he or her doctor lie to him or her if cancer is ever diagnosed. Our normative and conceptual theories would be deficient if the distinction between levels were not drawn.

The second objection is twofold. First, what is particularly significant about the second level? Might we not have preferences about our second-order preferences? Could I not regret the fact that I welcome the fact that I am not sufficiently generous in my actions? I accept this claim, at least in principle. As a theory about the presence or absence of certain psychological states, empirical evidence is relevant. It appears that for some agents, and some motivations, there is higher-order reflection. If so, then autonomy will be thought of as the highest-order approval and integration. As a matter of contingent fact, human beings either do not, or perhaps cannot, carry on such iteration at great length.

The second part of this objection concerns the acts of critical reflection themselves. Either these acts are themselves autonomous (in which case we have to go to a higher-order reflection to determine this, and since this process can be repeated an infinite regress threatens) or they are not autonomous, in which case why is a first-order motivation evaluated by a non-autonomous process itself autonomous. My response to this objection is that I am not trying to analyse the notion of autonomous acts, but of what it means to be an autonomous person, to have a certain capacity and exercise it. I do claim that the process of reflection ought to be subject to the requirements of procedural independence, but if a person’s reflections have not been manipulated, coerced and so forth, and if the person does have the requisite identification, then they are, in my view, autonomous. There is no conceptual necessity for raising the question of whether the values, preferences at the second order would themselves be valued or preferred at a higher level, although in particular cases the agent might engage in such higher-order reflection.

Putting the various pieces together, 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.

References


Gerald Dworkin is a professor of moral, political and legal philosophy. He is currently Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the University of California, Davis. Dworkin’s main areas of research include the nature and justification of autonomy, paternalism in the criminal law and the issue of which acts may legitimately be criminalised by the state.
Frontline practitioners like teachers in public-sector education systems are not policy takers but policy makers, according to Michael Lipsky’s seminal treatise Street-Level Bureaucracy, first published in 1980. They make policy by using their wide autonomy to adopt coping mechanisms, such as limiting client demand and creaming (cherry-picking). Winter and Nielsen have developed this into (1) reducing demand for output, (2) rationing output and (3) automating output. These distinctions are briefly clarified in the article. Do they have relevance for school systems and other Nordic public-sector frontline activities? The question is raised but left to upcoming research to clarify.

Keywords: Street-level bureaucrat; coping strategy; creaming; cherry-picking; autonomy; discretion; frontline practitioner; Lipsky, Michael; Winter, Søren; Nielsen, Viibeke L

For this brief article, I will select only one particular discourse among the many on frontline practitioner autonomy and one theory on how some frontline actors handle this discretion. I will concentrate on the autonomy and discretion of the so-called street-level bureaucracy, a discussion that grew out of Michael Lipsky’s seminal

1Synonyms of frontline practitioners include frontline staff, lineworkers, operators, and field officers. In Swedish: närbyråkrat, gräsbrotshyråkrat, baspersonal, handläggare, fältpersonal, personal; in Danish: markarbejder e.

2In prescriptive administrative theory, the time-honoured role ascribed to frontline practitioners has been one of the operators at the far end of implementation processes, who apply policy rules of some generality to incoming individual singular cases (individuals and collectivities). The job of the administrators is to carry out policy adopted by decision makers, and the role of frontline practitioners is to carry out the policy administered by the administrators. Frontline practitioners put policy into practice; they are policy takers, not policy makers.

Purpose

For this brief article, I will select only one particular discourse among the many on frontline practitioner autonomy and one theory on how some frontline actors handle this discretion. I will concentrate on the autonomy and discretion of the so-called street-level bureaucracy, a discussion that grew out of Michael Lipsky’s seminal

treatise *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*, first published in 1980. In addition to works by Lipsky, I will use literature produced by my Danish political science colleagues Winter and Nielsen.  

**Street-level bureaucrats as defined by Lipsky**

According to Lipsky (1980, p. 3), street-level bureaucrats are ‘public service workers who interact directly with citizens in the course of their jobs, and who have substantial discretion in the execution of their work’. Typical street-level bureaucrats are school teachers, social workers, home eldercare providers, health workers, and many other public employees who grant access to government programmes and provide services within them. To this list of Lipsky’s, we might add school supervisors, food and drug inspectors, environmental inspectors, prison guards, and junior lineworkers at local offices of the Swedish Social Insurance Agency or the Employment Agency Office.

In Lipsky’s view, to be a street-level bureaucrat does not necessarily mean that you must be a frontline practitioner who meets clients face-to-face like, for instance, teachers in municipal schools who interact with students. A street-level bureaucrat may physically intermingle with clients but she may also interact through email, letters, or the telephone and still be a street-level bureaucrat.

**Coping strategies of street-level bureaucrats to ease unbearable cross-pressure**

Lipsky’s work is about the unendurable cross-pressures that street-level bureaucrats experience and how they act to ease them (1980, p. 140). Street-level bureaucrats experience a gulf between the interminable client demands for their services and the limited resources available. Street-level bureaucrats cannot fully meet the quantity of demands from the clients, nor can they meet the substance of the individual client’s demands. They end up in unfavourable situations where they are compelled to use what Lipsky calls *coping mechanisms*. Otherwise, their working day would be psychologically exhausting with never-ending demands (Nielsen, 2006, pp. 864–866; Winter & Nielsen, 2008, p. 128 ff).

However, street-level bureaucrats harbour high ideals and strong ambitions to do good work. They feel bad about using coping mechanisms. Thus, both the bureaucrat and the client are thought to be in a lose–lose situation. The bureaucrat is forced to handle the client differently than she ideally wants to, and the clients are too weak to get what they want, the way they want it (Nielsen, 2006, p. 864; Winter & Nielsen, 2008, p. 122).

To avoid heavy caseloads, street-level bureaucrats use two coping strategies. They try to limit client demand for services. They reduce information dissemination about their amenities, ask clients and inspectees to wait, make themselves unavailable to contacts, or make ample use of referrals of difficult clients to other authorities. Or they resort to *creaming*. Frontline operators concentrate on a limited number of select clients, programme types, and solutions. They handpick easy, well-defined cases rather than difficult, amorphous, and time-consuming ones. They attend to cases that promise to be successful and downplay the trickiest ones.

Coping strategies are so common that they lead implementation astray. Thus, Lipsky (1980) concludes that street-level bureaucrats are policy makers: they actually create policy through the multitude of decisions they make in interacting with clients. In other words, policies are formed during the implementation process by programme operators as they develop routines and shortcuts for coping with their everyday jobs.

**The Winter–Nielsen extensions of Lipsky’s coping strategies**

The Danish political scientists Winter and Nielsen (2008, pp. 116–126) have expanded the idea of coping strategies into a notable scheme of fundamental types, of which I have selected the following three for brief presentations:

1. Reducing demand for output (Lipsky: limit client demand).
2. Rationing output (Lipsky: *creaming*).
3. Automating output (Lipsky: not noticed).

The reducing-demand-for-output mechanism includes the following three subgroups:

1. Limiting information to clients on services they are entitled to.
2. Forcing clients to form long waiting lines before getting appointments.
3. Making access to frontline workers cumbersome through incomprehensible application forms, short and inconvenient opening hours, inadequate signage to pertinent offices inside the building, and complex procedures in general (Winter & Nielsen, 2008, p. 116f).

In the rationing output strategy, frontline workers focus their efforts on a limited number of selected clients or solutions, not on the whole target group or a wider range of solutions. Here, I shall concentrate on *creaming*. Winter and Nielsen (2008, p. 117f) describe three different types:

1. I have excluded the other three categories due to interpretation difficulties. In Swedish: *gräddskumning*, *gräddskummeri*, skumma-grädden-av-mjölken* and *plocka-russinen-ur-kakan*.
1. Creaming for substantive success.
2. Creaming for cost efficiency.
3. Creaming for quantitative improvement.

In line with Lipsky, all creaming involves cherry-picking. Cherry-picking refers to selecting or accepting the best or most desirable, for example, accepting the most desirable people or things in a group (see cherry-picking, 2015). In *creaming for substantive success*, frontline operators choose to work with clients with good prognoses for recovery and/or rehabilitation and where they may use well-acknowledged or prestigious treatment technologies. Substantive success implies selecting cases that promise rapid and inexpensive cures, not those who are most in need or first in line. The idea behind this type of creaming is to further the achievement of substantive outcome goals.

*Creaming for cost efficiency* entails prioritising cases that contribute most to the composite cost-effectiveness of the whole office or unit. In this case, frontline operators direct their time and energy at cases whose solutions will probably promote goal achievement per working day or some other cost unit more than alternative cases. Environmental inspectors may choose to concentrate their inspections on large enterprises and neglect small ones to produce more improved environment per euro or Danish krone.

Frontline operators may also focus their cherry-picking on *creaming for quantitative improvement*. The aim is to carry out many outputs per unit of time, while ignoring the outcomes. In public health care, focus is on the quantity of services performed, for example, the number of surgeries performed in a clinic (outputs), not on whether patients have become healthier (outcome) through these surgeries. Library operators concentrate on lending as many books as possible (outputs), without bothering much about whether the borrowers get valuable entertainment or education out of reading them (outcome).

Research on how data from quasi-permanent indicator systems are used in after-the-fact auditing shows that adherence to data on output indicators instead of data on outcome indicators may produce very negative constitutive effects in affected agencies; agency leadership may begin to push for increasing the number of outputs without considering whether the outcome results are encouraging or not (Dahler-Larsen, 2007, 2011, 2012). Unintentionally, this may encourage goal displacement (Nielsen, 2006, p. 865). What would the mechanism be? Bohle and Meier have put it succinctly: ‘When agency performance is evaluated in terms of numerical outputs, bureaucrats have an incentive to maximize outputs, regardless of whether maximizing outputs is the preferred strategy for achieving desired social outcomes (a form of goal displacement). This incentive to maximize outputs may lead to organizational cheating, where public agencies purposely manipulate output levels to portray their work in the best light possible’ (2000, p. 173).

In automating output – coping strategy type 3, not noticed by Lipsky – frontline operators adopt SOP to achieve a reasonable workload (Winter & Nielsen, 2008, p. 117, 120f). SOP are work-saving institutions in decision situations that tend to surface regularly. ‘SOP are a detailed explanation of how a policy is to be implemented. The SOP may appear on the same form as a policy or it may appear in a separate document. The main difference between a SOP and a policy is details. An effective SOP communicates who will perform the task, what materials are necessary, where the task will take place, when the task shall be performed, and how the person will execute the task’ (SOP, 2015). ‘SOPs help government organizations, emergency response operation[s], and clinical research organization[s] achieve maximum safety and operational efficiency’ (SOP, 2014).

Within or even somewhat outside the substantive jurisdictional area created by the larger intervention, a local intervention is created that might govern the street-level bureaucrats and affect the continued implementation of the larger intervention.

**Reasons for the delegation of power and wide autonomy**

In adopting coping strategies, street-level bureaucrats use the large latitude some of them have in their work. Why do many (but not all) frontline practitioners have wide autonomy to make decisions of their own? The first answer is that higher level principals have delegated their decision-making power to them. To delegate means

1. to entrust to another and to entrust authority to another, and
2. to appoint as one’s representative or agent (see Delegate, 2015).

Why do principals delegate power within wide jurisdictions (i.e. autonomy) to lower level agents, including street-level bureaucrats? Among the several reasons for this, I will dwell upon just two.

First of all, delegation occurs because governing bodies lack competence to make appropriate local decisions. An overwhelming majority of all public-sector resolutions concern individual instances or specific situations. Cases in point are the placement of patients in lines for surgery, teachers’ decisions concerning grades for pupils, or the allocation of government housing loans to individual building commissioners. Often, these decisions have to be made on a continuous basis, for example, by the doctor in her clinic, the teacher in her classes, or the care provider to the clientele in municipal homes for the elderly. The resolutions require far more expert knowledge of the specific situation than higher level principals reasonably
can possess. They lack the necessary professional knowledge and knowledge of the individual clients. The need for situational adaptation with regard to the quality of client information is so demanding that higher level officials have no competence to handle these types of decisions.

In addition, it is not practically possible either for principals at the pinnacles of pyramids to determine such low-level, street-level work in detail before the fact. The performance of the school teacher in her classroom and the social worker in his encounters with assistance seekers is too complicated to be regulated from the top. Partly, this is due to the joint production between practitioners and clients. Joint production means that the content of service delivery is determined by the frontline practitioners after dialogues and discussions with the clients; such collaborative content of human interactions cannot be specified in advance and across the board.

Second, delegation occurs because governing bodies lack time to make well-informed local decisions. Usually, higher level officials make fundamental decisions in the same substantive area on only very 2, 3, or 4 years. However, in most functional policy domains, decisions have to be made several times a month, a week, and quite often even a day, in a continuous manner. The parliamentary resolutions in these cases must, therefore, be general and contain endlessly by bodies that have their powers delegated to them by parliamentary institutions or by authorities that in turn have their powers delegated to them by bodies that derive their power from parliamentary institutions.

**Autonomy and information asymmetry advantage frontline practitioners**

In adopting coping strategies, street-level bureaucrats run relatively small risks of being discovered. First, they are physically separated from their principals. Second, there are never enough resources to provide close, frequent and direct supervision of them. Third, there are no precise performance criteria that specify exactly how a teacher, an engineer, a public health nurse, or a social worker should do their job. Finally and most importantly, there is a considerable information asymmetry in their favour.

Lipsky's view of coping behaviour among street-level bureaucrats seems to be in line with the so-called public choice theory. Public choice theory departs from the economic principal-agent theory. Agents (executives) may act unfaithfully towards their principals because of the enormous information asymmetry in their favour.

Teachers who intermingle on a day-to-day basis with students and pupils know infinitely more about the school's operations at the street level than the rector (principal), who almost never meets a student in a teaching situation. It is information asymmetry of this type that enables self-regarding behaviour. This mechanism will influence implementation.

Coping behaviour is universally valid for all street-level bureaucrats, maintains Lipsky (Winter & Nielsen, 2008, p. 141 f). Once cross-pressure occurs, street-level bureaucrats of all sectors are compelled to adopt coping strategies to secure a fair and manageable workload. Against this, Winter and Nielsen (2008, p. 128 ff) argue that some street-level bureaucrats are enticed, not forced to cope. At least, this goes for a country like Denmark with a welfare-state regime of the Nordic type. Optimising job satisfaction or good relations with clients might be drivers, particularly in implementing regulation (Nielsen, 2006, p. 867 ff). For such cases, mechanisms of optimisation might be the proper expression to use. Street-level bureaucrats may adopt both coping and optimising mechanisms.

**Conclusion**

Coping mechanisms, limiting client demand for output, creaming, rationing output, or automating output through SOP: Do these notions have any relevance for teachers’ behaviour towards students in schools and top-down governance from national authorities? Do they have any relevance for other Nordic public-sector frontline activities? In this context, I can only raise the question. Providing answers to it must be left to future upcoming scholarship and science.

**References**


Evert Vedung is an emeritus professor of political science, especially housing policy at Uppsala University’s Institute for Housing and Urban Research (IBF). His works on evaluation in English include *Public Policy and Program Evaluation* (author, 1997, 2016), *Carrots, Sticks and Sermons* (1998, 2003, co-editor) and *Four Waves of Evaluation Diffusion* (2010).
AUTONOMY IN EDUCATION

Three forms of professional autonomy: de-professionalisation of teachers in a new light

Magnus Frostenson*

Centre for Empirical Research on Organizational Control, Örebro University School of Business, Örebro, Sweden

There is a general tendency in research to claim that the teaching profession, like many other professions, has undergone substantial de-professionalisation in recent years. Such de-professionalisation is commonly explained with reference to lost professional autonomy. A problematic assumption that this article identifies is that lost professional autonomy at the general level more or less inevitably results in lost autonomy at the level of practice. In addition, an unspoken but frequently present assumption is that increased managerial power or autonomy to influence professional work will actually lead to decreased professional autonomy within the professional practice. Both these assumptions are problematised through the development and use of a three-level analysis of professional autonomy. General professional autonomy, collegial professional autonomy and individual autonomy are identified. The two latter forms of autonomy relate to professional practice. It is argued that on the basis of this levelling of professional autonomy, there are strong reasons to question the abovementioned assumptions and to study professional work at the organisational level, in particular with regard to managerial ideologies, philosophies, routines for evaluating teachers and organisational principles for professional work. Such managerial ideas and practices tend to influence the nature of teachers’ work and, correspondingly, professional autonomy at the practice level. Not least in a fragmented and decentralised school system, local conditions for professional autonomy exhibit a highly varying character.

Keywords: autonomy; de-professionalisation; profession; teacher; Sweden

*Correspondence to: Magnus Frostenson, Örebro University School of Business, SE-701 82 Örebro, Sweden, Email: Magnus.Frostenson@oru.se

Could it be that the literature on the de-professionalisation of the teaching profession jumps to a questionable conclusion? Is it too quick to assume that the general loss of professional autonomy implies that professionals actually lose their autonomy at the level of practice? This, ultimately, is what this article suggests.

To start from the beginning, a general explanation of the de-professionalisation of the teaching profession, as well as other professions, is that professional actors have lost autonomy. Professional autonomy involves the freedom of professional actors to define the nature of professional work with regard to its formal contents, quality criteria, entry barriers, formal education, control mechanisms, ethics, et cetera. The loss of professional autonomy is commonly seen as the hallmark of de-professionalisation, a process wherein professional actors lose the ability to influence and the power to define the contents and forms of their own work, and fail to maintain the boundaries of their professional domains vis-à-vis other professionals, the authorities, market forces, or others (see, for example, Fredriksson, 2010; Jacobsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 1995).

When it comes to the teaching profession, it has long since been argued that de-professionalisation is an ongoing reality (Jacobsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 1995; cf. Carlgren, 1999). This is evident both in Sweden, the example on which this article will focus, and in other countries. Among the many arguments, one finds references to political reforms of the school system, such as free school choice, decentralisation, and the transfer of formal responsibility for the school system from the state to municipalities. The historical co-existence of progressive pedagogical ideals and NPM (New Public Management) ideology also matters. All such factors, it is claimed, have contributed to a substantial challenge to the professional autonomy of the teacher, which is particularly obvious in Sweden (see, among many which emphasise various aspects, Stenläs, 2009, 2011; Wennström, 2014; Zaremba, 2011).

However, even though it may be hard to argue against researchers who contend that teachers’ professional autonomy has been lost, or is, at least, under constant attack, there exists a teaching practice which must not, per definition, be characterised by lost autonomy. At the very least, this is a conclusion one reaches if one is bold.
as to discriminate between the profession and the professional practice (cf. Englund, 1996; Frelin, 2013; Hoyle, 2001). This is precisely the point of departure of this article. If we do not assume that reforms and other developments have, per definition, challenged teachers’ professional autonomy at the practice level, what do we see then? In other words, if autonomy is not just talked about as professional autonomy, but also as autonomy in the profession, do we, in such a case, end up drawing the same conclusion? Possibly not.

A central figure of thought throughout this paper is the proposition that de-professionalisation in the teaching profession implies challenges to teachers’ professional autonomy, but also that such challenges may or may not occur at different levels. If one looks at autonomy from the perspective of levels, the question of professional autonomy may be seen from a new perspective. The experienced loss of autonomy may not be present at the practice level, but may be highly identifiable at the general level.

The purpose of this article is to develop a three-tiered understanding of professional autonomy in the teaching profession and to discuss its significance for the debate on de-professionalisation. Implications for research are also discussed. The three-levelled understanding of professional autonomy in this paper takes into account both teachers as a professional category and as professional actors partaking in teaching practice at the local level. Examples used in the following discussion refer to the Swedish context, but they are most likely highly relevant for general analyses of professions and de-professionalisation, both in an international context and in connection with professionals other than the teaching profession.

A key contention of this article is that de-professionalisation, even though it may exist at the general level, need not necessarily imply loss of professional autonomy at the level of practice. Notably, challenges to professional autonomy need not be present at different levels simultaneously. It is also not the case that challenges to professional autonomy at one level necessarily result in challenges at other levels. Whether and why challenges occur is dependent on pedagogical ideals and influences, perspectives on pupils, ideologies of control, managerial efficiency principles, for example with regard to division of work, and other factors.

The article is theoretical in character, building on a categorisation originally published by Frostenson (2012), who discriminated between three levels of professional autonomy to understand the predicament of contemporary teachers as professionals. This article, however, develops the arguments and extends the analysis. As for structure, de-professionalisation is first discussed in terms of a loss of professional autonomy. Then, to problematise the argument of lost autonomy in the teaching profession, three forms of professional autonomy are delineated. An analysis of de-professionalisation in light of the tripartite understanding of professional autonomy follows, and, finally, some concluding implications for research close the article.

**De-professionalisation as loss of autonomy**

Autonomy is a central concept in the discussion on professions in general and de-professionalisation in particular. A profession is commonly viewed as a professional work category united by decisive influence and autonomy when it comes to defining the contents, quality criteria, control mechanisms, education, certification and ethics of work. Traditionally, a typical sign of professionalism has been the prevalence of a professional peer-oriented logic of organisation of work and its context (Freidson, 2001). Collegiality contextualises professional work, and the common professional value system and other mechanisms, such as educational requirements and entry barriers, condition work and its criteria of perfection. Professions, of course, do not enjoy splendid isolation, but usually require some sort of certification or authorisation from the state (cf. the recent reform of teacher certification in Sweden, see Frostenson, 2014; Lilja, 2011; Solbrekke & Englund, 2014). This is not to be seen as explicit state intervention in the profession, but may instead be part of the authorities’ assistance and safeguarding of the profession vis-à-vis other professional groups or societal actors. Boundaries exist and define the profession in relation to external constituents.

The general tendency in the literature on professions is to portray professions as under constant challenge and threat (Stenlås, 2009, 2011; Wennström, 2014; Zaremba, 2011, and others). This may be seen as a paradox since, at the same time, various categories of professional workers strongly aspire to manifest and develop their own trade into a profession, for example nurses (Sahlin-Andersson, 1994) or consultants (Gross & Kieser, 2006). This has also been the case of vocational teachers (Borg, 2007). Notwithstanding such a fact, the bulk of the literature suggests that teachers are subject to deep-level challenges to their professional status (Fredriksson, 2010). Explanations vary but seem to converge in a general conclusion. De-professionalisation is considered to be a fact and lost professional autonomy a central aspect of this. One could relate the alleged loss of professional autonomy to the mandate of the profession to decide on and influence the overarching frames of work, for example education, general organisational forms of the school system, principal organisation, collective agreements, boundaries of the profession and other issues. The general picture, at least in the Swedish case (Parding, 2010; Stenlås, 2009, 2011; Wennström, 2014; Zaremba, 2011, and others), is that teachers suffer from ever-increasing hardships, such as longer working hours, stricter spatial organisation of work, more administration, greater pressure from pupils, principals and parents, for example with regard to
marking, stronger forms of evaluation, new and traditionally irrelevant work tasks like marketing the school, poor wage development, et cetera. This is interpreted as a result of de-professionalisation. Teachers simply lose the power to influence their work, becoming prey to malicious management ideologies, political reforms, pedagogical experiments, incompetence of municipal and private education organisers and so on.

The open question which must be asked, however (and perhaps this is a heretical question considering the general tendency of the literature on professional autonomy in general and teachers’ professional autonomy in particular), is whether a loss of professional autonomy actually matters to teachers in their actual professional practice. Do teachers have to care? If, for example, a teacher has worked for 30 years, is trusted by school management, enjoys bearable working hours, and is given full confidence with regard to the planning, execution, marking and other traditional aspects of teaching, what is the problem with de-professionalisation? Does such a problem even exist? The teacher still masters the professional activity with skill, competence and mandate to decide on relative freedom. One clue might be the way in which this particular teacher’s experienced autonomy is under challenge (if indeed it is) within the professional practice. The following attempt to define levels of professional autonomy may serve as a tool to explain why or why not autonomy may be experienced by teachers from a professional practice perspective.

In understanding what autonomy may imply, both at the general level and at the level of practice, the three-level typology mentioned above will be developed. This categorisation captures professional autonomy at the general level (general professional autonomy) and at the level of practice (collegial professional autonomy and individual autonomy, respectively). Differentiating between levels or aspects of autonomy is not unique to this article. For example, Wermke (2013) elaborates on the concepts of institutional autonomy (regarding legal or status issues) and service autonomy (referring to autonomy in practice). Concepts like managerial or organisational autonomy have also been developed (see, for example, Evetts, 2003, 2009, 2011). Managerial (or organisational) autonomy, however, has been interpreted as the very opposite of professional autonomy (Stenlås, 2009, 2011), since it refers to the autonomy of managers or other administrative agents within organisations, with the mandate to decide on conditions of professional work. The categorisation of this article, however, retains the perspective of the professional – the teacher – as the agent whose autonomy is challenged. It offers a twofold interpretation of practice autonomy (possibly corresponding to service autonomy) to capture both the collegial and individual aspects of professional autonomy in the teaching profession.

Three forms of professional autonomy

General professional autonomy

General professional autonomy refers to the frames of professional work, with regard to, for example, organisation of the school system, legislation, entry requirements, teacher education, curricula, procedures and ideologies of control (such as management by objectives rather than detailed rules for the school system). Professional autonomy at this level consists in the mandate to organise the framing of teachers’ work, for example through influencing the general organisation or control principles of the school. Many researchers have this level as their vantage point when discussing the de-professionalisation of teachers, frequently in the form of studies examining consequences of certain reforms, for example the Swedish free school reform of the early 1990s (Carlgren & Klette, 2008; Lundström & Holm, 2011; Lundström & Parding, 2011; Parding, 2011) or consequences of NPM (Andersen, 2008; Jacobsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 1995).

One observation at this level is that the professional teaching body has not been able to dictate the conditions and frames of professional work at this higher institutional level. In the Swedish case, the reform that made municipalities the principal organisers of primary and secondary education (replacing the state) met with fierce resistance from teachers. Teacher training and education has been subject to constant reform and change. Collective agreements on working hours and other important aspects of teaching have, according to many, been to the disadvantage of teachers (Stenlås, 2009, 2011; Wennström, 2014; Zaremba, 2011). Decentralisation of school governance has implied increased power to decide on the contents, forms and evaluation of teachers’ work (Lundahl, 2005). Free school choice, which has resulted in the framing of professional work in a market context, has in turn implied that teachers have been assigned tasks of marketing and selling that have traditionally been completely foreign to professional work (Fredriksson, 2010; Lundström & Holm, 2011; Lundström & Parding, 2011).

To some, this is a consequence not only of the reforms as such, but also of NPM as an ideological construct clashing with traditional professional logic of organising work (Jacobsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 1995). A new discursive practice of control, measurement and efficiency is said to have established itself over the teachers’ sphere of influence (Johnsson & Lindgren, 2010; Lunneblad, 2010; Selander, 2006).

What is striking, when it comes to this challenge of general professional autonomy in the teaching profession, is that the developments have to a high degree occurred without the explicit request or participation of teachers themselves. For example, the establishment of large private entrepreneurs owned by venture capitalists as principal school organisers has been a more or less unanticipated
development that has conditioned the frames of teachers’ work and, as discussed below, in some cases also the contents of it (Fredriksson, 2010; Frostenson, 2011; Lundström & Parding, 2011; Parding, 2011; Sandoff & Norén 2002). From the perspective of pupils, of course, such a development has implied further opportunities to choose schools. This freedom of choice, however, affects the nature of teachers’ work, situating it in a market context (Johnsson & Lindgren, 2010; Lund, 2007). Managerial practices, competition, ‘customer’ adaptation, evaluation systems, accountability and control are likely to follow. On another note, however, other researchers claim that the profession has been highly influenced by ideals of care, emphasising not traditional professional values, but the personal development of the pupil (Stenlås, 2009, 2011). These tendencies, labelled as attacks on the profession from both the political left and right (Wennström, 2014; Zaremba, 2011), tend to undermine the traditionally strong professional authority and autonomy of the teacher, it is argued.

Such a development refers to both a more general reform context and ideological setting, in opposition to traditional professional ideals. The results of this development point in one direction, to de-professionalisation of the teaching profession. Such a conclusion bears traces of generality. As a professional body, teachers have not been able to set the direction of school developments in recent decades. Politicians, market forces, ideological reformists, and others have paved the way for a development that need not in all its details but in its generality be seen as beyond the control of the teaching profession as such. One may argue that recent Swedish reforms follow this trajectory. For example, tendencies towards marks in earlier grades, not a reality in Sweden for several decades, are not genuinely supported by the two large teacher trade unions. The teacher certification reform was in principle supported by the teacher unions but was paradoxically organised to include state verification of the quality and relevance of teacher exams and their contents rather than internal professional judgment and evaluation. In addition, the reform had to be revised during the process in order not to exclude too many teachers from certification (Frostenson, 2014; Lilja, 2011; Solbøkke & Englund, 2014).

In sum, actors like the state, private enterprises within the school system, and municipalities have conditioned the frames of the teaching profession in such a way that the actual influence, in the form of professional autonomy, can be said to have been undermined in recent decades. What this has implied at the level of practice is, however, another important aspect of de-professionalisation and professional autonomy in general.

**Collegial professional autonomy**

Decentralisation implies that issues involving pedagogical concepts, control and organisation of professional work, et cetera, become issues where local school management has decisive influence (Lundahl, 2005). One interpretation of this is that **managerial autonomy** (enjoyed by, for example, principals at local schools), has increased, possibly at the expense of professional workers (Evets, 2003, 2009, 2011; Stenlås, 2009, 2011). One important issue is, however, how such local influence in the form of managerial autonomy is **used** and in which way it stands in opposition to collegial influence within the teaching profession. The loss of general professional autonomy and the rise of (reform generated) managerial autonomy at the school level may pose a substantial challenge to the possibility of exercising autonomy at the level of practice. But is it, per definition, true that collegiality, one aspect of autonomy, cannot be upheld at the practice level even if general professional autonomy is lost and local school management has a say when it comes to organising professional work? If the answer to this question is no, **collegial professional autonomy** becomes a relevant issue for analysis.

Collegial professional autonomy in the teaching profession concerns the teachers’ collective freedom to influence and decide on practice at local level, a form of autonomy enjoyed to varying degrees in practice (see, for example, Fredriksson, 2010; Svensson, 2008; Wermke, 2013). Judging from the Swedish case, decentralisation has not just implied increased influence of school management at the expense of the teachers. A central idea behind letting the school governance reform of the 90s was to give teachers the possibility to develop new pedagogical ideas and concepts in new forms (Lundahl, 2005). Possibilities to establish, run and organise schools on principles of cooperation and collegiality were introduced. This is an aspect of local level influence based on an idea of joint efforts to organise and develop professional work on the basis of pedagogical ideas. According to this idea, the phenomena of collegial and managerial autonomy would converge. Increased autonomy to manage schools would be exercised in a collegial manner.

However, few would argue that such a development has taken place in the Swedish case. Swedish schools tend to be managed by either municipalities or, as it turned out, large private educational organisers, making truly collegially driven schools uncommon. But despite such developments, both public and private school organisers and local school management have had pedagogical or organisational preferences that may have endorsed or even required teachers to work collegially through collective forms of work (cf. Stenlås 2009, 2011). The emphasis on or even requirement of collective forms of work may be an expression of pedagogical preferences or ideals by school management. From a practice perspective, however, the corollary of such requirements may be **increased experienced autonomy in collegial form**, whereas individual autonomy in the form of individual decision-making power and influence on work is downplayed. Collegiality
as a managerial preference or ideal may imply substantial freedom for teachers in shaping the contents and forms of collegial work relating to teaching practice. Thus, increased collegial autonomy may follow.

Such reasoning suggests that collegial autonomy may not be contrary to managerial or ideological preferences, but fully in line with them. Within the sphere of collegial autonomy, substantial freedom of action and influence may prevail. In other words, decentralisation of decision-making power need not automatically imply decreased autonomy at the level of practice, since collective forms of work, preferred by school management, may require it.

One should bear in mind that collegial autonomy may be exercised in organisational settings where teachers, at a general level, may be subject to strong restrictive organisational and pedagogical ideals. Collegial forms of work, where teachers are, for example, required to work in teams or collectively according to ideals of problems-based or entrepreneurial learning or other concepts, may imply restricted autonomy from a general professional perspective, but not from a collegial one. Decisions concerning contents and forms of work are reached jointly. This paradox has to do with the fact that managerial ideas about the frames and methodology of local professional work organisation and pedagogy co-exist with teacher autonomy in terms of defining the contents and general forms of work, at least at the collegial level. Despite the challenge to general professional autonomy, collegiality at the local practice level implies that professional actors define the contents, pedagogy and forms of work based on professional competence. This does not mean that any teacher can do whatever he or she likes, but that a requirement exists on collegial action with regard to professional work at the local level. What to do, how to do it, as well as how to examine and assess are issues that are decided upon jointly if collegial autonomy exists.

One may argue that collegial autonomy stands in opposition to individual autonomy (see below). This may or may not be the case. Collective forms of work, including decision-making power over what and how work should be performed may be the opposite of individual autonomy. But individual autonomy does not in any sense preclude collegial efforts in teaching practice. In such cases, individual autonomy is, so to speak, used collegially. Depending on the nature of practical work, individual autonomy of teachers may co-exist with collegial autonomy. Perhaps this is not the case from a strictly organisational point of view, but probably is in practice. Even structured forms of work may imply structures within which the individual teacher has substantial freedom to choose what themes or methods to work with.

A consequence of this reasoning is that collegial autonomy may actually be generated through two different processes. It may be seen as the delegated and preferred principle for organising work from a managerial perspective or it may be seen as the collegial outcome of individual autonomy, where preferences of individual teachers result in collegial action and decisions. One may object that the former basis for collegial autonomy is highly conditioned by school management, implying that the latter form is the only ‘genuine’ form of collegial autonomy. From a practice perspective, however, both forms of collegial autonomy result in the same outcome, that professional workers jointly decide on and organise professional work. Furthermore, the abovementioned case where managerial and collegial autonomy converge may be seen as a third situation or process (although uncommon) when collegial professional autonomy is generated, in that case also accompanied by a mandate to run and organise the school.

**Individual autonomy**

Individual autonomy may be understood as the individual’s opportunity to influence the contents, frames and controls of the teaching practice. It involves the existence of a practice-related auto-formulation of the contents, frames and controls of professional work (Järkestig Berggren, 2011; Krejšler, 2005). This includes choice of teaching materials, pedagogy, mandate to decide on the temporal and spatial conditions of work, and to influence the evaluation systems of professional teaching practice. Central to individual autonomy is a substantial sphere of action and decision-making power tied to the professional practice of the individual teacher. This, of course, does not imply complete freedom (Järkestig Berggren, 2011), since the teacher must still respect authoritative rules and prescriptions, for example with regard to subject content and marking. But within those frames, the limits for individual influence on creating, inventing, adopting course content and teaching are manifold. The enjoyment of individual autonomy at the level of practice is possible when local school management has limited actual opportunity to curb it (for example through the mandated use of strongly collective forms of work, standardised modules for teaching or other devices), or little interest in doing it, possibly because of a strong trust mandate given to individual teachers.

At least in the Swedish case, the teacher has traditionally been trusted to choose and dictate the means to achieve what is required in the curriculum, for example by choosing pedagogical means and ideas, course books and other ingredients of professional practice. One concrete example of a challenge to individual autonomy is the compulsory use of ready-made modules or tutorials for teaching. Some schools, mainly under private principal organisation, declare openly that teaching material is not chosen at the discretion of the individual teacher (see, for example, Kunskapsskolan, 2015), but must be decided upon centrally and adopted and used within all schools run by the enterprise. Others even reject the use of textbooks. For professional teachers within such organisations, the
corollary is that they are stripped of one of the traditionally central aspects of professional work and practice, the freedom to choose and develop teaching material as preferred by the teacher herself. The holistic character of professional work is undermined by externally decided principles of division of labour where traditional aspects of work are removed from practice and allocated to specialists, legitimised through norms of efficiency and quality.

Infringement on individual autonomy in the teaching practice does not, of course, have to emanate from local school management. Administrative duties, for example with regard to documentation, may follow directives or rules from authorities. Such duties may severely contrast with the possibility to undertake professional work in a desired manner. Such infringements refer to a high degree to the contents of professional work rather than its forms. Experiences of such administrative duties may vary considerably between teachers and schools.

The frames of professional teaching practice may refer to temporal and spatial organisation of work. That is, individual autonomy presupposes relative professional control of where and at what times work is performed. One may argue that such professional autonomy implies flexibility for teachers, but such flexibility is constantly under challenge, following demands on teachers to organise their work to facilitate flexibility of organisations and pupils. That is, flexibility stands against flexibility (Frostenson, 2012). Being required to be present at work between 8 A.M. and 5 P.M. implies that teaching practice becomes spatially and temporally bound, severely affecting individual autonomy in terms of the freedom to organise work. Motivations for temporally and spatially decreased individual autonomy are usually argued to be the alleged needs of pupils, pedagogical concepts and organisational priorities. A striking formulation could be found on the homepage of a Swedish school a few years ago: ‘To manifest and develop our strong position in the market, we require employees that are driven and not afraid to work hard. Flexibility and accessibility are also of importance to us, since they mean that we can work according to the needs of the pupil. For this reason, it is important that our recruited staff are accessible and see it as self-evident that they will be there all day long for the pupils’ (NTI-gymnasiet, 2011, author’s translation). This is an example of time and space related flexibility of the teacher being a mere extension of the requirements of the school and the pupils.

As for controls, the highly unevenly distributed existence of performance control systems is a concrete example of the issue of control in the teaching practice. Whereas teachers traditionally monitor the output of their work either collegially or, even, individually, the emergence of performance management systems (such as course evaluations, questionnaires related to teaching practice, evaluations and rankings made by school management, for example through observations) strongly challenges traditional professional quality controls. However, individual autonomy does not necessarily exclude the existence of evaluations and controls related to teaching practice. The central issue, rather, is who is in control of the instruments of control and how these instruments are used. The challenge to individual autonomy lies specifically in the use of metrics or other forms of evaluation as decisive criteria for quality. That is, the ultimate criterion of successful professional work is the attainment of a good score on a questionnaire administered by school management or the like. The teacher becomes accountable rather than responsible (Solbrekke & Englund, 2011), implying that the teacher loses the traditionally enjoyed mandate of trust. Instead, ongoing adaptation to the measurement systems is necessary for the professional teacher.

What is important to note, however, is that infringements on individual autonomy with regard to content, frames and controls of professional practice, need not necessarily occur. Whereas some schools still allow for considerable autonomy with regard to teaching practice, others challenge professional work through organisational and managerial measures severely infringing on the professional autonomy related to various aspects of teaching practice.

**De-professionalisation in a new light**

Numerous studies have focused on the de-professionalisation of the teaching profession (Stenlås, 2009, 2011; Wennström, 2014; Zaremba, 2011, to mention just a few). A common conclusion seems to be an ongoing de-professionalisation that expresses itself through ever decreasing opportunities to control and direct the profession. Notwithstanding all the merits of such studies, a problem touched upon in this article is the conclusion that decreased professional autonomy automatically implies a strongly reduced independent sphere of action at the practice level. What this article actually problematises is two underlying assumptions more or less present in studies on professionalism.

The first assumption suggests an ‘all or nothing’ approach to professional autonomy. This ‘all or nothing’ assumption implies that lost general professional autonomy more or less automatically implies lost professional autonomy within the professional practice. In the words of this article, de-professionalisation in terms of lost general professional autonomy would imply the loss or undermining of collegial and individual autonomy.

The second assumption suggests that if managerial autonomy exists in the sense that local school managers or, possibly, principal educational organisers are granted the privilege of influencing professional practice, with an explicit mandate to control its contents, forms and outputs, they will actually do so in a way that undermines collegial and individual autonomy. In other words, managerial
autonomy is, according to the assumption, presumed to be used in a way that undermines collegial and individual autonomy. To wit, ‘manager’ may in the Swedish case mean the principal of the local school, which is a legally required position according to the Swedish School Act, or any other person with managerial influence on local schools, for example within a private education organiser with several school units.

Without questioning whether real challenges to teachers’ professional autonomy exist, the article argues that both of these assumptions are highly problematic. The first argument, strongly deductive in its character, assumes that the natural consequence of a loss of general autonomy is a loss of professional autonomy at the local level, implying that collegial and individual autonomy are undermined. Such an argument seems to underestimate the fragmentation evident in at least the Swedish school system today, to a high degree the result of decentralisation and the possibility to influence how teachers work at local level (see, for example, Frostenson, 2012). What it means to be a teacher in one school might be something quite different in another. Indeed, sometimes the differences are evident even within the same school. The teacher may be seen as a specialist, coach, leader, service staff member or a childcare worker, depending on the ideals of school management. Within this fragmented picture, some teachers – but not all – experience practice-based professional autonomy, more or less in the same way as they traditionally had. Others, however, experience quite another character of teaching work, in stark contrast to any traditional notion of what characterises the position of the professional teacher.

The argument may, of course, be one of definition. According to such a view, experienced professional autonomy within the practice of teaching would be a kind of false consciousness or illusion because teachers are not in full control of the practice, but only granted autonomy by management. Managerially mandated professional autonomy would not be ‘real’, because it is conditioned by managerial ideologies and decisions. However, such a definitional rejection of the existence of collegial and individual autonomy in the teaching profession seems presumptuous, since it obscures the significance of the profession as a practised reality, in other words the professional experience and practice of autonomy. Against such a backdrop, the ‘all or nothing’ assumption is simply strange. As will be discussed below, professional practice – rather than just the professional frames, boundaries, educational contexts, et cetera – is an underestimated locus for examining the existence or non-existence of autonomy.

The second argument – the conviction that managers at the local school level or among principal school organisers will, if they are given the chance, establish a regime that undermines professional autonomy within the teaching practice – is, one could argue, simply false. At the very least, the argument does not hold if one considers the entire spectrum of schools, where school managements are actually given relative freedom in implementing ideals related to control, organisation and pedagogy. The fact that such ideals differ implies that the experienced practice and professional autonomy of teachers will differ. Strict output control, strong division of labour, as well as strict temporal and spatial organisation of teachers’ work can be assumed to decrease experienced professional autonomy at the level of practice. Such solutions and ideals, however, need not be present. Managerial autonomy may actually manifest itself through decentralisation of all relevant decisions concerning practice to teachers. And in some cases, as the discussion on collegial autonomy suggests, a form of autonomy may actually be in the pedagogical and organisational interests of school management. Autonomy at the practice level then becomes an integral part of the management philosophy of principal or local school organisers. The fact that the state has transferred several governing mechanisms to the municipalities and schools (resource allocation, class size, remedial teaching, governance of teachers’ working conditions, et cetera, see Lundahl, 2005) does not necessarily imply that municipalities, private education organisers and local schools use these means to severely impact autonomy in teachers’ professional practice (even though some obviously do).

Whether a general adoption of managerial, pedagogical or administrative practices that undermine professional autonomy has occurred at the practice level is an empirical question, not a definitional one. The contemporary fragmented Swedish school system actually offers possibilities to sustain experienced professional autonomy at the level of practice. It could be argued, of course, that the mere fragmentation of the school system and the teaching profession is a sign of de-professionalisation as such. But even if this is the case, macro level de-professionalisation should not be taken as an automatic confirmation of micro-level practice de-professionalisation in terms of lost autonomy.

Notably, if the two assumptions described earlier in this section do not hold, de-professionalisation should be seen in a new light. Not least, it is very important to identify the level at which challenges to professional autonomy actually occur and what the consequences of such challenges are. One way of understanding this is also to identify which aspects that traditionally constitute a profession are upheld within new organisational, ideological and pedagogical regimes. In other words, to understand de-professionalisation, one should not assume without careful analysis that all aspects that characterise professions (control of relevant education, work content, certification, quality standards, ethics, et cetera) have been lost in the teaching profession. For example, little
influence with regard to general organisational principles of the school system does not mean that teachers are not allowed to influence the contents of daily work (Frostenson, 2012). Or, in another vein, the decentralisation of the school system actually allows for collegial autonomy in the sense that, for example, teachers with a pedagogical ideal can establish and run schools (cf. Lundahl, 2005; Román, Hallseén, Nordin, & Ringarp, 2015).

**Implications for research**

One relatively obvious consequence of the previous reasoning is that studies of professional autonomy and the de-professionalisation of teachers should not stop at the general level, limiting themselves to the frames of the teaching profession. Of course, this article does not claim that studies usually do end at this level. Studies, such as those by Fredriksson (2010), Parding (2010) and Wermke (2013), belong to the many examples which certainly do go into teachers’ work and practice to understand phenomena like autonomy or spheres of action. But it should be emphasised that more general reform studies at least suffer the risk of committing the fallacy of the ‘illicit’ assumptions mentioned earlier. It is of considerable importance to understand not only the reforms as such, but also their actual implications given the decentralised and fragmented picture of today’s school system. That is, if reforms result in extended managerial mandates of influence and power within the school system, it is important to study how such mandates are actually used, for example with regard to policy enactment (cf. Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012). Doing so will imply valuable insights into professional practice, which is crucial for understanding the development of the teaching profession.

Because of the fragmentation of the school system, evident in the Swedish case not least due to decentralisation, there is a further need to identify and problematise professional activity at the level of practice. Such an approach not only focuses on teaching practice as such, but also on ideologies, pedagogical ideals, organisational principles and management approaches of local school management and principal school organisers. The local organisational context impacts on what it means to be a teacher to a higher degree than the more general development of the teaching profession probably reveals, since it is the local school management (and principal education organisers at the meso level) that possess the means to challenge the professional identity at school level. Not least, performance measurement, division of labour, standardised tasks, and practically and ideologically motivated approaches to pedagogy are important factors for an understanding of how the professional practice actually develops.

A multi-faceted school context, like the Swedish one, makes it possible for school managers to mould and carve out the professional role of the teacher in a discretionary way. One aspect of this discretion is ideological, another is instrumental, implying the choice and use of certain instruments to control professional activities. Both aspects are important to understand, hopefully without falling into the trap of labelling everything with an element of control and measurement as NPM. Rather, to understand professional autonomy and potential de-professionalisation, not only managerial ideologies must be understood, but also how such ideological philosophies of management are used (or not) in conjunction with pedagogical ideals. The important paradox of the management of professions in a country like Sweden (and presumably other countries too) is that managerial autonomy (cf. Evetts, 2003, 2009, 2011) also implies the possibility to endow teachers with substantial freedom within their professional practice, even though, admittedly, this is not always the case. That is, the managerial predicament of exercising influence on professional work is not necessarily used (or ‘misused’) to undermine teacher professionalism in practice.

Another way of putting this is to call for studies that carefully examine what actually defines and conditions the experienced action sphere of professional teaching. The possibilities to create local autonomy of collegial or individual character, as described in this article, should not be underestimated. Whether the will to further such autonomy exists is quite another issue.

In understanding school management and its consequences, it is not 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. As already noted, managerial and collegial autonomy may converge if a school is run, for example, by a number of collegially organised teachers with a particular pedagogical ideal. Who organises the school (as principal educational organiser) is probably also of importance. At any rate, increased fragmentation and individualisation following decentralisation should imply that professionalism must be understood at the levels where it is exercised. Whatever the case, in the Swedish school system, professional autonomy is certainly conditioned at the local level, because of the strong mandate of school managers and principal educational organisers to organise professional work.

**References**


Stenlås, N. (2009). En kär i kläm – Läraryrket mellan professionella ideal och statliga reformideologier [A professional body under pressure – The teaching profession between professional ideals and...


Magnus Frostenson is an Associate Professor with the Centre for Empirical Research on Organizational Control (CEROC) at the Örebro University School of Business. His research is focused on business ethics, corporate social responsibility and the management and control of professions.
AUTONOMY IN EDUCATION

Shifts in curriculum control: contesting ideas of teacher autonomy

Solvi Mausethagen¹* and Christina Elde Mølstad²

¹Centre for the Study of Professions, Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences, OSLO, Norway; ²Department of Social Sciences, Hedmark University College, Elverum, Norway

This article addresses how the introduction of a more product-oriented curriculum in Norway has challenged and altered more traditional ideas of teacher autonomy. Based on interview data, the study investigates prominent perspectives on autonomy through an analysis of how teachers, principals, a district superintendent and educational administrators perceive the current steering and control through the national curriculum. The findings show three main perspectives on teacher autonomy as (1) pedagogical freedom and absence of control, (2) the will and capacity to justify practices and (3) a local responsibility. However, these varying viewpoints are contested and highlight the multidimensionality of teacher autonomy. These should be discussed in relation to one another for an increased understanding of the associated and current dilemmas arising in the teaching profession with the shifts in curriculum control. The findings also shed light on how an increase in local responsibilities related to student outcomes and school development interferes in the unofficial contract that has historically existed between teachers and the state.

Keywords: autonomy; curriculum control; education reform

¹Correspondence to: Solvi Mausethagen, Centre for the Study of Professions, Oslo and Akershus University College, Pilestredet 40, 0130 Oslo, Norway, Email: solvi.mausethagen@hioa.no

This article addresses how recent changes regarding curriculum control in Norway are perceived at different institutional levels, as well as how they challenge and alter ideas of teacher autonomy. Although the issues of accountability and autonomy in education have received significant attention in international research (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2007; Day, 2002; Evetts, 2008; Helgøy & Homme, 2007), how teacher autonomy is framed by specific state-based curricula has been researched to a lesser extent (Mølstad, 2015a). Therefore, this study investigates how teachers, principals, a district superintendent and educational administrators perceive steering and control within an outcome-based national curriculum and associated assessment policies with a stronger accountability element than that of previous curricula (Skedsmo & Mausethagen, 2015; Tveit, 2014). Furthermore, the study addresses the multidimensionality of teacher autonomy, as well as how an increase in local responsibilities related to school development and student outcomes for municipalities and principals interferes in the unofficial contract that has existed between teachers and the state.

Norway is an interesting context for studying teacher autonomy since policymakers have recently increased their emphasis on student outcomes, assessment practices and teacher accountability. At the same time, Norway has a long-standing, strong tradition of compulsory schooling, and the teaching profession has historically held a relatively important position (Rovde, 2006; Slagstad, 1998). However, since the release of the first Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results in 2001, educational reforms, schooling and teacher education have been criticised as not satisfying societal expectations (Karseth & Sivesind, 2010), which legitimised the introduction of a national quality assessment system (NQAS), including national testing, in 2004, and an outcome-based curriculum in 2006 [The Knowledge Promotion (LK06)]. The LK06 represents a shift from a content oriented to a more outcome-oriented curriculum (Engelsen, 2009). Additionally, municipalities were given increased responsibilities in terms of school development and student outcomes (Sandberg & Aasen, 2008). As such, these reforms have affected both the curriculum and the structure of the educational system, focusing on increasing the responsibility of municipalities and schools to improve student outcomes, as well as placing more emphasis on school leadership (Skedsmo & Mausethagen, 2015). Therefore, the emphasis of educational policy has shifted from a somewhat traditional interpretation of autonomy – where teachers enjoyed a high degree of classroom autonomy, coupled with a limited evaluation of student
outcomes – to placing more responsibility on local actors (municipalities, schools and teachers) and their documentation on succeeding in improving student outcomes and the overall quality and efficiency of teaching.

The implications of new assessment and accountability policies on teacher professionalism and autonomy have been extensively addressed in existing research, particularly in the Anglo-American context. This body of research is often concerned with how teacher autonomy has been reduced, particularly over the last two decades (Mausethagen, 2013b). International research tends to uphold a quite dichotomous and linear picture of changes in teachers’ work and professionalism, where accountability pressure reduces teacher autonomy and typically leads to more standardisation and micromanagement of teaching (Evetts, 2008; Jeffrey, 2002; Locke, Vulliamy, Webb, & Hill, 2005). However, empirically, such tensions between autonomy and accountability are more likely to co-exist and be negotiated within the local context (Mausethagen, 2013a; Stone-Johnson, 2014; Wilkins, 2011). Although previous studies have investigated issues related to curriculum control and teacher autonomy, they have to a limited extent done so from the perspectives of different actors at different institutional levels. Moreover, autonomy is often conceptualised as ways of freedom rather than also focusing on issues of self-governance.

However, important contextual differences also exist between Anglo-American and Nordic countries, in the latter, the teaching profession has been subject to external control of outcomes to a limited extent only and has enjoyed a relatively high degree of professional ‘freedom’ (Hopmann, 2007; Lundahl & Tveit, 2014). Nonetheless, some cross-national studies have also highlighted interesting differences across the Nordic countries in terms of changes in educational policy and implications for teacher autonomy. For example, Carlgren and Klette (2008) found how Swedish teachers enjoyed more individual autonomy although they were also restricted by external relationships in which local authorities played an important role. The Swedish teachers also showed more willingness to accept new obligations than their Norwegian counterparts. Helgoy and Homme (2007) reported that Norwegian teachers were better than Swedish teachers at balancing traditional and new demands on teaching and seemed more in control of policy changes, primarily by relying on professional practices based on formal education. These two studies were conducted before the outcome-oriented curriculum in Norway was introduced, and the variations are interpreted as providing different conditions for the promotion of teacher autonomy in the two countries. However, more recent studies from Norway suggested that school leaders and teachers were becoming more oriented towards student outcomes and accountability for these as a result of how new ways of steering and control had influenced the patterns of interactions among national authorities, municipalities and schools (Skedsmo, 2009).

In a cross-national study of Finland and Norway, Mølstad (2015b) found that local curriculum development in Norway over the last decade had evolved into mainly focusing on the application of the national curriculum rather than its development. As such, state-based curricula frame teacher autonomy differently.

Against this backdrop, the following research questions have been pursued: How do different actors within the Norwegian educational system perceive autonomy in education, and in what ways do changes related to curriculum control challenge ideas on teacher autonomy? What central dimensions of teacher autonomy can be identified within and among different institutional levels, and how do these dimensions represent possible dilemmas and challenges for the teaching profession?

The remainder of this article is organised as follows. The next section presents theoretical perspectives on autonomy and how curriculum theory provides a fruitful lens to investigate issues of autonomy for the teaching profession. Then we describe the interview data and its analysis. Through the analysis, three prominent yet contested ideas on teacher autonomy are illuminated – as pedagogical freedom and absence of control, as the capacity and will for self-governance and as a local responsibility. We conclude by discussing how in various ways, these three perspectives on teacher autonomy are creating dilemmas for the teaching profession in Norway, following more product control.

Multidimensionality of teacher autonomy

The multifaceted and value-laden concept of teacher autonomy is used in different ways by different actors (e.g., Ozga & Lawn, 1981). The various uses of the concept relates to different contents that can be attached to professional autonomy, mainly focusing on issues of self-governance and experiences of ‘freedom’ in professional practice.

Generally, professional autonomy implies that individuals control the terms and content of their work and related issues, based on their professional knowledge and moral and ethical principles (Molander & Terum, 2008). However, autonomy is also related to self-governance (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2007) and one’s capacity to develop, safeguard and justify one’s knowledge base. Such conceptualisations of autonomy often receive lesser focus than issues of ‘freedom’. Thus, autonomy connects personal and professional accountability (Conway & Murphy, 2013), often placed in opposition to managerial accountability (Sinclair, 1995). This latter distinction can also be described as internal and external accountability, which has implications for how teachers and other actors within the field of education experience autonomy. In other words, the quest for increased external accountability can also be understood as a response to the perceived lack of internal accountability within the profession.
A common yet imprecise distinction is often made between individual and collective autonomy. While individual autonomy can be broadly defined as a person exercising a high degree of control over issues directly connected to his or her daily activities (Frostenson, 2012; Ingersoll, 2003), collective autonomy is typically how an organisation or union controls individuals' work and professionalism. Individual autonomy can be a somewhat troublesome concept within the context of education, as nowadays, it can be argued that teachers are working less as privatised educators in the classroom. However, collective autonomy can also be difficult in this context; for example, although teacher unions come closest to investigating and supporting the collective voice of teachers, the views of local groups of teachers are not necessarily in accordance with the official views of their union. Moreover, this distinction relates to how teachers' work takes place within their schools and depends on the curriculum requirements and other legal regulations; this indicates why strong leadership and the creation of organisational legitimacy have become increasingly important (Hopmann, 2003; Noordegraf, 2013). Thus, teacher autonomy is also grounded within school organisations and among colleagues.

Autonomy can therefore be viewed as a continuum where the performative and individual aspects of teachers' work are related to the organisational and collective aspects of their profession (Mausethagen 2013c; Molander & Terum, 2008; Wernike & Höstfält, 2014). In other words, if educational policies contradict the values and knowledge of teachers, this can create tensions and result in teachers' emphasising the importance of maintaining control over classroom practices and their knowledge base. As such, these tensions can also result in teachers' lack of involvement in local development initiatives. However, the profession must also clarify in public discourse that teachers' internal control is sufficient and can protect the quality of their work (Molander & Terum, 2008). For their part, policymakers are concerned with how much control is necessary to ensure quality and efficiency in direct correlation to the degree to which teachers are entrusted with autonomy. Consequently, teachers and schools risk diminishing trust and legitimacy if they do not perform in accordance with curricula and related policies.

Since professional autonomy is often treated as a general term and used across professions, the concept of licensing is more accurate within the field of education, as it more specifically characterises the framing of teacher autonomy across national contexts. According to Hopmann (2003), the two dominating patterns of curriculum control are product control and process control. Each has a different set of vocabulary for constructing expectations towards teachers and their responsibilities. The first pattern is a product-centred system of external control that is found in the United States, for example. Within this framework, external control of student outcomes is the main instrument of control. The second pattern is the continental licensing or Didaktik system, which has weak control over the educational process and almost no external control over educational outcomes. Different outcomes are allowed, depending on local teacher groups and schools, as long as they are in accordance with the national curriculum. Within this tradition, the basic claim for professional expertise is Didaktik, which is the art or study of teaching (Gundem & Hopmann, 1998). The use of Didaktik in teaching implies a considerable amount of teacher autonomy. As such, the national authorities provide teachers with a 'licence to teach', defining their degree of autonomy. Licensing can also be described as a differentiation process that distributes responsibilities (Haft & Hopmann, 1990) and is shaped by the construct of 'pedagogical freedom' or 'freedom of method' (Hopmann, 2007). Hence, this licence given to the teachers indicates the distribution of responsibility between the curriculum administration at the national level and the teaching profession.

Traditionally, there has been a contract of dividing responsibility between the state and the teaching profession, explained above as licensing. At the same time, there are different ways to develop the local curriculum, based on how the national curriculum is designed (Mølstad, 2015b). One approach is aligned with the licensing tradition; a teacher's work comprises activities that develop the national curriculum, and curriculum work presupposes that local actors possess adequate professional and curriculum language and models (Dale, Engelsen, & Karseth, 2011). However, local curriculum development can also concern determining the ‘correct’ and ‘evidence-based’ understanding of the prescribed curriculum. Such an emphasis has a stronger focus on delivery (Priestley & Biesta, 2013) than development of the national curriculum, and it is more aligned with the tradition of product control. However, these are not mutually exclusive; this approach could be a mix of curriculum traditions that implies 'delivering through developing'. This perspective is helpful for understanding the expectations of the emerging accountability policies in Norway, where the outcome dimension of the curriculum has been strengthened through new assessment policies, while teacher autonomy to implement the curriculum is also emphasised (Skedsmo & Mausethagen, 2015).

This article argues that moving beyond dichotomies is important for revealing issues related to curriculum control and teacher autonomy. A comprehensive understanding of this multidimensionality of teacher autonomy is essential to illuminate the dynamics between self-governance based on professional knowledge and ethics and the government's desire to strengthen its control over teachers' work. With the implementation of a more product-oriented curriculum, how responsibility is
distributed to the local level also seems pertinent when investigating (changes in) teacher autonomy.

**Methods and data sources**

To gain more knowledge about teacher autonomy in the context of educational reform in Norway, this study analysed interviews with actors at different institutional levels: the classroom (teachers), the school (principals), the municipality (the superintendent) and the national level (the Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training and the Norwegian Ministry of Education). The data came from two different data sets (Mausethagen, 2013c; Mølstad, 2015a), where issues of curriculum control and autonomy were explored. One data set delved into the classroom, school and municipality levels, while the other covered the national level. We recognised the potential in these two data sets because of their overlapping topics and reanalysed the data so that it was possible to explore them together. Then both data sets were analysed by both authors in collaboration.

Both individual and group interviews were carried out (see the Appendix for an overview of the informants and types of interviews). Four group interviews that included 22 teachers from three schools (two primary schools and one secondary school) were conducted in 2011, together with individual interviews with the principals from these three schools and the superintendent in the municipality. The municipality could be described as a typical Norwegian municipality in terms of the number of its inhabitants and their socioeconomic backgrounds and its concern for school development. The principals and the superintendent had taken courses towards a master’s degree in school leadership, and the municipality had initiated various professional development projects in which all the schools and teachers could participate. The three schools were selected since the superintendent described them as being in the forefront in the municipality in the area of assessment. The interview questions addressed broader aspects of the teachers’ work and their views on it and the teaching profession, focusing on new expectations following the latest reform (LK06). Additionally, the findings from a survey1 conducted in 2008 at the Centre for the Study of Professions (Oslo and Akershus University College) were used to inform a specific question asked in the interviews with the teachers, principals and superintendent. In the survey, the teachers reported their desire for both a high degree of autonomy in their work and more external control although it restricted their perceived autonomy (Mausethagen & Mølstad, 2014; Granlund et al., 2011). The interviewees were asked to comment on this finding, giving impetus to their answers and longer discussions that were particularly important for the analysis of this study.

At the national level, five educational administrators were interviewed in 2013. One interview with two participants was conducted at the Ministry of Education and Research, while another interview with three participants was held at the Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training. The directorate is the executive agency of the Ministry of Education and Research. To conduct purposeful sampling, selection criteria for the participants (Bryman, 2012) were established. For example, they had to be experts with extensive knowledge in curriculum governance (Meuser & Nagel, 2009). To find these key participants, the relevant administrative leaders of the units working on the national-level curriculum were contacted and asked to identify individuals who had extensive knowledge of and experience with curriculum development at the national level. The interview questions focused on issues of governance through the curriculum and policymaking processes related to the recent reforms.

All interviews were audio-taped, transcribed and read several times. The transcripts were then analysed in several steps by using a content analysis approach. Content analysis categories often derive from areas of interest (Cohen, Manion, Morrison, & Bell, 2011), yet we conducted a conventional content analysis where categories were derived from the text (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In line with this study’s focus, certain sections of the interviews were determined to be of specific interest for the analysis process. The following steps were followed to analyse and code the data, combine the codes into broader themes and make comparisons across the data (Creswell, 2007). First, a thematic analysis of the interviews with the same ‘group’ of actors (e.g., teachers, principals or educational administrators) and the ways that the interviews explicitly or implicitly addressed issues of teacher autonomy was conducted. Second, these data were coded across the actors, and common themes were identified. Third, similarities and differences among these themes, as well as how the actors dealt with the themes, were analysed (Creswell, 2007). A part of this analysis process included identifying instances where specific views either supported or contradicted one another. These contradictions often followed from the various perspectives present in the data and thus represented a kind of ‘communication’ across the institutional levels.

The analysis and interpretations of the findings were discussed with participants and other researchers as a type of communicative validity. Although the findings are not statistically generalisable, they can be considered analytically generalisable. Researchers-based analytical generalisations are made possible by ensuring transparency in the analysis and theoretical interpretations, while reader-based generalisations can be made when judging how the findings can be transferred to similar contexts (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). It can also be assumed that differences among Norwegian municipalities are not very

---

1 A total of 2205 teachers from 111 schools participated in this survey. The quantitative analyses of these data were presented in Granlund, Mausethagen & Munthe (2011) and Mausethagen & Mølstad (2014).
dramatic since all schools in Norway use the same national curriculum, abide by the same laws and regulations and are all mandated to participate in national tests and evaluations. Additionally, teacher education is guided by national frameworks, and several professional development programmes have been introduced and nationalised following the Knowledge Promotion Reform. However, quality assurance systems in Norwegian municipalities can differ quite substantially, suggesting the possibility of differences in local actors’ beliefs regarding teacher autonomy.

Findings

This section presents prominent issues related to teacher autonomy and curriculum control that were addressed by actors at the different institutional levels. These issues included protecting the more traditional style of autonomy (as pedagogical freedom and absence of control), questioning the new expectations regarding teacher autonomy (as the will and capacity to justify practices) and attempting at the local level to manage issues related to teacher autonomy within the context of accountability and local responsibility for development work and outcomes (autonomy as a local responsibility).

Autonomy as pedagogical freedom and absence of control

A prominent idea of autonomy identified in the data was that of protecting the more traditional style of autonomy, which we describe as pedagogical freedom and absence of control. This study’s participants all agreed that the freedom to choose teaching methods was highly important in allowing teachers to do their jobs. Protecting this freedom was perceived as desirable and valuable across all institutional levels, yet it was articulated in different ways. The local level first and foremost addressed individual autonomy, while the national level was concerned with how autonomy was also a collective responsibility for the profession.

In the four group interviews, the teachers were asked for their opinions regarding the survey’s findings about teachers’ desire for both freedom and a high degree of control over their work. The teachers in all four groups immediately began to discuss aspects of the curriculum. In one of the focus groups, the conversation started as follows:

Hans: It is particularly important to have freedom to choose methods. We are different people, and we know that we teach content in different ways and what we are best at. So freedom to choose methods is the most important. That it is relatively clear what kind of content we should teach, that is a different matter. That is something that I consider a straightforward limitation. We have to decide ourselves what to emphasise.

Interviewer: So in terms of content, that could largely be decided upon?

Hans: Yes, content specific, it can very well be decided by others. But I think it is important that there is a certain extent of freedom in terms of methods. Because if the methods are ‘strung down our heads’, then you experience stress and feel that you are being overridden.

The same response pattern repeated itself in the other three group interviews with teachers; in response to the survey question, the teachers primarily discussed the relationship between the Didaktik categories of methods and content. In short, the teachers commented, ‘Steer us on the content but not on the methods’. Hence, the teachers also communicated their desire that the content of their lessons be prescribed and decided on in the curriculum.

The principals and the superintendent largely agreed on this construct of autonomy – that the teachers should have a high degree of freedom and individual autonomy in terms of choosing how to work in the classrooms. However, they also stated that this would go hand in hand with the need for control and leadership, as demonstrated by the following excerpt from a principal interview:

[...] yes, freedom, or I would rather say that it has to do with delegation of responsibility. Teachers can experience it as freedom to do their jobs, or I would rather say that it is delegation of responsibility, that they are given a responsibility – this is what you are going to do. And yes, they are professional teachers who know their jobs, and they must have this responsibility. If not, we are not utilising their knowledge. But you also let go of some control, that is, some school leaders would say that you are losing control. But I find that the risk is worth taking.

The principals found the issue of what teachers wanted control over to be somewhat confusing, yet they agreed that teachers needed to be in control over their pedagogical choices in the classroom. In other words, both teachers and principals agreed that teachers, to a limited extent, needed support and common guidelines when choosing teaching methods. As such, the principals situated the teachers in line with the licensing tradition, delegating this responsibility to teachers according to their knowledge of Didaktik. However, the principals also argued that it was important to discuss methods and that this should, to a greater extent, be a collective responsibility within the schools. However, this was an area where they would tread carefully, and they acknowledged that it was the teachers’ responsibility.

The educational administrators were also concerned with the construct of freedom to choose methods and how this had changed from the previous curriculum (L 97), which was more content oriented. For example,
the informants from the Ministry of Education described the main ideas behind LK06 as follows:

It is a part of the original idea that the state is concerned with aims that should be reached, but it is the local level that best knows how to do it and has better conditions for understanding how to enact the aims. That is why you should not steer the actual implementation.

Moreover, the informants from the Directorate of Education and Training were quite clear about the reform’s intentions and the division of responsibility among the state and the local actors, emphasising the teaching profession:

I1: We think that the curriculum is developed in such a way that it gives superior aims from the state’s side. And then it is a local responsibility to enact the curriculum and make choices in terms of content and methods [...]; they must be operationalised locally.

I2: So this means a longer line in terms of, should we say, a complication that makes school owners accountable, but also as a way of professionalising teachers.

I3: There is an intention here [of the reform] to increase the local leeway and the professional autonomy [...]. So the professional autonomy is important, and the local leeway is strong; this is a central intention [of the reform].

The emphasis on the local operationalisation of the curriculum and protection of ‘pedagogical freedom’ is related to the professionalisation of teachers by delegating the responsibility of curriculum implementation to the teaching profession. Examining these statements regarding the importance of teacher autonomy and its discursive relationship with the professionalisation of teachers shows them as somewhat contradictory. However, despite the relatively strong agreement on the construct of pedagogical freedom, the difference here involves issues of individual versus collective autonomy. While the local actors are more concerned with their individual freedom and the absence of control over their daily teaching, the informants at the national level address this issue more in a collective sense – this is their responsibility that the teaching profession should take – yet they do not relate it to an absence of control. Rather, the control over outcomes is strengthened in LK06. Thus, although all actors are concerned with the importance of protecting the teachers’ pedagogical freedom, there is a tension around the issue of control that must also be viewed in relation to how the profession is expected to take responsibility for its development in line with the curriculum developments.

**Autonomy as the will and capacity to justify practices**

Another prominent issue in the data was that of questioning new expectations regarding teacher autonomy and which we describe as having to do with the will and capacity to justify practices. The topic of assessment criteria represents such a new aspect of the curriculum for the teachers and illuminates a case where autonomy in different ways is put into question. This case also sheds light on internal versus external control over assessment, a central aspect of teaching. Assessment criteria are descriptions of student achievement that are used to analyse and divide competence aims in the curriculum, introduced as being part of the local curriculum development in LK06. The study participants were all concerned with this issue of assessment criteria but disagreed on who should assume this responsibility. Many teachers brought up the issue of assessment criteria and at what level these should be created and decided on, which could serve as a case to illuminate the issue of teacher autonomy. Should the assessment criteria be created by the individual teachers, by the school or within the municipality, or should they be decided on by the Directorate of Education and Training and thus be the same for the whole country? All but one teacher who discussed this topic stated that they wanted the assessment criteria to be given to them by the directorate. For example, one teacher said:

> It would have been great if we had had a common set of assessment criteria so that you could have gone straight in [...]. If each municipality, and not to talk about each school, will have different criteria or various measures of them, that [will] certainly [be] strange.

The other teachers expressed similar concerns; for example, some thought that the assessment policies were not specific enough. The teachers emphasised three main reasons for centrally developed assessment criteria: (1) they should be the same for all students (thus enabling a greater degree of justice), (2) it was time-consuming for the teachers to develop them, and (3) the teachers lacked the needed competence. The teachers questioned why the creation of assessment criteria was part of their main responsibilities although they regarded assessment in general as an integrated, sustainable part of teaching (by making statements such as ‘but we have always assessed [...]’). Thus, most of the teachers who participated in this study did not consider assessment criteria a part of their professional responsibility and within their area of self-governance.

The principals, superintendent and educational administrators also brought up the issue of assessment criteria as an especially sensitive matter. Two principals directly cited this issue as an example of the relationship between control and support, on one hand, and teacher autonomy, on the other.

P1: Many or very many teachers want clear instructions in terms of assessment, and they need help with assessments and to understand the circular letter, so they ask for help.
P2: I see it when it comes to the issue of assessment criteria. Because in a way, they want clearer signals as they are easier to relate to.

However, the principals tended to agree with the teachers regarding assessment criteria creation:

To develop those criteria is stupendous work, and we have experience that it takes a lot of time. So they must be developed more centrally, yes. And I think that the directorate must be involved. But it is, of course, our job to teach the teachers how to use it. […] But we must get something that is more streamlined; I hope so. […] We are not trained to do it, but we will use it on the students, and we must be able to use it. But to make the tool is not our job, I think.

The participants from the Ministry of Education were also concerned about the issue of assessment criteria and at what level they should be created. They referred to discussions around this issue and concluded:

What we saw was that the assessment criteria were actually a new curriculum. And we said that we [did] not dare to decide this nationally. […] That [was] a deliberate choice from our side.

In this discussion regarding the assessment criteria, the educational administrators also referred to experiences in Finland and Sweden, where the criteria were decided nationally. The main reason for their stance was that they did not want the criteria to become a ‘second’ curriculum, which would be linked to the issue of professional discretion. They mentioned that it was ‘not any kind of discretion but professional discretion that [was] being used in the interpretation of the curriculum’, communicating a quite strong degree of trust in the teaching profession and the local level in this specific case.

A similar perception was prominent among the Directorate of Education participants, highlighting the importance of teacher autonomy and teachers’ use of discretion and relating these to the reform’s intentions, that is, providing more freedom to the teachers while controlling the outcomes of the curriculum. Therefore, the authorities at the national level considered assessment criteria a part of the teachers’ professional self-governance, for which they should take responsibility – supported and managed by the municipalities. However, the teachers who participated in this study did not regard the matter as an internal responsibility. As such, this aspect of autonomy involved a tension with internal control, where the teachers’ reluctance to take on responsibility could lead to an increase in external control.

**Autonomy as a local responsibility**

A third issue has to do with attempts at the local level to manage issues related to teacher autonomy within the context of accountability and local responsibility for development work and outcomes (autonomy as a local responsibility). The actors brought up the municipalities’ role several times, primarily when they were discussing ways to solve some of the perceived dilemmas in teacher autonomy related to the shifts in curriculum control, thus shedding light on the tension between national and local governing. This situation illuminates how municipalities and schools currently become important actors for managing teacher autonomy. The superintendent was explicitly concerned with these dilemmas and how to solve them. Although the teachers were asking for more guidance and action (in relation to the assessment criteria), this request was more often directed towards the state rather than the municipality. On the contrary, the municipality was often viewed as interfering with teacher autonomy despite the teachers’ varying opinions on this issue. They were primarily sceptical about development initiatives that they perceived as restricting their autonomy in the classroom. They found the initiatives that provided clear guidance on methods to be used as problematic (yet examples of such initiatives were unclear) although some teachers also described the importance of their developing similar practices in the classrooms.

Randi: It is the freedom to choose methods that is so important, really, that we must do what we are best at and what works for us. And now, the present curriculum gives us this freedom. But then, when we get orders from our own administration and from municipal sources […] And then the freedom to choose methods is dead in practice. It’s just someone else that decides. So freedom to choose methods is for the principal and superintendent, we might say, instead of the ones [who] teach.

The superintendent gave an example of how the municipality-level authorities had taken on their new responsibilities by initiating the development of common guidelines in reading instruction:

We are about to implement a new plan where we are actually saying, ‘Now we are all going to do it this way’, but at the same time, there is a certain freedom there. But we force them [the teachers] into a smaller path, at least [rather] than it being full freedom. Because someone wants to do as they wish or as they have always done it. But at the same time, you have got the cry for ‘yes, but then you have to decide’ [referring to the teachers]. So that fluctuation related to the assessment criteria, for example, has been like this, ‘This must come from the directorate, from the ministry’. Okay, when it doesn’t come from them, then we have to decide. Okay, now we have decided, but we do not want to do it like this way after all. [referring to the teachers]

The superintendent said that this was the first time that they had this concrete approach in terms of methods even though they did not provide ‘doing receipts’
through the reading plan. This was an example of attempts to take on responsibility that had been assigned to the local level yet where the teachers were protecting their autonomy in its more traditional sense. It also illustrated how the superintendent was in a somewhat difficult position in having to negotiate between the new expectations of control and development and being ‘loyal’ to the profession.

On the other hand, the Ministry of Education representatives were concerned with the importance of giving ownership to the municipalities in this kind of development work:

The challenge is, for example, to formulate the competence aims in ways so that they cannot be understood directly, but that they must be interpreted, and they must enhance their discretion [at the] local level. Through research, some believe that the more precise, the better, but if it becomes too precise, then we are restricting the autonomy [at] the local level. [...] But to find the right balance for us, that is a challenge.

There was a relatively strong belief among the study participants regarding how teachers’ professional knowledge would increase and school development processes would take place through the initiatives that had been implemented. This can be regarded as being in line with the tradition of curriculum as product control yet where the new roles of the state and the municipality are negotiated with process control. Thus, these developments also relate to the challenges of balancing national steering and control with protecting local autonomy. Such challenges of the national-level experience must be related to what appears as an increasingly contested ‘contract’ between the state and the teaching profession.

Discussion
This article has addressed how recent changes in curriculum control in Norway are perceived at different institutional levels and how the emerging accountability policies challenge and alter ideas of teacher autonomy. However, these ideas are contested, depending on one’s perspective, as a central question for the study participants refers to what types and degrees of autonomy the different institutional levels should have. This section pays specific attention to three dimensions of autonomy that have been identified through the study’s analysis – pedagogical freedom and absence of control, the will and capacity to justify practices, and a local responsibility – to provide an understanding of how ideas about teacher autonomy are altered as the curriculum and curriculum control change. The different ideas of autonomy are interrelated and must be viewed in relation to one another to provide a more comprehensive understanding of teacher autonomy, following the implementation of an outcome-based curriculum.

Furthermore, we argue that these ideas of teacher autonomy address the relationship between autonomy and managerial accountability, which can be discussed along the following dimensions: individual versus collective autonomy, internal versus external control, and national versus local governance. Thus, this section also discusses how traditional ideas of teacher autonomy are challenged by the new responsibilities assigned to municipalities, principals and teachers regarding outcomes and development that interfere with the contract and division of responsibility that have historically existed between the state and the teachers.

The first dimension, autonomy as pedagogical freedom and absence of control, is closely related to the licensing tradition, where the state defines and controls the aims of education, while the teachers control the methods. This more traditional view of teacher autonomy emphasises a limited use of prescriptions for practice and highlights the teachers’ ‘pedagogical freedom’. It includes a relatively high degree of agreement among the various actors that teachers should have the freedom and thus the responsibility to implement the curriculum, based on their professional knowledge. However, this more traditional idea of teacher autonomy has been put under pressure with the shifts in curriculum control. On one side, it can be argued that this is not really a contested idea in the Norwegian context, and this agreement among the different actors can be interpreted within the licensing tradition. On the other side, while the teachers are mainly concerned with their individual autonomy and the importance of remaining in control of classroom practice, the national-level authorities address this issue primarily as a collective responsibility of the teaching profession. Although all actors build their arguments around Didaktik as the ‘core of professionalism’ (Hopmann, 2003), this is also contested by the national-level authorities who also emphasise the need for steering and control of professional practice. As such, it can be argued that the developments in Norway are turning towards an emphasis on delivering the curriculum rather than developing it (Mølstad, 2015b; Priestley & Biesta, 2013), arguably narrowing teachers’ classroom autonomy based on Didaktik. However, these developments should be discussed in relation to how practitioners in the profession show the will and capacity to justify and develop their core practices.

The second dimension of teacher autonomy, the will and capacity for such self-governance, becomes prominent when teachers’ ability to take responsibility for their knowledge base and performance is questioned through policymakers’ quest to increasingly control the outcomes of education in order to raise ‘quality’ and ‘efficiency’ (Aasen, Proitz, & Sandberg, 2013). However, this development relates to the idea of autonomy as ‘pedagogical freedom’, as it consequently questions the teachers’ will...

Citation: NordSTEP 2015, 1: 28520 - http://dx.doi.org/10.3402/nstep.v1.28520
and capacity to self-govern and requires them to justify their actions based on their professional knowledge (Molander, Grimmen, & Eriksen, 2012). As such, this involves questions of internal or external control of teachers’ work; if the profession does not convince them that they have sufficient internal control or ‘keep order in [their] own house’, external control will usually increase (Molander & Terum, 2008). This question of internal and external control becomes particularly evident with the introduction of the new assessment policies, which appear to be an element of the new curriculum for which the participating teachers are reluctant to take responsibility. This stance is partly based on their perceived lack of knowledge regarding the development of assessments, as it is a new form of assessment that the teachers are not used to. Moreover, developments within the field of assessment that have followed L.K.06 and the NQAS are viewed as policy tools in addition to assessment tools (Mausethagen, 2013a; Welner, 2013). Even though the profession should provide good reasons that can be evaluated, accepted or rejected by others, it can be argued that from the teachers’ side, there is a crucial difference between reporting on actions, on one hand, and justifying judgements, decisions and actions, on the other hand (Molander, 2013a; Molander et al., 2012). When the capacity to take on responsibility in the field of assessment is questioned by other actors, it seems to result in an increase in local and central steering and control. Somewhat paradoxically, the teachers also ask for it. This development also sheds light on how maintaining autonomy can be demanding, as it expects one to both act and justify one’s practices. This idea of autonomy thereby raises questions of how teachers approach new expectations related to their work, whether they are in a position to demand autonomy in the more traditional sense, and how practising autonomy can be challenging for teachers, with the changing expectations regarding their knowledge base and outcomes.

The third idea of teacher autonomy as a local responsibility focuses on what kind of autonomy should be afforded to the local level and how it should be managed. National versus local governing is thus a central dimension. This idea of autonomy also highlights how changes in curriculum control interfere with the historical contract between the state and the teachers although the principle of local autonomy has been regarded as a vital part of the Norwegian political system over time (Aasen et al., 2013). The current shift towards giving municipalities increased responsibilities, as well as the emphasis on documenting their successful fulfilment of these responsibilities, thus represents more recent ideas about autonomy – in addition to reinforcing this local responsibility for governance and development. However, this change is contested by both teachers and educational administrators, as the introduction of governing instruments can be interpreted as a response to the local actors’ reluctance to act on the new reform, hence also signalling a diminishing trust in the teaching profession (Molstad & Hansén, 2013). For example, when the teachers did not acknowledge their capacity and responsibility to fill the ‘empty space’ that was created with the introduction of the curriculum, the state moved in and reduced aspects of teacher autonomy. It can also be argued that the control dimension of the current reform is causing local governing to be contested. Hence, it can be said that the teaching profession regards these new local responsibilities as partly being beyond the teachers’ will and capacity for self-governance, consequently altering the local responsibilities for control and development.

These three ideas of teacher autonomy are important for understanding what is at stake for the different actors in their quest to improve the quality of the educational system. Rather than focusing on dichotomies around autonomy, these ideas point to the dynamics between self-governance based on professional knowledge and ethics and the government’s desire to strengthen its control over teachers’ work. However, despite the curriculum’s structure that somewhat weakens the contract between the state and the teachers, the teachers themselves may also have contributed to this diminished relationship through their emphasis on the construct of ‘freedom of method’. To a certain extent, teachers have been positioned and have positioned themselves as curriculum deliverers rather than developers. Although the teachers in this study strongly focus on maintaining control over their classrooms, they seem to partly accept their position as deliverers of prescribed content. Arguably, this emphasis on protecting ‘pedagogical freedom’ represents the more traditional notion of autonomy as established through the system of process control (Hopmann, 2003). However, if and when teachers’ knowledge of Didaktik is questioned, this can become a somewhat troublesome position for the profession because it can lead to more external control. On one hand, the teachers’ responses can be considered valid in terms of the importance to protect ‘what is left’ when their autonomy is under pressure from the emphasis on assessment, outcomes and accountability. On the other hand, it needs to be determined whether this strong focus on protecting individual autonomy can also contribute to diminishing autonomy at a more collective level. By partially situating themselves as curriculum deliverers, teachers might be contributing to external actors increasingly defining standards for work and professionalism, which has taken place in England and Australia, for example (Goepel, 2012; Mulcahy, 2011). If such standards were introduced in the Norwegian context, it would

---

2This move away from decentralisation towards increased centralisation should also be viewed in the context of the change in government in 2005, when a red-green coalition government took power (Labour, Socialist Left and Centre Parties).
imply a quite distinct break from the licensing tradition and differentiation processes around the distribution of responsibility.

Furthermore, the different ideas of autonomy suggest that the licensing contract is still a prominent frame of reference for the teaching profession, whereas the municipalities’ new role appears to be more contested. Through these changes in curriculum control, the relationship between the state and the teaching profession has been weakened; thus, the licensing ‘contract’ has also been undermined. Therefore, a relevant question to ask is what position the teacher union takes on issues of teacher autonomy. The teachers in this study collectively acknowledge that they should become more proactive in retaining their autonomy, such as by highlighting research-based knowledge and professional ethics (Mausethagen & Granlund, 2012; Nerland & Karseth, 2013). However, as addressed in public discussions, the union has been reluctant to discuss the methods that teachers use in classrooms or to define professional standards that interfere with the ‘pedagogical freedom’ of teachers. This can be viewed as a viable position since there are many reasons why this ‘freedom’ is necessary and particularly important to enable teachers to maintain control when external control increases. Nonetheless, it can also be questioned whether the protection of teachers’ classroom autonomy can lead to a reduction of collective autonomy in the sense of the profession’s seeming involvement in discussions over standards, assessment and feedback loops, to a limited extent. A possible interpretation is that the teaching profession partly situates these changes in the curriculum within the logic of external, managerial accountability rather than representing pedagogical tools. By doing so, the profession also partly situates these new developments outside their area of self-governance.

Finally, it can be asked whether protecting teachers’ autonomy in a more traditional sense is a sufficient strategy for the profession to take on today’s knowledge societies. New sources of knowledge and data (Coburn & Turner, 2011) based on research and student testing become available, and arguably, there is a need to build collective knowledge practices within teaching that also include such sources of knowledge, as well as knowledge about how these can be used for organisational learning. To a limited extent, the emphasis on knowledge sharing within organisations has been discussed in the literature on teacher autonomy, licensing and Didaktik, and it should be taken into account when studying shifts in curriculum control and ideas of teacher autonomy. Moreover, as it is unrealistic to assume that teachers can independently develop and safeguard their knowledge base (Hermansen, 2014), collegiality and differentiation of responsibilities within schools should be addressed when discussing teachers’ capacity for self-governance in the current, complex work context.

Conclusion
This article has analysed and discussed how the introduction of a more product-oriented curriculum has challenged and altered ideas of teacher autonomy. As such, the study has also contributed to the knowledge about ways in which the concepts of autonomy and accountability relate to each other in the context where the outcomes of education have been controlled to a limited extent, and the teaching profession has enjoyed a relatively high degree of classroom autonomy. 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 governing), 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.

To a certain extent, there is a continuation in the historic views on teacher autonomy in terms of the division of responsibility between the state and the profession regarding teachers’ control over their classrooms. However, this is also a question of perspective, and the introduction of an outcome-based curriculum, combined with an increased emphasis on local responsibilities for outcomes and development, somewhat conflicts with this ‘contract’. It is also reasonable to ask whether the teaching profession might be risking a loss of autonomy through its attempt to protect the more traditional approach, particularly through the construct of ‘pedagogical freedom’. Addressing autonomy as an issue of the will and capacity for self-governance and how this relates to both the more traditional notion of autonomy (understood as pedagogical freedom and absence of control) and the recent emphasis on local responsibilities for outcomes, poses a challenge for teachers to involve in both individually and collectively.

References


governing level: Intentions, expectations and assessment. Report no 1]. Oslo: NIFU STEP.

**Appendix**

Overview of informants and interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informant source</th>
<th>Type and number of interviews</th>
<th>Number of informants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National level, the Norwegian Ministry of Education</td>
<td>One group interview</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National level, the Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training</td>
<td>One group interview</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipality level, superintendent</td>
<td>One interview</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School level, principals</td>
<td>Three individual interviews (three schools)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom level, teachers</td>
<td>Four group interviews (three schools)</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sølvi Mausethagen,** PhD, is Associate Professor at the Centre for the Study of Professions, Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences. Her research interests involve teacher work and professionalism, educational governance and accountability.

**Christina Elda Mølstad** is associate professor at Hedmark University College, Department of Social Sciences, Hedmark University College, Norway. She is a former PhD student at the University of Oslo, studying state-based curriculum-making. Her PhD-study investigated state-based curriculum-making for compulsory school in Norway and Finland.

**Shifts in curriculum control**


Citation: NordSTEP 2015, 1: 28520 - http://dx.doi.org/10.3402/nstep.v1.28520
AUTONOMY IN EDUCATION

Local educational actors doing of education – a study of how local autonomy meets international and national quality policy rhetoric

Andreas Bergh*

Department of Education, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

This article studies how local autonomy meets international and national quality policy rhetoric. The research question asked is: How can the local doing of education be understood in relation to international and national quality policy rhetoric, and how does this affect teachers’ autonomy to realise nationally formulated goals? To answer this, two sets of theoretical concepts are combined: horizon of expectation and space of experience (Koselleck, 2002) and autonomy and control (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2007). An earlier study (Bergh, 2010) of how the use of the quality concept has successively changed in Swedish authoritative educational texts from the 1990s and onwards provides a broader context for the local study, which empirically builds on interviews with local politicians, civil servants, school leaders and teachers. The results show that the national policy rhetoric has a strong impact on local practice, but also that certain interpretations are taken further in the local context, such as an emphasis on market forces. Although possible conflicts in the national context are concealed by the use of positive concepts like quality, these conflicts eventually erupt in the local setting, often with far reaching consequences for its different actors and for the education in question.

Keywords: quality; conceptual history; autonomy; control; teacher; Sweden

*Correspondence to: Andreas Bergh, Department of Education, Uppsala University, SE-750 02 Uppsala, Sweden, Email: andreas.bergh@edu.uu.se

When the goal- and result-oriented system was introduced in Swedish education in the early 1990s, the political rhetoric emphasised decentralisation and local participation in goal setting. Today, the emphasis is on quality, equivalence and goal attainment. Despite this changed rhetoric, and the fact that extensive educational reforms have been carried out over the last decade, the government states that the educational assignment is still formulated in the same way as it was in the early 1990s (Bill 2008/09:87). Against this background, a central starting point for the article is that in the interpretation of the educational assignment tensions could arise between the goals and values formulated in the national curricula and syllabus documents and other aspects of the governing of education, such as the dominating policy rhetoric and structural changes in the educational system as a whole.

With a view to providing an empirical focus that is specific and at the same time facilitates a broad contextual understanding, the article takes its point of departure in the international and national policy concept of quality and, with Sweden as a case, reports on the national and local implications of different interpretations. This empirical focus is chosen because within a very short period the introduction of the quality concept radically challenged and partly marginalised the earlier national education tradition. In earlier research, the years around 2000 are characterised as a challenging period, with demands for new solutions and actions (Bergh, 2010, 2011, 2015). From 2006 onwards, this was followed by an extensive restructuring of the Swedish education system. However, while great efforts have been made in the last decade’s educational reforms to make the system controllable, the focus on pedagogical aspects has been very limited.

Following this, a central argument in this article is that it cannot be taken for granted that national needs for control of the education system coincide with the autonomy required by local actors to conduct good education. Therefore, the aim is to investigate whether the tensions identified in the national policy texts also have an impact on the education that takes shape at local level, with a focus on local politicians, civil servants, school leaders and teachers. The specific research question is: How can the local doing of education be understood in relation to international and national quality policy?
rhetoric, and how does this affect teachers’ autonomy to realise nationally formulated goals?

In answering this question, the study not only contributes knowledge about the Swedish case but also about the international education policy research field. The development that is taking place around the quality concept in Swedish education is not limited to a single concept or specific nation (Bergh, 2010) but reflects a wider social transformation in many countries. Although for a long time educational issues have primarily been a national concern, reports from several countries show how in recent decades education has gradually become part of an international development (Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012; Biesta, 2004; Ozga, Dahler-Larsen, Segerholm & Simola, 2011; Sundberg & Wahlström, 2012). As Sivesind, van den Akker and Rosenmund (2012, p. 321) formulate it: ‘A multitude of treaties, agreements and strategies, existing within the European policy and education space, steadily challenge nation-states and local institutions with new prospects to renew their education systems’. Following this, the same authors conclude that the formal curricula and their associated pedagogic practices remain largely under-researched as elements in the shaping and governing of education across Europe. Thus, there is a need to acquire more knowledge about how international policy trends are interpreted and ‘translated’ in national and local educational contexts (cf. Ball et al., 2012).

This article is structured into four sections. The first section consists of this introduction, which also includes the analytical concepts used in the analysis and an overview of earlier research to give the local study a broader context. The following two sections present a two-step analysis of the local ‘doing’, where the first makes use of conceptual history and the second analyses the tensions between the different forms of autonomy and control. The empirical material used for the local study consists of interviews with different actors from a municipality chosen for its clearly expressed intention to work with and improve quality in the frames provided by the goal- and result-oriented steering system. Four individual interviews with two politicians (chair of the board and a minority politician) and two with leading civil servants are reported, as are two focus group interviews, one with teachers and one with a group of school leaders. The fourth section consists of final reflections.

Using conceptual history and the concepts of autonomy and control for educational analysis

As a concept like quality can be used by different social forces with different intentions, there is a need to develop a theoretical approach that opens for a broad conceptual understanding and at the same time facilitates an analysis of the different ways in which the quality concept is used in specific contexts. To do this, the study is initially inspired by educational research that stresses the importance of not viewing policy as a one-sided process of implementation, but as an on-going process of ‘doing’ that implies interaction within and between several levels and actors (Ball et al., 2012; Bergh, 2010; Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Englund, Forsberg & Sundberg, 2012). However, to analyse whether and how the national quality rhetoric affects local actors doing of education, further analytical perspectives are needed. This is provided for by combining two sets of theoretical concepts: horizon of expectation and space of experience from Koselleck (2002) and conceptual history and autonomy and control from Cribb and Gewirtz (2007).

According to Koselleck (2002), political and social concepts like quality can be seen as navigational instruments of history, because in addition to indicating or recording given facts, they also help to form consciousness and control behaviour. A central point of departure in conceptual history is that the concepts we use consist of memory and hope, experience and expectations. From this, it follows that history is not only past time but is instead made up of the experiences and expectations of acting and suffering humans. To facilitate an empirical analysis of how political and social concepts contain layers of the past and the present as well as expectations of the future, Koselleck uses the analytical concepts of horizon of expectation and space of experience. Whereas an experience from the past is spatial and collected into a whole, an expectation of the future is more like a horizon in the distance that cannot yet be grasped. As Koselleck explains, the two categories of experience and expectation are ‘suitable for detecting historical time in the domain of empirical research since, when substantially augmented, they provide guidance to concrete agencies in the course of social or political movement’ (2004, p. 258).

For this study, the use of conceptual history has methodological implications. The first is that the material from the interviewed local actors is interpreted with an interest in understanding the relation between expectations and experiences, which is also supported by the accompanying language. The second is that an earlier study (Bergh, 2010) of how the use of the quality concept has changed over time in authoritative policy documents provides an important contextualisation. The third is that the study of national education policy also uses the concepts horizon of expectation and space of experience, which makes it possible to analyse whether the tensions that have been identified in the national policy texts also have an impact on the education that takes shape at the local level.

However, to answer the research question of how international and national quality policy rhetoric affects teachers’ autonomy to realise nationally formulated goals, additional theoretical perspectives are needed. These are provided by Cribb and Gewirtz’s (2007) work on autonomy and control (cf. Bergh, 2015). As they point out: ‘In making assessments about the value of different patterns
of autonomy–control it is necessary to grapple with conceptual, empirical and normative complexities’ (p. 212). To support this, the study is guided by three analytical questions: Whose autonomy is in question? Autonomy/control over what? Who are the agents of control and how is their agency exercised? By answering these questions, the intention is to grapple with the conceptual complexities of the concepts autonomy and control and contribute knowledge that avoids ‘the seemingly widespread – and usually unspoken – normative presumption that autonomy is good and control is bad and to open up space for the possibility of richer debates about the value of different forms of and balances between autonomy and control’ (p. 203).

Thus, with the chosen approach, the article analyses whether and how the linguistic force of authoritative actors at national and local levels and the different structures frame and control teachers’ autonomy over the educational practices that prevail in school.

A changed social perception of education

When the goal- and result-oriented steering system was introduced in the early 1990s, instruments for the reporting of results were not provided for, but were introduced in connection with the requirement for written quality reports in 1997 (Bergh, 2015; Skr. 1996/97:112). However, what is important to notice is that this regulation was first presented in relation to the earlier tradition of Swedish education, with an emphasis on local autonomy and where complex and qualitative goals were placed at the local level to be interpreted and dealt with by professional teachers. Within the space of only a few years, this then changed to an emphasis on building an education system with strengthened national control. With an increased focus on quality, interpreted as goal achievement, politicians agreed on a number of structural changes that have transformed the design of the educational system. For example, from 2006 onwards, an increased number of tests, inspections and a new grading system have been introduced.

Using the analytical concepts horizon of expectation and space of experience, the earlier mentioned study of Swedish education policy (Bergh, 2010) shows that certain understandings, long associated with education due to the changing horizon of expectations, have gradually been challenged and partly marginalised. While expectations in the 1990s referred to experiences from the earlier Swedish ‘education’ tradition, at the beginning of the 21st century this changed to experiences originating from ideas about how to build ‘quality systems’, ‘international policy’ expectations and ‘juridical regulations’. As a consequence of the linguistic change, it can be argued that the concept of quality has led to an acceptance of new social perceptions of education. Among other things, the systemic approach has led to an increased juridification and a quality thinking that can be traced to what in international literature is often called Total Quality Management.

This linguistic change has also facilitated the appearance of new actors and perspectives. In the early 1990s, when expectations were still related to educational experiences, educational practitioners and researchers were regarded as having the most expertise. However, new ideas about the improvement of international competitiveness, the strengthening of juridical regulations and the building of quality systems subsequently led to a change in agency. For example, whereas in the 1990s discussions about teachers’ competences in national texts were expressed in terms of concepts such as reflection, goal interpretation and school development, this emphasis changed over time to include questions that were instrumental in character. Now, the teacher’s role as an administrative link in the education system, mainly for a higher goal achievement, appears to be more important than pedagogical competence (cf. Solbrette & Englund, 2011). The national political conditions have also changed. Instead of discussions about education as a societal and principle question, the national political role has increasingly become one of international education cooperation, with a focus on carrying out and administering international policy decisions. When content-related matters at national political level become non-issues, potential conflicts over goals are instead transferred downwards in the education system to national administrators and the different actors at local level.

Moreover, following the understanding earlier referred to of not viewing policy as a one-sided process of implementation, but rather as an on-going process that implies interaction within and between several levels and actors, the ‘doing’ is not just a question of the relation between local and national levels. Instead, the degree of autonomy given to teachers is also affected by the control ambitions and pedagogical ideals of different actors in the local context. In his study of different forms of autonomy, Frostensson (2012) looks at professional, collegial and individual aspects of autonomy: His conclusions are that autonomy can exist in collegial or individual form even if the overall professional autonomy has eroded, that collegial autonomy can take two different forms and either depart from collegial needs or from management preferences, and that individual autonomy is directly dependent on school leaders or the local authority’s requirements for individual members of the organisation to be flexible. Frostensson (p. 78) concludes ‘that a fragmentation of the teaching profession evolves, which can be explained by the degree of autonomy that is given to the teachers’, and that the ‘control ambitions and pedagogical ideals of the local school management and the principal organisers of education explain to what extent the teachers are granted autonomy in their work’.

Citation: NordSTEP 2015, 1: 28146 - http://dx.doi.org/10.3402/nstep.v1.28146
Thus, from earlier research we know that around the new millennium, there was a shift in Swedish educational policy, which is also closely connected to a shift from governing by goals to governing by results (Wahlström, 2002). But what we do not know very much about is the extent to which this shift also affects educational practices and the everyday choices made by school leaders and teachers. Therefore, in the following two sections local educational practices will be analysed in the light of the broader policy context provided here.

The local doing of education – interpreted as expectations and experiences

The chosen municipality is situated in a metropolitan area with a long tradition of a right-wing majority. Two central principles are formulated and highlighted as a basis for all local political activities: freedom of choice and competitive neutrality. As a consequence, both municipality-driven schools and independent schools are encouraged within the municipality’s geographical borders.

Starting with the two locally decided principles of freedom of choice and competition neutrality, different steering instruments are organised at the political level, the overriding municipality administration level and each school’s management level. First, at the political level, the local education policy strategy is accompanied by a comprehensive system for follow-up and evaluation, including results in the form of grades, tests, economy, customer satisfaction, self-evaluations and observations.

As these political steering instruments cover all the schools in the municipality’s geographical boundaries (including the independent schools), the steering that is organised at the overriding municipality level simply targets the municipality-driven schools. This includes balanced score cards and a contract with each school leader that is combined with a system for result-based salaries. In addition to those two levels, each school has its own instruments. In the investigated school, a survey was conducted in which each teacher received personal feedback based on the students’ evaluations of his or her teaching. As well as being shared with the teacher in question, the content was also used in discussions between the individual teacher, the principal and the teaching team. In addition, this specific school was also certified by a quality assurance institute every second year.

Compared to the four spaces of experience emanating from the study (Bergh, 2010) of national authoritative texts, namely ‘education’, ‘international policy’, ‘juridical regulation’ and ‘quality system’, the local study shows that the same spaces of experience are reflected in the interviews, with one exception. Instead of ‘international policy’, which over time became increasingly central for the national policy actors, in the local context this is represented by a space of experience named ‘market’.

However, despite the different use of terminology (international policy vs. market), which often reflects a number of variations, there are many conceptual parallels between the two. While the national policy actors’ expectations are to improve Sweden’s international competitiveness, the local actors formulate beliefs in local market forces.

In this section, the analysis of the interviews with the local actors is presented with the support of the four spaces of experience hitherto referred to, namely ‘market’, ‘quality system’, ‘juridical regulation’ and ‘education’.

Politicians – market, juridical regulation and education

To illustrate the tension between the different interpretations of quality, the following quotes show how the two interviewed politicians refer to different spaces of experience and as a consequence express completely different expectations of education.

In our municipality the principals are the key players who ensure that our system works. They should be general managers … and everything should always be transparent … Knowledge is the central aspect, delivering what has been promised … (Majority politician)

… as I see it, it is actually a deeply philosophical question; should we have education that aims at producing citizens who have learned about the society in which we live and its functions, or should we educate people on the basis of their own needs, desires and visions that then shape society? I think that they are two different things. For me it is the latter that is more interesting. (Minority politician)

For the majority politician, who is also chair of the board, the way towards a high-quality education refers to his experience as a manager in the business sector. In contrast to his expectations on systemic aspects, transparency and delivering knowledge, the minority politician is strongly critical of what he describes as the dominating ‘customer and market inspired approach’. Instead, he calls for a discussion about ‘what it means to be a good school in a true and honest democratic system’; a discussion that can be understood in relation to the earlier Swedish tradition of comprehensive education for democracy and equality (cf. Sundberg & Wahlström, 2012). In addition to the political difficulties of discussing issues like this, the minority politician claims that local civil servants should present material that facilitates a problematisation of the different questions, instead of ‘presenting a facade where everything seems fine but where the important questions that should be asked are not articulated’ (Minority politician).

The dominating tension between the expectations formulated by the two politicians can primarily be understood as related to the ‘market’ and ‘education’ spaces of experience. The analytical point is that even though they
both express ideas about education, the more specific meanings of this differ due to their different reference points. In addition, both politicians refer to experiences that can be understood as related to the ‘juridical regulation’ and/or ‘quality system’ spaces of experience. This is done in two quite different ways. The majority politician refers to the national school inspection and concludes that the inspectors were impressed; something that he sees as ‘confirmation that our way of governing works’. The minority politician, on the other hand, agrees that it is good to hear about positive things. However, what is more important in his eyes is acquiring knowledge about the things that do not work – information that he has never received.

Management – quality system, market and juridical regulation
The tensions between the different spaces of experience are also reflected in the interviews with the managers in the municipality’s administration. Compared to the interviews with the politicians, the interviews with the management staff give quite another picture. Here, the interviewees stress the importance of building a system, having control of the results and continuously improving those things that can be measured.

To achieve goal- and result-oriented steering, the head of administration stresses the importance of all goals pointing in the same direction and argues that local politicians should not formulate any additional goals beyond the national. When it comes to the local educational policy strategy, she explains that this has great legitimacy among politicians and different professional groups, which she thinks could be explained by the fact that it does not add anything to what has already been formulated in the national curricula. With reference to what she calls ‘quality research’ the head of administration explains that success means ‘making sure that the minimum level is raised, is of basic quality, rewards the best and lets them fly, so that they take others with them’. To do this, a quality system needs to be developed that is simple and clear.

And then when you have done that it should be simple, clear and visible. And you have to use the results. You should not do anything if you don’t use the results. You need to go all the way and ensure that measures are taken that reflect the results. And that you persevere and don’t keep chopping and changing but stick to the objectives and don’t complicate things. I think that this is fundamental and know that it leads to success. (Head of administration)

The deputy head of administration has overriding responsibility for all the municipality-driven preschools and schools. She emphasises the importance of building a system that, with its different instruments and experts, helps those working in the organisation to continuously improve what they are doing. She reflects on her own role and concludes that over time she has become a much more strategic leader. The work with visions and balanced score cards has accelerated the process of improved results and today she has access to a lot of information.

We have digitised the entire administrative process. Everything is digitised. Nothing is written on small pieces of paper and pinned up in a corner, but the whole process is very professional. So the principal can press a button and have immediate access to facts 24/7. And that’s a powerful thing. The principal knows what he or she is dealing with… This is how I explain it: that I’m sitting in the eye of the storm, there should be peace and quiet, systematics, we should know what we are doing and why and that we are here for the schools, we are a support process, myself and the support and expertise that is to hand. (Deputy Head of Administration)

In the above excerpts, the two administrative heads talk about quality by referring to the ‘market’, ‘quality system’ and ‘juridical regulation’ spaces of experience. However, neither of them reflect on what can be measured and what is educationally desirable. An illustrative example of the absence of educational aspects is when the deputy head of administration explains that the goal with competence development activities ‘is just to get better and better, there is no other goal’. A strong focus on ‘quality system’ can also be identified when the same person uses the terms ‘remote steering’ and ‘trust system’ when talking about her relations with teachers and school leaders. In this manner, ‘quality system’ and ‘juridical regulation’ help to structure the political ‘market’ expectations of realising the central principles of freedom of choice and competition neutrality. When the head of administration explains that she has no problem referring to students and parents as customers, she bases her argument on them being customers with the right to choose a preschool or school: ‘but once they have chosen a school, the school activities must follow the Education Act and other regulations, so actually we have a very rule-governed school’.

School leaders – quality system, market and education
The interviewed school leaders explain that their ambitions are to develop a common way of understanding the concept of knowledge and the education assignment from the preschool to Year 9. At the same time as striving for a school with no clear divisions between the different subjects, they reflect that the political development seems to be going in the opposite direction. One example of this is that the school leaders see the need to stress both goals and results, while acknowledging that the political focus
is on results. If the emphasis is on goals or results, rather than goals and results, this leads to conflict.

We want to strive for goals that are never-ending, where there is always a lot further to go. At the same time, we need to make assessments in relation to grades, i.e. a result that has to be achieved in order to obtain a grade. For the pedagogue, student and parent this can be a conflict. We strive towards one thing but have to measure something else. We have to assess something and it’s difficult to put it all together in a proper manner. (School leader 1)

A consequence of the strong emphasis on grades and documentation is that it is no longer possible to work towards more open goals. Instead, the focus is on predefined results. According to the school leaders, this in combination with freedom of choice lead to different kinds of conflict. An example of this is when parents think that they always have the right to choose and to formulate their demands, as has been signalled by local politicians.

The political goal is that parents should be included and express their opinions. This also includes the choice of school – that you choose a school that is good or not. This has led to people feeling that they can choose exactly when they want and that “I can make a difference. I can go in and make demands and say that’s how I think things should be”. Parents can thus have two completely different pictures. This also rubs off onto the student, of course. These direct demands, the direct need for satisfaction, that “now I want this” because this is the political signal that has been sent. That’s what we are striving for in the municipality and it leads to conflict. (School leader 1)

The strong focus on results also affects the school’s possibility to enable democratic influence. On the one hand, the school has an ambition to develop questions about influence and involvement, which requires working with values that cannot easily be measured. On the other hand, demands for clarity and grades require that the conditions are made clear in advance; something that the school leader (1) argues is supported by the system for freedom and choice: ‘Where do you create participation, where do you create influence on things that are to some extent taken for granted? Yes, it’s very difficult and it’s that which is measured, but what can you be involved in and decide about’.

Although the views expressed by the school leaders in the interview with them can be interpreted as strong criticism of the constant measuring and emphasis on freedom of choice, at the same time they also explain that they can see that the political focus on continuous improvement has had a positive effect: ‘people here are used to being scanned from right and left and we discuss the results and one asks: What can I do differently in my teaching to increase the values?’ (School leader 2). Attempts to make everything transparent have had both favourable and unfavourable effects. The favourable effects are that teachers have started to sit in on each other’s lessons, give feedback and learn from each other, while an unfavourable effect, in terms of competition between schools, is that some schools are no longer cooperative.

Thus, a conclusion that can be drawn from the interview with the school leaders is that the ‘education’ space of experience, which clearly relates to the expectations they formulate, is in tension with the ‘market’ and ‘quality system’ spaces of experience. However – and perhaps more importantly – there are also conflicts between the latter. While ‘quality system’ expectations have contributed to an increased awareness and cooperation between teachers, ‘market expectations have led to isolation’. In addition, there are also conflicts of interest within the ‘quality system’ space of experience. In contrast to the experience of increased awareness and cooperation, another picture is that educational practices have to be adapted and reduced to what can be measured.

**Teachers – quality system, market and education**

Like the school leaders, the teachers explain that the expectation that everything should be transparent has favourable and unfavourable sides to it. A favourable aspect is that they have had to develop as pedagogues and be more aware of what they do. An unfavourable aspect is that schools have become isolated due to the focus on results and competition.

There isn’t much cooperation between the schools because competition is so hard on the students. If you compare with the neighbouring municipality there they work a lot with joint projects, when it’s about grades, assessment and grading criteria. Things don’t work in the same way here. They don’t. So in that way a school becomes isolated. (Teacher Karin)

Although the teachers consider themselves to be very goal- and result-oriented, they think that the municipality emphasises results. The teachers’ opinions about this strong focus on results vary. Some of the teachers think it is positive that schooling is a prioritised arena, while others are more critical of human aspects getting lost:

‘I think that you lose the human being in this focus on quality and results. You lose the little child who is right in the middle of it’ (Teacher Ingela).

Some years before the interview was conducted, the teachers initiated work with the curriculum to develop a common approach to different forms of knowledge and abilities. This work included cooperation within and between different subjects for all students between the ages of 6 and 16. A favourable outcome of this, according to the teachers, is the development of a joint language,
which is important for the next step to also include students and parents.

The fact that many of the parents in this area are engaged is something that the teachers welcome, even though it is not always easy to explain what they mean by, for example, communicative, reflective and analytical abilities. Besides the challenge of communicating with parents who regard knowledge as different packages of facts, there are also those who formulate demands based on their own needs. One of the teachers (Mats) explains that there are lots of active, well-informed and verbal parents: ‘there are those who know everything about the curriculum and constantly ask questions about what we do’. Another teacher (Ingela) agrees: ‘You have to have control all the time because you can get the most unexpected questions’.

As in the interview with the school leaders, the teachers formulate their horizon of expectation on the basis of their ‘educational’ experiences. But, also here it is apparent that expectations that can be understood in relation to the ‘market’ space of experience challenge the teachers’ perspectives. For example, when parents act as demanding customers the teachers find this challenging, because as professionals they want to inform and involve the parents of their students. Furthermore, according to the interview with the teachers, the ‘quality system’ facilitates educational discussions at the same time as the strong focus on results tends to marginalise and instrumentalise the educational perspectives.

Tensions between autonomy and control
In this section, the four spaces of experience emanating from the local study in the previous part form the empirical context for an analysis of different kinds of autonomy and control. Throughout the analysis, the three questions mentioned earlier are answered (cf. Cribb & Gewirtz, 2007): Whose autonomy is in question? Autonomy/control over what? Who are the agents of control and how is their agency exercised?

Whose autonomy is in question?
Considering the actors interviewed and referred to above, there is no doubt that the teachers’ and school leaders’ autonomy to act in accordance with expectations that can be understood as ‘educational’ experiences is marginalised. However, it is also important to note that the minority politician’s autonomy is clearly reduced. For him, the dominating ‘customer and market inspired approach’, in combination with the ‘quality system’, works as a ‘facade’ that makes it impossible to ask questions of an educational character, such as what is education for. As a consequence, in his opinion there is no local political space for questioning the dominating ideological perspective that is embedded in the two principles of freedom of choice and neutrality in competition, or for discussing the philosophical or educational implications of this governing.

However, for the other three interviewees, that is, the majority politician and the head and the deputy head of administration, educational questions relating to content, goals and purposes seem to be non-issues. Even though these three people also mention limitations in autonomy, this is referred to in positive terms. One example is that the ‘juridical regulation’ provided by the state limits the municipality’s emphasis on freedom of choice, in that the ‘customers’ (students and parents) only have the right to choose a preschool or school: ‘but once they have chosen … the school activities must follow the Education Act and other regulations …’ (Head of administration). Another example is how the majority politician sees the control conducted by the national school inspectorate as ‘confirmation that our way of governing works’.

In the investigated municipality, there is a clearly expressed intention to realise goal- and result-oriented steering. Following this, at the local policy and administration level, the decision has been taken not to formulate any more goals than those already formulated nationally. Instead, the responsibility for the interpretation of these is left to teachers and school leaders, while the political and administrative interest is directed towards follow-up and evaluation. A consequence of this governing is what can be characterised as a depoliticised political role and a politicised administrative role. When local politics are reduced to an administrative responsibility for financing, follow-up, control of goal achievement, etc., potential conflicts move down the local educational hierarchy. But instead of giving schools the autonomy to interpret the goals, this is limited by the ‘quality system’ and its function as ‘market’ information to help students and parents choose.

Autonomy/control over what?
Although the minority politician, school leaders and teachers take the question of what can be regarded as good education as a starting point, that is not the case for the majority politician or the head and deputy head of administration. For them, goals are something that are written into the national curricula documents and are thereafter, without any changes being made, copied and emphasised in the local educational policy strategy. Instead, their focus is on constructing a simple, clear and transparent ‘quality system’ that complements the national ‘juridical regulations’ and can create the necessary conditions for the local principles of freedom of choice and neutrality in competition.

From the way in which the question ‘Whose autonomy is in question?’ is answered, it is also important to note the consequences of the question ‘Autonomy/control over what?’. The tensions between the different spaces of experience do not just control and reduce the autonomy
of politicians and different professional groups, but also control and reduce the didactical choices of what is possible in education. As the school leaders and teachers explain, the demands for clarity, transparency and competition affect the school’s assignment to work with knowledge and democracy. In this manner, the control imposed by ‘market’, ‘juridical regulation’ and ‘quality system’ expectations reduces the possible content and the educational processes; something that has consequences for the students’ learning possibilities and their parents’ democratic influence.

Although the interviewed school leaders and teachers experience that the local governance has led to some positive developments, none of them indicate that follow-ups and evaluations are primarily aimed at analysing professional needs. On the contrary, as the deputy head of administration explains, it is the customers who have ‘the right to tell you if there really was any improvement’. However, the study shows that the absence of content, in combination with the ambition to construct a simple and clear system, reduces complexity and diversity, which limits the possibility to politically discuss different issues and to constructively deal with them in educational practice.

Instead of working with goals as the teachers and school leaders would like, and thus making room for pedagogical processes and democratic influence, the national and local requirements for measurements, documentation and transparency mean that the teaching has to be adapted to specific goals – goals that due to their nature serve as predefined results rather than more openly point out a desired direction. The concept of influence can be used as an illustrative example of this. When expectations are formulated around this concept, with reference to an understanding of the ‘education’ space of experience, societal and democratic perspectives are opened up. But, when the horizon of expectation relates to the ‘market’ and ‘quality system’ spaces of experience, it is instead interpreted as a right for individuals to choose and demand within the space provided by ‘juridical regulation’.

Who are the agents of control and how is their agency exercised?

As already explained, the municipality has developed control structures at several different levels. This means that a comprehensive system for different kinds of follow-up and evaluation at the political level is combined with another system at the overriding municipality level, with balanced scores and contracts with each school leader and a system for each school, which in the investigated school consists of students’ evaluations of each teacher’s teaching and external certification performed by a quality assurance institute. A comment from the interviewed deputy head of administration can be used as an illustrative example of how the quality system or systems in the investigated municipality are constructed: ‘I’m sitting in the eye of the storm, there is peace and quiet, systematics, we should know what we are doing...’

The answer to the question ‘Who are the agents of control and how is their agency exercised?’ is thus that control in the local context is shared between different actors. As a consequence, different forms of autonomy and control are combined in many and complex ways. Some become dominant, while others tend to be marginalised. According to the dominating approach, parents and to some extent their children are given the autonomy to choose the preschool or school they prefer. However, in order for the principles of freedom and choice and competition neutrality to work, the system must be controlled by the ‘quality system’ and ‘juridical regulation’. The information provided in the different systems not only serves as a control for the responsible politicians and management staff but also informs parents and students about the quality of the different schools. As has already been reported from England, this way of governing can mean that instead of being citizens in a democracy, parents become customers in a regulated market (cf. Biesta, 2004; Gewirtz, 2002).

The three local systems are related to each other in complex ways, which leads one to wonder how they relate to the national education system. One suggestion, based on the interviews, is that in a hierarchical sense the national juridical regulation and the national quality system are above the three local systems. On the other hand, when it comes to educational aspects, the opposite seems to be the case, in that in the curricula quality expectations are formulated through the national goals and values. In other words, just as questions about goals, values, possible goal conflicts, etc. are non-issues in the local political debate and for civil servants, in the investigated municipality these are hierarchically sorted under the three local systems.

From this, it follows that when the goals and values that are formulated in the national curriculum are subject to requirements of measurability and control, rather than being taken as starting points for a desired development, there is a risk that the ways in which different forms of autonomy and control are combined will become counterproductive (cf. Forsberg & Wallin, 2006). According to the interviewed teachers and school leaders, this is not in line with how they as professionals prefer to work.

Final reflections

The knowledge interest in this article has been to analyse whether the tensions observed in national policy texts impact the education that takes shape at the local level and, more specifically, how these tensions affect teachers’ autonomy to realise the nationally formulated goals. A general conclusion that can be drawn is that the national policy rhetoric has a strong impact on local practice. However, even though the way in which the quality
concept is used by local actors reflects the interpretations and tensions at the national level, certain interpretations are taken further in the local context, such as the emphasis on market forces, as described above. Moreover, this study has shown that it is not only the national rhetoric that has a strong impact on local educational contexts but also that conflicts eventually emerge somewhere in the local education system. In other words, although possible conflicts in the national context are concealed by the use of positive concepts like quality, these conflicts eventually erupt in the local setting, often with far reaching consequences for its different actors and for the education in question.

This study has demonstrated that the linguistic force of international and national policy, in combination with structures that have been developed to measure quality, has a strong impact on the way that local politicians and civil servants talk about quality. When the national use of language relates to goal achievement, results, documentation, systematics, clarity, responsibility, etc., it is difficult for local actors to use a different language. The study has also demonstrated that the qualitative goals and values formulated in the national curriculum are hard to measure, and thus risk being marginalised by those aspects that can more easily be quantitatively controlled, documented and demonstrated. As a consequence, conflicts arise between the different uses of language. This in turn leads to different actions and implications restricting teachers’ autonomy and thus what can be done in educational practice. However, even though we are embedded in practices and constrained by them, it does not mean that another language cannot be used. As Frostenson (2012, p. 78) argues: ‘challenges of professional autonomy may strike differently at different levels . . . ’ Here, conceptual history offers important insights and reminds us that political and social concepts, such as quality, do not only indicate or record given facts but can also become factors in the formation of consciousness and the control of behaviour (Koselleck, 2002). Given that the formulation of this educational assignment has not changed since the early 1990s, as the government has stated (cf. Bill, 2008/09:87), there is a need for further study and discussion about how different forms of autonomy and control can best be combined to arrive at the intended destination.

References


Andreas Bergh has a two-year postdoctoral research fellowship at the Department of Education, Uppsala University, Sweden (2014–2016). He is a member of two research groups: Studies in Educational Policy and Educational Philosophy (STEP) at Uppsala University and Education and Democracy at Örebro University.
AUTONOMY IN EDUCATION

Metamorphoses of pedagogical autonomy in German school reforms: continuities, discontinuities and synchronicities illustrated by empirical studies on school development planning, school profiling and school inspection

Martin Heinrich1,2*

1Faculty of Educational Science, Bielefeld University, Bielefeld, Germany; 2Department of Oberstufen-Kolleg, Bielefeld University, Bielefeld, Germany

This contribution begins with an analytical differentiation of three different forms of autonomy that appear in the German educational research discourse. Based upon the Enlightenment’s proposal of an autonomous subject as the ideal objective, the pedagogical interpretation of this concept postulates the idea of the autonomous nature of the child, which is discussed in contexts of reformed pedagogy. 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. After presenting these three different forms of autonomy, the article will discuss their continuities, discontinuities and synchronicities against the background of Germany’s various stages of educational reform in the last 40 years. This will be achieved through the means of brief insights into empirical studies on school planning development, school inspection and school profiling. Finally, the consequences of these different forms of relating to the question of autonomy for the discourse on school reform and school development are discussed.

Keywords: autonomy; school development; school inspection; school profiling; school development planning

*Correspondence to: Martin Heinrich, Head of the Research Department Oberstufen-Kolleg, Bielefeld University, Faculty of Educational Science, Universitätsstrasse 23, 33615 Bielefeld, Germany, Email: martin.heinrich@uni-bielefeld.de

For reassurance regarding the meaning of the term autonomy in pedagogy (Froese 1952, Bohnsack 1967), it is worth re-considering its original etymological meaning. Literally translated, the term expresses the idea of a self-legislatating entity (Greek: αυτονομία and νομοπραξία). Embedded in this concept of autonomy is the modern idea of the self-reflective subject able to rationally justify its actions in this reflection (cf. for the following Heinrich, 2006, pp. 31–50). Crucial in its influence on the Enlightenment, within the field of pedagogy this idea needed to be transferred from phylogeny to ontogenesis: the development of society as a whole as desired by the Enlightenment should also be initiated and fostered in every individual person (Beutler, 1969; Bohnsack & Rückriem, 1969). Taken to its full consequence, ‘pedagogy’s aim is to make itself redundant’ (Nohl, 1933b, p. 21).

Pedagogical autonomy and its derivatives

By this reasoning ‘education ends where man becomes independent’ (Nohl, 1933b, p. 21). However, drawing on Pestalozzi, Geißler (1929, p. 19) emphasises the priority of the individual: ‘In a way, the individual constitutes the criterion of pedagogical autonomy’. This leitmotiv of the enlightened and independent man resulted in concepts of reformed pedagogy distancing themselves from traditional pedagogy by rejecting the idea of a naturally

1Derivative: something that has developed or been obtained from something else (Macmillan open dictionary, retrieved 2015-05-23).

1The author would like to thank Michael Cope and Monika Palowski for translation into English and Maik Lambrecht for helpful comments and discussions.
flawed will of the child needing to be broken in order to socialise him/her as was the case with August Hermann Francke's pietistic pedagogy (Blankertz, 1982). In opposition to this pietistic pedagogy, reformed pedagogy claimed a positive anthropology, viewing the child as an untainted subject not yet damaged by society (cf. Rousseau, 1993) whose autonomy ought to be transformed but always respected during this transformation: 'In the conflict between child and culture, both Rousseau and Pestalozzi entirely took the side of the child' (Geißler, 1929, p. 29).

Besides reformed approaches tending to idealise the child (cf. Gläser, 1920, p. 15; Hartlaub, 1922; Key, 1902/2000, p. 120; Montessori, 1967, p. 23) due to their pedagogy 'From the Child’s Perspective' (Gläser, 1920, see references in section 4), historically explicable as a reflex to a perceived negligence of the child's autonomous nature, the German discourse at the turn of the last century was mainly influenced by humanistic pedagogy (Bast, 2000; Schiess, 1973). Its many approaches (Flitner, 1928; Geißler, 1930; Weniger, 1928/1929) perceived the pedagogical process as characterised by the need to foster the child's autonomy specifically by confronting it with an adult world while always allowing for ‘Protest against [the] Intentionality' thus 'imposed' (Blankertz & Gruschka, 1990, see references in section 4).

Thus humanistic pedagogy reacted to a phenomenon all too familiar from classical German pedagogy: the paradox of independence as already put forward by Kant:

> How do I cultivate freedom within compulsion? I should accustom my pupil to endure the compulsion of his freedom and yet teach him to use his freedom well. Without this, all is but mechanism, and the graduate does not know how to make use of his freedom. (Kant, 1803/1922, p. 206)

The paradox of independence therefore immediately clarifies that pedagogical professionals moderating such a sensitive process cannot act upon narrow and schematic guidelines, for these forms of generalisation – inevitably abstracting from the individual – would render all attempts at focusing on the individual subject impossible. The concept labelled ‘pedagogical relation’ by humanistic pedagogy, i.e. the ‘enthusiastic connection between a mature person and a developing person for the latter’s sake, so that he may come to realise his life and identity’ (Nohl, 1933b, p. 22), directly results in a necessary pedagogical freedom of pedagogical professionals in order to carry out their difficult duty (Delekat, 1928; Nohl, 1933a). Within school, this is referred to as ‘pedagogical freedom’ (Buer, 1990, see references in section 4), the ‘freedom of the teacher’ (Mayer, 1980, see references in section 4) or, in short, teacher autonomy (Fauser 1986). In modern terminology the idea of the autonomy of the child re-emerges, featuring prominently in contemporary curricula and lesson-planning emphasising the need for student-centred teaching and categorically excluding a teacher-centred style of instruction (Tillmann, 2001). Evidently, the ideas of the autonomy of the child and the autonomy of the teacher are still relevant in the modern resp. modernised school (Brüsemeister & Eubel, 2003), mediated by the outlined methodical and didactical principles.

This also explains why concepts of reformed pedagogy often opposed overly strict regulation of instruction and didactics (Schaller, 1962). Reformed pedagogy's mostly ambivalent relationship with school as an institution (Oelkers 1989) – in some more subversive parts of the discourse explicitly rejecting (Bernfeld, 1967) resp. decidedly criticising (Fromm, 1965) – originates from this very ambivalence: the modern version of school as an institution (compulsory education) on the one hand, allowing for all children to participate in ‘pedagogical relationships’ resp. pedagogically designed interactions; school as a ‘compulsory institution’ on the other hand, including universalistic rules aimed at turning children into pupils (Dreeben, 1980). Both assumptions opposed the ideas of teacher autonomy and the autonomy of the child.

Taking an offensive turn on this phenomenon, the autonomy of the school (Klafki, 1987; Richter, 1994) and its independence from other social institutions were – if only to a certain extent – resolutely called for (Bastian, 1998; Beetz, 1997; Daschner, Rolff, & Strycck, 1995; Frister, 1994; Munin, 2001; Richter, 1999) in order to assure that within this ‘realm of pedagogy’, pedagogical reasoning was decidedly observed. Thus, the school ought to be independent of society’s other demands (e.g. economic convertibility of degrees and sufficient aptitude for vocational training, cf. Leschinsky & Cortina, 2003, p. 34). Autonomy of the school, therefore, was also used as a polemic term against various forms of usurpation by the state (e.g. Knitter & Wiedemann, 1996, p. 64, drawing on the Enlightenment philosopher Johann Heinrich Campe) or against attacks from the sphere of economics (Blankertz, 1982, pp. 81f., drawing on Rousseau), both subjecting pedagogical autonomy to the rules of the market.

Following this school autonomy concept’s – typically German – history of thought (Hörner 1991; Helmer 1994; Döbert/Geißler 1997; Munin 2001), an area of conflict between a pedagogical ethos and pedagogy institutionalised in schools emerges, based on origins in reformed pedagogy and derivation contexts in educational research; a pattern which does not seem to be observable in the Anglo-American discourse (Anderson, 1991; Busching & Rowlis, 1986; Cox & Wood, 1980; Shulman, 1983). In the face of ‘Social Efficiency’, a concept of broad relevance early on in America gaining increasing influence subsequent to the late 19th century’s Taylorism (Waldow, 2012), schools were imagined as autonomous economic entities and, in the educational research discourse as well as in the pedagogical–psychological (Herzog, 2012) and the political-administrative discourse (cf. Bellmann, 2012, p. 144),
appeared compatible with the ideas of enhancing efficiency and effectiveness.

So, while the (dominant) Anglo-American perspective – apart from traditions of reformed pedagogy and those following Pragmatism (Dewey), which are marginalised in American educational policy (cf. Biesta, 2007, p. 20) – is characterised by a seamless continuity between the educational mandate and the institution carrying it out, the German tradition appears characterised by typically projecting the area of conflict between autonomy and heteronomy onto all dimensions of interaction in school, mediated by an ambivalent understanding of autonomy:

- the idea of student-centred instruction in terms of the autonomy of the child which needs to be guided towards independence,
- the idea of the pedagogical freedom of the teacher resp. teacher autonomy essential for encouraging such processes, and
- the idea of school autonomy which, in its moderate version of schools’ independence from other state and economic institutions, constitutes the sole source of teacher autonomy.

Using this specifically German trifold and, therefore, potentially conflictual understanding of autonomy as a background for establishing a perspective on the German schooling system’s developments over the last 40 years, the history of school reforms in these years does not appear to be a continuous development of quality but rather a history of contradictions (Terhart, 1998, 2000; Wollenweber, 1997). A policy analysis drawing on governance categories (cf. Altrichter & Heinrich, 2007) reveals the numerous interdependencies between norms of the pedagogical discourse, demands from educational policy connected with them, and the resulting administrative directives (cf. Heinrich, 2007). The complex management of interdependence by the different agents from pedagogy, politics and administration eventually makes it impossible to unequivocally identify one subject of action promoting reforms. Instead, a 'topos' from governance analysis seems to apply: it is not individual agents who direct actions anymore but a constellation of agents as a whole (cf. Kussau & Brüsemeister, 2007, p. 26).

**Stages of German school reforms and metamorphoses of the autonomy concept**

Drawing on governance analyses, we have developed and elsewhere published the following model of stages of the Austrian school reform (cf. Altrichter, Brüsemeister, & Heinrich, 2005, pp. 9–14; Altrichter & Heinrich, 2007, pp. 78–93):

- Preliminary stage: stagnation and grey area autonomy
- Stage 1: autonomisation of schools
- Stage 2: school management and the search for new governance instruments
- Stage 3: the ‘PISA shock’ and across-school elements of governance.

Due to comparable structures (Federalism and continuous debates on school structures) and, as a consequence, astonishingly similar discursive formations, this model is basically transferrable to the German school reforms (Altrichter, Heinrich, & Soukoup-Altrichter, 2014, pp. 1–3):

**Preliminary stage: stagnation and grey area autonomy:**

Spanning from the 1970s to the late 1980s, this rather long-lasting period in German educational policy was characterised by stagnating reform efforts. In spite of on-going debates about the hierarchical structure of the German schooling system, especially regarding the establishment of comprehensive schools in opposition to the segregated schooling system (cf. Heinrich, 1996), conditions in many of the German federal states – which hold the legislative authority on education – were stable and largely unquestioned. Positions in the debate on the structure of the schooling system were polarised: rather conservative voices called for a strictly segregated system, while more liberal and politically left-wing factions demanded the implementation of a ‘one school for all children’-model. Tensions were high between the two sides, but no fundamental reforms were implemented in this period. Individual teachers with an orientation towards reformed pedagogy who appreciated the need for innovations were forced to move in grey areas of the law resp. to identify and secure niches for reform-oriented teaching in their daily work (grey area autonomy).

**Stage 1: autonomisation of schools:** The beginning of the 1990s saw some changes. Based on the international discourse, de-centralisation and de-regulation grew more relevant in German educational policy. This discourse mainly originated in criticism of the dominant centralised governance for its inefficiency. In this sense, the ‘Individual School’ was found to be a ‘Unit of Pedagogical Action’ (Fend, 1986, see references in Section 4) resulting in an understanding of school as an organisation in need of development (Rolf, 1994). This period also saw adaptations of Anglo-American concepts regarding the development of schools as organisations in the German discourse (Lange, 1995a, 1995b).

**Stage 2: school management and the search for new governance instruments:** In the second half of the 1990s, the idea of individual school development as a necessity was still relevant but increasingly connected with the (legally) binding fixation of reform instruments like required self-evaluations or the liability to submit school development plans. Recognising the need for an increase in efficiency, very diverse instruments of school development were combined and the need for an ‘orchestration’, i.e. a reconciliation of single instruments’ effects emerged.
Stage 3: the ‘PISA shock’ and cross-school elements of governance: in Germany, the publication of results from the first PISA survey resulted in a profound shock across all levels of educational practice and policy. As an effect of the so-called ‘PISA shock’, this ‘orchestration’ or coordination of action abruptly manifested. Referring to the ‘PISA shock’ in an international context does, however, require some explanation, since in many other OECD countries PISA’s results were acknowledged but did not cause as intense political debates as they did in Germany (Tillmann, Dedering, Kneuper, Kuhlmann, & Nessel, 2008). The firm belief that the German schooling system was extremely efficient and, therefore, fit for international competition, was heavily shaken by the PISA inquiry’s results which were, if not entirely poor, still far below expectations. Accordingly, the ‘PISA shock’ triggered a widespread and heated discussion about the coordination of governance elements across schools which itself resulted in the ‘Comprehensive Strategy’ issued by the Central Commission of Education Secretaries (KMK, 2006) representing a consensus between the individual Secretaries and proposing the idea of educational monitoring. In this stage, numerous reforms that had not even been dreamed of during the decades of stagnation in educational policy were consensually implemented at incredible speed: national standards, centralised assessment tests, school inspections and educational reporting at a national level. In the meantime educational reporting has also been partially introduced at a regional level (Ackeren et al., 2013).

Changing relations between teacher autonomy and school autonomy – the example of school development planning as supersession of grey area autonomy during the transition from school autonomy to state-regulated school management

The implementation of compulsory school development planning in Germany was reconstructed in an empirical study in which 25 teachers were interviewed.\textsuperscript{2} The phenomenon in question is suitable for an inquiry into changing pedagogical concepts of autonomy because school development planning radically transforms innovative reform ideas emerging from the midst of the teaching staff by means of their fixation and publication in a school development plan.

Whereas during the stage of grey area autonomy individual teachers or teacher networks conscious of their autonomy used to take the pedagogical liberty of implementing low-level reform ideas in their lessons without informing head teachers or administration, the concept of development via school development planning is now being transferred from the individual autonomous teacher’s readiness to accept reforms to the whole school as an organisation. Since development objectives now require legitimisation before colleagues, head teachers, and the school community instead of the teacher’s own pedagogical conscience only, the room for autonomy shifts: the individual teacher’s autonomy may have to submit to decisions on school development planning democratically made by a majority (cf. in detail Heinrich, 2007, p. 299). Objectives of school development planning are still meant to represent the whole teaching staff’s objectives and can, therefore, still count as an expression of teacher autonomy, but it is the autonomy of the collective that now functions as a corporate agent.

It is, however, totally unclear in many cases whether this collective autonomy actually constitutes a corporate agent with a coherent position or whether differing individual opinions merging into compromises or majority decisions are being treated as agents (‘The school conference has decided . . . ’). Heinrich, 2011, p. 111f). Analysing dilemma interviews (cf. in detail Heinrich, 2006), focused on fictional scenarios which illustrated possible conflicts between autonomy and control in school development planning, yielded numerous reactions from teachers fearing for their pedagogical freedom in the face of compulsory collective agreement. After the formerly voluntarily school development planning which educational policy had offered as a possibility had become compulsory (fixated in decrees or laws, varying between the different federal states), not only teachers’ individual freedom but also the autonomy of the teacher collective, which within its particular school had agreed on specific objectives, was curtailed. School development plans were required to be submitted, a rule which in some cases even included formal instructions on the components that the plans should cover.

It could be argued that such forms of curtailing autonomy are harmless as the failure to achieve objectives outlined in school development plans never resulted in sanctions. In involved agents’ subjective interpretations, however, fears and feelings of losing autonomy, often implicitly articulated, become visible:

\textsuperscript{2} The aim was to find interviewees from all different types of school in order to avoid overlooking certain patterns of argumentation specific to individual types. Because of their exceptional position, special needs schools were not included in the sample. Instead, we interviewed teachers from primary schools, secondary schools (‘Hauptschule’), middle schools (‘Realschule’), vocational schools (‘Berufsfachschule’), grammar schools (‘Gymnasium’) and comprehensive schools (‘Gesamtschule’). Whenever possible, interviewees were selected from contrasting age groups (for instance, trainee teachers and teachers on the brink of retirement). Questions regarding the distribution of certain characteristics among the population and the sample were, however, not prioritised. Because of the small sample, socio-metric categories could not be expected to be significant in the sense of a statistically sound group comparison. The hardly structured sampling process was supposed merely to increase the likelihood of assessing all patterns of argumentation essential to the autonomy debate, which would not have been likely with a sample strictly homogenous regarding gender, age, and type of school. To further increase the variety of responses, interviews were carried out in the Federal States of both North Rhine-Westphalia and Hesse. At the time of the interviews (summer/autumn 2002), they had either just completed the first stage of school planning development as recently demanded by law or were just going through its critical phase (cf. in detail Heinrich, 2007, p. 223).
Interviewer: Do you feel controlled by the school council and school supervision?
Teacher: -- Not yet.
Interviewer: What do you mean by ‘yet’?
Teacher: -- Because maybe, when the school development plan is finished, this could happen. But I don’t think that … well, ehm, I think I’ll be able to justify my pedagogical work.
Interviewer: But that means it is an examination nevertheless …
Teacher: … no, it’s not a direct, concrete examination, it’s more like a kind of dictation inside the head. (As cited in Heinrich, 2007, p. 237)

This teacher at first rejects the notion of their autonomy being curtailed, only to then concede that this curtailment affects them at the level of subconscious internalisation, even if legal resp. manifest circumstances do ‘not yet’ constrain it.

Meanwhile, larger empirical inquiries suggest that remarkably, German teachers react to statutory provisions from educational politics as if they were embedded in high-stake systems, even though negative sanctions never took place. While in the USA the non-fulfilment of fixed objectives often results in direct and drastic sanctions, German teachers seem to react with pre-emptive obedience and conformism, even though no comparable negative sanctions by the government have – as yet – to be expected (Bellmann, 2015).

On the fading autonomy of schools in the context of quality management – the example of school supervision

The relatively non-binding nature of school development planning in Germany was transformed into a binding nature not only by compulsory submission of development plans to school supervision boards, but also through implementation of school inspection as a compulsory procedure in the German federal states. Similar to England, where in the years following their implementation new standards of school inspection were used as guidelines in many individual school development plans, instruments of school inspection presumably have a normative influence on school development planning in Germany as well.

This is valid not only in terms of compulsory submission of development plans to school inspection boards with their non-submission being an indicator of failure on the schools’ part, but also in terms of school inspection assessments following a national framework of school quality, which is a signal to teachers as to which norms have to be considered binding norms of their profession.3 Kotthoff and Böttcher emphasise that

3These frameworks contain the pedagogical idea of the autonomy of the child in respective norms, such as student-centred, individualised or differentiated instruction. Nevertheless, the autonomy of the child is only present as a formal claim which, still, has to be met within the frame of teacher autonomy in actual lessons.

the norms of reference relevant in school inspection [are] normally published in the form of an orientation framework for school quality, representing a quasi-theory of ‘good schools’. By publication of evaluation criteria, expectations concerning the quality of schools and instructions are formulated, lending an additional normative effect on individual schools to the governance instrument that is school inspection. (Kotthoff & Böttcher, 2010, p. 296)

In an empirical inquiry funded by the Federal German Ministry of Education and Research (see Heinrich, Lambrecht, Böhm-Kasper, Brüsemeister, & Wissinger, 20144) and involving different school agents, one school inspector articulates this normative claim very clearly:

And whether we can define norms to a certain extent. That’s an example of one of the discussions that took place [...]: ‘Does [school inspection] define the norms that must be fulfilled?’ Like: ‘Who really does define the quality standards?’ This, at the moment, is the compelling idea behind it. (School inspector)

It should be noted that, especially in Germany, schools have always been confronted with guidelines issued by the government, i.e. in the form of curricula (Avenarius, 1995; Flügge, 1964; Hennecke, 1986; Stock, 1971).

This normative entity, however, traditionally manifested in Germany (and in Austria) as a school supervision board composed mainly of members of the actual teaching staff and was, therefore, predominantly oriented towards the norms of the teaching profession and open to pedagogical arguments in favour of teacher autonomy (Schratz, 1993). These very forms of teacher autonomy became, however, subject to criticism due to an increasing interest in meeting quality standards through school management (Lange, 1999; Richter 1999), so that, as a consequence, the traditional school supervision oriented towards teacher autonomy also began to attract critical attention and a ‘crisis of school supervision’ (Maritzen, 2008, p. 88) seemed imminent.

In contrast, the school inspections implemented after the ‘PISA shock’ clearly follow the lines of efficiency-centred organisational development, conducting their evaluations in accordance with externally defined objectives

4The data presented in the following originate in two sources: a school administration survey, carried out on a region-wide basis in four federal states (Böhm-Kasper & Selders, 2013) and more than 120 interviews conducted for the joint project ‘School Inspection as a Governance Impulse for School Development and Conditions for its Realisation in Individual Schools’ (funding code 01JG1001A-D) and for the follow-up survey ‘Functions of School Inspections: the Generating of Knowledge, Knowledge-based School Development and Legitimation’ (funding codes 01JG1004A-B), both funded by the Ministry of Education and Research. For reasons of anonymity, all denominations of processes in the respective organisations have been changed to ‘school inspection’. Similarly, all names given are pseudonyms, indications of gender have been partially interchanged and official functions are not distinguished, with only the affiliation with school supervision or school inspection marked down.

Citation: NordSTEP 2015, 1: 28563 - http://dx.doi.org/10.3402/nstep.v1.28563

55
that must be achieved in the best possible way. Therefore, the normative entity has not only abandoned the traditional form of school supervision oriented towards teacher autonomy but also, at the content level, changed a fixation of objectives which now only allows for an ‘autonomy of channels’, as another school inspector clearly describes:

[...] so, this increasing independence of the school clearly leads to people saying: ‘school supervision has strict administrative supervisions but, in principle, takes a step back and leaves large parts to the school’. But, in exchange, the state – so to speak – looks at that school in the shape of [school inspection] using a secure system and giving a feedback- a feedback system, for an independent school. [...] Especially from that perspective I can understand the rather large part of normalisation that somehow, for reasons of fairness, has to be involved. (School inspector)

This illustrates a further shift of the room for autonomy away from individual teacher autonomy 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. This new type of standard-setting appears to gradually replace the 1980s’ original concept of the individual school as a ‘Unit of Pedagogical Action’ (cf. Fend, 1986) with a universalised idea of a ‘good school’. Thus, the potential for increasing the quality of schools by means of site-specific elaboration, which had been the focus of the beginning school development movement in Germany in the 1980s and 90s, is gradually weakened.

School as an institution of the state is still operating within its own framework of norms distinguishing it from other social spheres, such as the economy, but these norms’ fixation (autonomy), mediated by the government’s quality frameworks, does not reside with schools as individual organisations, with the teaching staff or with individual teacher autonomy anymore.

On the one hand, the phenomenon of school profiling can be understood as an extension to school planning development in which the individual school learns to view itself as an organisation with shared pedagogical standards and, therefore, to distinguish itself from other schools as well. On the other hand, catalysed by the demographic context of decreasing student numbers, this process of differentiation also triggers competitive thinking which has abandoned the pedagogical logic of providing the best education possible for each individual child but instead follows the economic paradigm of self-preservation.

The phenomenon of school profiling illustrates how the idea of ‘Social Efficiency’ (cf. Waldow, 2012) can be connected to the highly compatible concept of the economical-liberal autonomy of the school as a business. In an inquiry funded by the Austrian National Bank\(^3\) we could identify highly differing effects of competition on school profiling (cf. in detail Altrichter et al., 2014). For instance, in the case of an Austrian ‘Gymnasium’ (grammar school) we observed the gradual disappearance of the perspective of pedagogical encouragement and its substitution by a concept of selection modelled along the lines of economic self-preservation:

That means, the mere fact: one goes with the child to an upper secondary school with a cultural focus, the child has to take a kind of entrance exam – many people won’t apply, and those who do are mostly far above the average, and that’s a very positive selection effect of the orientation workshop; we’ve already discussed getting rid of it, if we don’t get as many applications as before, but we won’t do so, as the mere fact of its existence gives us access to a clientele with very high potential. (Austrian grammar school teacher)

It seems remarkable how well this teacher is able to utilise market mechanisms and their symbolic biases and, at the same time, refer to a ‘positive selection effect’. This conceptual pair would have been considered an oxymoron, a contradiction in itself, within reformed pedagogy or traditional conceptualisations of pedagogical autonomy.

\(^3\)As part of a larger project network, eight Austrian secondary schools of different types were included in the sample following three preliminary studies. The case studies were based on document analyses (documents relevant to profiling, such as draft papers, public image documents, minutes, representation in the media), field studies, and interviews. In each of the eight schools between 10 and 15 thematically structured interviews were conducted in two waves. The first wave included five ‘officials’ from each school (school administration, representatives of staff, parents’ representatives, students’ representatives, teachers with coordinating functions) who were assumed to put forward essential ‘formal’ perspectives on the development process. Interviewees for the second wave were selected by means of theoretical sampling supported by preliminary analyses of the first wave data. The aim here was to assess expertise, perspectives or attitudes which had been referred to in the interviews from the first wave but had not been systematically observed (cf. in detail Altrichter, Heinrich, & Soukup-Altrichter, 2011, p. 53).
Mediated by ‘second order competition’ (which means not only competing for a high number of students as in ‘first-order competition’, but also for a high-performing clientele; cf. Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995), the prevalent interpretation of pedagogical processes results in a loss of sensitivity for aspects that might constitute the modern equivalent of the pedagogical orientation towards the autonomous nature of the child: student-centred instruction, individualisation and differentiation.

Students are, in contrast, mainly seen as de-individualised performers:

And I want qualified students to come. That doesn’t mean that I would refuse foreign students, for example, not at all. We have very good foreign students, but we have also very weak foreign students. I mean, I want the qualified ones to come. And I want the good ones. What teacher wouldn’t like that? (Austrian grammar school teacher)

**Autonomy – or trans-intentionality of divergent processes of self-legislation in the constellation of agents**

To conclude, the metamorphoses of the autonomy concept – beginning with a concept in humanistic pedagogy and developing into an instrument of modern educational governance – illustrate how pedagogical reasoning becomes increasingly irrelevant in the term’s semantic substance and is being reshaped by bureaucratic institutionalisations resp. by the logic of control by the state or by economic principles.

It could be argued at this point that the German discourse, in whose context these pedagogical elements of the rhetoric of autonomy seem to have secretly disappeared, has become indifferent to these traditional pedagogical norms’ necessity (cf. Heinrich, 2010). And it is in fact – except in explicitly reform-oriented and alternative circles – considered old-fashioned and anti-modernistic to refer to such old pedagogical norms.

Meanwhile, however, such autonomy’s necessity is again referred to more often and *ex negativo*, as the ‘monitoring paradigm’ (cf. Böttcher, 2013) is increasingly criticised in the German school-related discourse. Suddenly, even proponents of an efficiency-centred school development agenda warn against the horrible image of a controlling state, drawing on the United States as a frightening example:

In the Federal Republic [of Germany], the paradigm of monitoring has not yet changed into a paradigm of control that links assessment to negative sanctions. The USA serves as an example of this. It might therefore be too early to give out a ‘warning against the false idol’ [...]. But, if politicians should decide to focus on the further development of monitoring instead of the further development of pedagogical practice, we will quickly arrive at a system that produces a number of negative side effects. (Böttcher, 2013, p. 18)

At the same time, the United States is seeing an increase in criticism of technological and control-oriented school development resp. of the failed ‘great American experiment’, as the two American experts in school development Mintrop and Sundermann (2012, p. 24) put it:

The hypothesis of simplification was put forward by experts in management and psychometrics. It claims that we can humanise a very complex system of human interaction, i.e. teaching, by employing a limited number of effective quantitative indicators. The great American experiment has taught us how difficult it is to connect exact numbers to the more subtle professional values of human charity, enthusiastic teaching and good instruction.

Even if this criticism does not explicitly refer to traditional German concepts of autonomy, it does contain the aforementioned elements of a pedagogical idea, beginning with the autonomy of the child which needs protection and for whose careful development the autonomy of the teacher is essential, and arriving at the school as an autonomous institution which ought to provide the framework for free pedagogical interaction. This possibly means that we no longer find ourselves in the third stage of coordination of across-school governance elements (see c. 2) but already in a fourth stage of school reform, the ‘monitoring paradigm’, in which – as the interview studies illustrated – the three earlier forms of autonomy come under pressure and the pedagogical potential threatens to dwindle away.

At the same time, the ever-increasing criticism seems inevitable, making a return to traditional forms of pedagogical autonomy appear promising. A progressive option could be the concept of a negotiation-centred and evidence-based school development (cf. in detail Heinrich, 2015), because within this concept, through the demands for evidence, the old idea of the enlightened subject could be revitalised: a self-governing subject, establishing its own law (autonomy) and justifying it in the court of its ‘own’, in this case ‘pedagogical’, reason.

**References**


Tillmann, K.-J. (2001). Autonomie der Schule – Die bildungspolitische Diskussion in Deutschland und die Erfahrungen der Bielefelder Laborschule [Autonomy of the school – The German debate in educational policy and experiences from the laboratory school in Bielefeld]. In U. Sandfuchs &


**Martin Heinrich**, PhD, is full professor of educational science at Bielefeld University and Head of the Research Department Oberstufen-Kolleg. His research interests are Educational Governance, school development research, education for sustainable development as well as action research and especially qualitative research methods.
AUTONOMY IN EDUCATION

Innovation and autonomy at a time of rapid reform: an English case study

Ruth McGinity*

Manchester Institute of Education, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK

This paper sets out to report upon the findings of a case study of an ‘innovative’ school in England. Specifically, the research focusses upon the way in which the school has engaged with the neoliberal policy context in which increased autonomy and diversification of provision is promoted in England as a driver of standards. Using Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of symbolic capital, the findings suggest that within this autonomous system, ‘innovative’ localised policy-making can arguably misrecognise the role such ‘innovation’ plays in helping to maintain structures, which may contribute to ensuring the field, and its competitive nature, is protected rather than challenged.

Keywords: autonomy; innovation; England; symbolic capital; misrecognition

*Correspondence to: Ruth McGinity, Manchester Institute of Education, University of Manchester, Manchester M13 9PL, UK, Email: Ruth.mcginity@manchester.ac.uk

In England there is an on-going drive for educational change that demonstrates innovative approaches to both policy and practice in order to deliver on a centrally framed standards agenda, developed in tandem within a ‘neoliberal imaginary’ of public education (Ball, 2012). In England such a drive has been dominated by those in government committed to diversification and autonomy as a means of enabling the change process, often through structural re-organisation of educational provision (Caldwell & Spinks, 2008; Harris & Ranson, 2005; Simkins, 2000; Wright, 2012).

Within such an approach, the term ‘innovation’ gives rise as a desirable catalysat for such change processes to be successfully enacted within particular socio-economic and political contexts. Inter-alia, innovation is regularly conceptualised as a necessary condition for effecting efficacious change at the local level, which is often associated with structural, rather than pedagogic, re-organisation contributing to a diverse and autonomous educational landscape (Gewirtz, 1997, 2002; Goodson, 2010; Lubienski, 2003).

This paper intends to think critically about the way in which ‘innovation’ is conceptualised and framed as a strategic process, by using a case study of a secondary school in England undergoing significant re-organisation. The school’s approaches to this change process have been described as innovative, by those working within the school as well as by powerful policy players at the national level. In particular the school leadership team and the school’s governing body are fully committed to ‘thinking and doing things differently’ in order to develop the educational provision on offer to the young people they serve. In doing so, the paper will argue that the conceptualisation of innovation witnessed throughout this research project is less about radically different ways of perceiving and delivering public education and more about innovation as a strategy of improvement for the effective delivery of centrally derived neoliberal policy goals, with a particular focus on the codification of autonomy in order to develop human capital approaches to educational re-structuring.1

As such the paper deploys Bourdieu’s (1990) notion of misrecognition as a theoretical lens through which to think about how innovation may indeed contribute to the (re)production of inequality in an education system explicitly and implicitly wedded to autonomous and hierarchical notions of schooling processes and outcomes, which as is well documented, are persistently differentiated on the basis of class, race and gender (Araújo, 2007; Ball et al., 1996, Gillborn & Mirza, 2000; Reay, 2006, 2008; Thrupp & Lupton, 2006).

1It is important to note that the term neoliberal is used to great effect in much policy scholarship in the field of education, and that there is still work to be done with regards to the application of this concept in a range of contexts. For the purpose of clarity neoliberalism is defined here by a commitment to pro-market governance and thus what is of interest is how the increased marketisation of education, particularly through the codification of autonomy, diversity and competition, impacts upon the way schools develop and enact localised policy-making in specific sites.
The processes of educational change in England over the last three decades in particular have focussed upon reforms and codified legislative interventions which privilege neoliberal discourses pertaining to choice, competition and autonomy. The speed at which the English system of education is being transformed into a patchwork of autonomous schools (or groups of schools) operating in a quasi-market place is significant; as England fast becomes the most diverse system in the world, such processes are of significant interest for an international audience, as attempts to introduce market-based reforms into education systems across the globe are becoming more commonplace (Marginson, 1999).

The paper starts by providing a socio-historical critique of the development of the English education system since 1944, following on from this the next section outlines the context and specific policy trajectory of the case-study school, taking into account how the school has framed ‘innovative’ re-structuring of the educational provision on offer through the lens of autonomy. The research design is then explicated and following this the analysis identifies ways in which innovation and autonomy are conceptualised as providing an approach to school improvement as a means of developing distinctive and competitive educational provision during a period of rapid, neoliberal reform.

Autonomy and innovation in context

Educational reform in England has undergone significant change in the 20th and early 21st centuries. As a result of the two world wars, the 1940s signalled the beginning of a sea change in a number of key areas of social life in England. In particular a political consensus was developed which prompted the parturition of social welfare, of which the National Health Service is a, if not the most, significant exemplar (Clarke & Newman, 1997). Alongside the ‘free at the point of access’ principle in the provision and delivery of healthcare was the Butler (Education) Act of 1944, which was celebrated at the time for ensuring ‘the development of equality of educational opportunity within a democratic welfare society’ (McCulloch, 1994, p. 42). The Act was reported as ‘revolutionary’ by the Ministry of Education (1947, unpaged) and a later ministerial White Paper noted the Act ‘provided that all children of secondary school age throughout England and Wales, not just the selected few, should have a secondary education in accordance with their age, ability and aptitude’ (Ministry of Education, 1958, unpaged). The Act legislated compulsory education for all children up to the age of 15; and the preceding Norwood Report (1943, unpaged) laid the foundations for a tripartite approach to state provision for ‘three broad types of secondary education’ from the age of 11; the ‘grammar’ (selective, academic) and the ‘technical’ and ‘modern’ (non-selective models focussing on more technicist or vocational approaches to education). The established fee paying independent school model from the late 14th and early 15th centuries, the proliferation of church schools throughout the latter 18th and 19th centuries, along with the development of grammar, technical and modern schools in the mid-20th century illustrate that hierarchised and diverse provision, often along class lines, was a foundational, indeed integral, aspect of the English educational landscape (McCulloch, 1994).

Acknowledgement of the negative impact of effectively siphoning children off at the age of 11 into academic or non-academic provision led to the comprehensive school ideal gaining traction in the late 1960s and 1970s, and as a result many grammar schools transferred to the independent sector, were abolished or became comprehensive (Benn, 1980; Benn & Chitty, 1996). Despite this change, there remain 164 state-run grammar schools in England today that select their intake according to ability (Bolton, 2013). The Education Reform Act of 1988 is often cited as the next significant legislative intervention in English educational policy, this time fostering the conditions to enable the strengthening of market forces into the running of state provision, in particular through the ‘empowering’ of parents to choose schools based on merit rather than proximity, through the introduction of standardised testing, a national curriculum and league tables (Barker, 2008; Hoskins, 2012). At this time autonomy as a stimulus for improvement was becoming embedded through the Conservative policy agenda, initially through Local Management of Schools (LMS) and Grant Maintained Schools (GMS) which subsequently enabled the establishment of City Technology Colleges; state funded, yet independent schools, run by business sponsors (Whitty, Power, & Halpin, 1998). In the 1990s the Conservative’s also established ‘Specialist Schools’ (increased funding was given to schools to specialise in certain curriculum areas in order to further embed diversity of provision and the schools were able to select up 10% of their intake based on student ‘aptitude’ for this specialism) and from 2002 New Labour introduced the City Academy programme, which saw ‘failing’ schools in urban areas of disadvantage closed down and reopened as state funded independent schools sponsored by a variety of providers (Adonis, 2012; Gunter, 2011; Sammons, 2008). In 2010 the Academies Act was passed by the coalition government, which enabled the conversion of successful schools to become autonomous from Local Authority control via sponsorship, as well as forced academisation for failing schools in any geographical location, and the opening of new schools (Free Schools) by a range of interested parties (parents, teachers, sponsors, church groups, etc.). This legislative intervention thus significantly contributed to the privatisation of state education in England (Gunter & McGinity, 2014). The Conservative party won a majority in the general election held in May 2015 and as such have
confirmed their intention to accelerate the reform process to increase the number of Academies in England and to open 500 Free Schools over the period of their government, despite the a lack of consistent evidence to support the success of this reform programme. However, these key twists and turns in the recent history of English educational reform serve to illustrate that change processes through diversity and latterly autonomy have formed the bedrock from which ‘innovation’ within the system is conditioned.

This story is mapped by a commitment to the fragmentation of traditional, and democratic mechanisms for overseeing state educational provision, with Local Authorities painted as unwieldy, bureaucratic stranglers of innovation, and in the more recent neoliberal imagination, autonomy and entrepreneurialism have been framed as not only desirable but necessary dimensions for successful leadership (Ball, 2011; Gunter & Forrester, 2010; Gunter & McGinity, 2014; Hatcher, 2008; Higham, 2013; Moore et al., 2002). It is within this context that the presentation of data and analysis that follows is sited.

The story of Kingswood

The school, the only secondary school within the seemingly affluent dormitory town of Kingswood, draws its intake from the middle classes of the town (although 20% of the towns young people attend independent schools), along with a significant minority of students from the social housing estate on the edge of Kingswood, a marginalised community with significant levels of deprivation. Students also travel some distance from the neighbouring metropolitan borough which is one of the 36 LAs (out of 433 in England) that operates the 11 + and as such a significant minority of students have either failed this examination and the parents have rejected the choices of non-grammers closer to their homes, or have actively sought a comprehensive education away from the tiered system that the 11 + generates and supports. This aspect of Kingswood’s identity is important because the data suggest that part of the ways in which policy processes play out in the school setting are related to the ways in which advantage and disadvantage are framed as a result of the school’s context.

In April 2012 the school converted to an Academy. In line with the coalition government’s shift in policy, under the Academies Act 2010, schools that were deemed to be ‘successful’ as determined through the accountability framework of Ofsted (the regulated inspectorate in England) were invited to apply for a fast track conversion to academy status as part of the drive to increase localised autonomy in the running of schools (Wrigley, 2012). Kingswood Academy’s Ofsted from November 2011 had measured the school as ‘Good with outstanding features’ and as such the school met the criteria for a rapid change in status. By the end of the following term, the school had become autonomous from the maintaining Local Authority. The conversion indicated that the school had accumulated enough symbolic capital within the field of educational policy in order to be legitimated within the new ‘regime of social practice’ (Gunter & Forrester, 2010, p. 56). Kingswood Academy had responded to the shifting nature of the field of educational policy by ‘playing the game’ by legitimating the schools position within the field through conversion. As Gunter and Forrester (2010, p. 57) argue, ‘the game is defined by, and entry controlled through, the doxa or self-evident truths located in values and discourses’ (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 11). Thus, what was evident was that the neoliberal doxa has worked to re-articulate the values and discourses within the field of educational policy in order to strengthen the position of the ‘self-evident truth’ for a centralised (autonomous), and market driven (diverse) system of educational provision.

Although the school had badge itself accordingly within this regime of practice, it was revealed that there were further and significant reforms planned as a result of the conversion, as using the autonomy granted to the school as a result of academisation they had more freedom to play with their organisational structures. This position put lead to the development of the ‘Multi Academy Trust’ (MAT) that was established in 2013. Within this model Kingswood would be split into two discrete yet interconnected provisions, both of which were to be tailored to embody an employability agenda within the curriculum. The ‘Professional School’ which would focus upon a more traditionally academic pathway with input from companies such as an international bank, a global consultancy firm and a law school, and the Studio School, which would be designed to offer a curriculum which whilst retaining the core academic disciplines, would focus on vocational-based choices such as a performance pathway, a digital pathway, a design or a sport and leisure pathway, with partnerships of representative companies in these industries. The students would make choices, which would see them designated into one of these ‘schools’ from the age of 13. Whilst the Studio School is still currently being developed in a separate building on the school’s site, the curriculum at Kingswood Academy has already been restructured in order to accommodate input from a range of influential businesses in response to the development of an explicit ‘employability’ agenda. It is an analysis of this re-structuring that forms the basis for this paper.

Research design

The research that forms the basis of this paper is drawn from a case study of a secondary school (Kingswood – anonymised name) in the north west of England between 2010 and 2013. The purpose of the research was to provide a ‘particular, descriptive, inductive and ultimately heuristic’ portrait of how one school is constructing a future during a period of intense and neoliberal educational
reform (Chadderton & Torrance, 2011, p. 54). In this sense, I developed a case study which set out to demonstrate how Kingswood engaged with the policy context at a specific period of reform, and how, through the enactment of autonomy, the school engaged with processes of capital exchange to achieve legitimation and distinction in a competitive field environment. The study took a qualitative approach, in which a total of 21 teachers, 18 students, five parents and seven school leaders (including the Principal and the Deputy Principle) were interviewed multiple times, alongside observations of 35 lessons and 10 meetings as well as documentary analysis of a wide range of school policies; in total 100 days were spent at the school between 2010 and 2012.

The analysis in this paper draws on data collected during the academic year 2010–2011 and 2011–2012, and predominately draws on data produced through two interviews with the Principal, one interview with the Deputy Principle, two interviews with senior members of the school leadership team (referred to as Senior Leader 1 and Senior Leader 2), one interview with a Middle Leader as well as one interview with the Chair of Governors. This data is supplemented where appropriate by the knowledge produced as a result of the range of research activities outlined above and this is clarified throughout the paper, where necessary. Each transcript from the eight interviews (2 from the Principal) forming the main basis of analysis for this paper were re-visited in order to identify conceptualisations of innovation within the schools development trajectory, of increased autonomy. Thematic coding was developed in which I identified emergent patterns which illustrated the position that these staff members took, firstly in relation to the claim that the schools localised policy trajectory was in itself innovative, and secondly the extent to which the participants linked such innovation with the autonomy granted to the school as a result of conversion to an Academy. As such the results theorise that the logics of leadership practice is structured by the necessity of school leaders to accumulate symbolic capital as offered through legitimate action defined by an increasingly centralised and regulating bureaucracy (Blackmore, 2010; Gewirtz, 2002; Thomson, 2005).

The staking for such symbolic capital reveals how there are field ‘interests’ that have been developed as a result for the need to engage with and play the game. Within the neoliberal conditions developed as a result of successive government’s reform processes embedding choice, diversity and competition into the system, the game involves protecting the interests of the individual student and the field of the school by playing the game ‘effectively’, that is, by accumulating capital that both legitimates and advances positions within the competitive market place.

Such an analysis allows a mapping of the ‘objective structures of the relations between the positions occupied by the agents [and the] institutions who compete for the legitimate form of specific authority of which this field is the site’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 230). In so doing it is possible to offer a theorising of how ‘innovative’ localised policy-making, developed as a direct result of the codification of autonomy granted through the Academies Act 2010, can arguably ‘misrecognise’ the role of autonomy in producing versions of ‘innovation’ that may help to maintain structures, which serve to disadvantage members of the school community as well as contribute to ensuring the field, and its competitive nature is protected, rather than challenged (Thomson, 2010).

The position shared by the seven interviews underpinning the analysis for this paper was that business leaders maligned the fact that not enough students left school with ‘employability’ skills and the use of the autonomy granted through the Academies Act to re-structure the provision in order to embed an employability agenda was an ‘innovative’ approach at addressing this perceived failure within state education. Interestingly research undertaken between 1987 and 1991 revealed similar positions by ‘leading industrialists’ who argued that comprehensive education ‘simply wasn’t delivering the skills that they needed. And it was also their view that the poor outcomes was what was creating high unemployment, high youth employment. It wasn’t necessarily the lack of jobs; it was the lack of skills’ (Whitty, Edwards & Gewirtz, 1993, p. 20). This point will be returned to, but it is of interest to note here that the discourses in the intervening 25 years regarding maintained schools (in)ability to prepare children for the world of work remain remarkably similar and that such an argument was used in the development of the autonomous, ‘independent state-funded’ City Technology Colleges. The school’s development trajectory also spoke to the commitment within the English system to diversity of provision, as offering a range of models of educational provision to meet a variety of needs, for parents and students to choose from.

**Symbolic capital and misrecognition: how innovation can be conceptualised in a centrally regulated, autonomous, and hierarchical school system**

It is possible to theorise that the re-structuring along academic and vocational pathways taking place at Kingswood shored up by the input of established businesses and consultancy firms is associated with populist neoliberal rhetoric in which educational provision is deemed to require external influences from sources outside of traditional educational administrational networks in order to address the apparent failure of schools in preparing young people for the competitive global marketplace they will enter at the end of their formal schooling (Ball, 2012). Such a position is supported by an analysis of the approach taken by the current Department for Education, which, under the previous Secretary of State for Education,
Michael Gove, commissioned two reviews since 2010 into 14–19 education, both of which have found the state of current vocational education to be severely lacking (Husbands, 2014; Wolf, 2011). The Husband’s Review stated:

The last Labour Government’s target to get 50% of young people into university expanded opportunity and increased the skills of the workforce. But not enough attention was paid to the options available to those who do not go to university. This ‘forgotten 50%’ of young people are faced by a complex mix of vocational courses, too many of which do not offer any progression to good jobs or further study. The failure to tap into the talent of these young people caps aspiration and holds back businesses that can’t get the skills they need to succeed. Other countries do better. We can too. (Husbands, 2014, p. 1)

Within this position is embodied a human capital approach to educational provision, additionally it is apparent that within the neoliberal, competitive framework, ‘tapping into talent’ requires innovation and entrepreneurialism at every level. Hodgson (2012) argues that the policy discourses emanating from both Europe and the UK Government identify such a need as essential, which underpins the neoliberal commitment to empowering the individual in order to take responsibility for achieving success, with the state taking on the role of facilitator and performance monitor:

Europe must find innovative ways to remain competitive. This entails bridging the gap between ideas and the market, ensuring that education at all levels provides citizens with entrepreneurial and innovation skills, and encouraging actors at all levels in all sectors to take responsibility for the need to innovate. (Hodgson, 2012, p. 532)

Innovation in these terms is conceptualised as an economic imperative, which taken with entrepreneurialism can and should be facilitated ‘in all sectors’ as a method of maintaining and securing a country’s place in the global hierarchy of competition – whether it be, for example, in technology or in international educational leagues such as PISA. In the field of education it is apparent that, in England at least, a prerequisite for the capacity to develop innovatively and entrepreneurially is autonomy from the state (Ball, 2009). Such a position follows the axiom that together autonomy and innovation work to produce higher standards. This is one of the foundational ideas underpinning the Academies movement, and is apparent in the Charter School movement the United States and the Free Schools movement in Sweden. Gove outlined this position in a speech in 2012:

Research from the OECD and others has shown that more autonomy for individual schools helps raise standards. In its most recent international survey of education, the OECD found that ‘in countries where schools have greater autonomy over what is taught and how students are assessed, students tend to perform better’. Two of the most successful countries in PISA international education league tables – Hong Kong and Singapore – are amongst those with the highest levels of school competition. And from autonomous schools in Alberta, to Sweden’s Free Schools, to the Charter Schools of New York and Chicago, freedom is proving an unstoppable driver of excellence. (The Education Secretary’s speech on academies at Haberdashers’ Aske’s Hatcham College, 4th January 2012)

Under Gove the DfE developed an initiative called ‘The Power to Innovate’ through which the ‘Secretary of State for Education is able to temporarily suspend, or modify, education legislation that may be holding back – or even stopping – innovative approaches to raising standards’ (DfE, web address). Thus there is in place powerful mechanisms, legislatively and rhetorically, which indicate the government’s position on both autonomy and innovation and the relationship between them. Since the 2010 Academies Act, over half of English secondary schools have either voluntarily or been forced into conversion.² It has been noted that this ‘serial, breathless restructurings’ (Glattor, 2012, p. 566) has created conditions in which ‘the government seems to have stopped noticing successful schools unless they’re academies’ (Morris, 2011: unpaged).

Within such a context it is possible to deploy Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of symbolic capital as a means of understanding the pressure schools are under to convert to this agenda. Bourdieu explains symbolic capital as:

a species of capital is what is efficacious in a given field, both as a weapon and as a stake of struggle, that which allows its possessors to wield power, or influence, and thus to exist, in the field under consideration, instead of being considered a negligible quantity. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 98)

In such a conception a school such as Kingswood, that has successfully converted to academy status and has used the attendant autonomy to re-structure aspects of their provision in such a way to meet the clarion calls of ministers and industry for the ‘forgotten 50%’ has efficaciously accumulated symbolic capital in the process. This was evident by the way in which the Principal was able to secure meetings in Westminster with high profile policy actors and policy networks during the development phase of the professional/studio school idea. The Principal at Kingswood explicitly identified the potential for schools

---

²As of January 2012 there were 3268 secondary schools in England, and by March 2013 2591 were either converted (1618) or in the process of converting (973) to academy status (Department for Education, 2014)
leaders within the current context to utilise the codification of autonomy in order to accumulate symbolic capital through innovative practice:

We’ve had contact with the department. We ran a big project with the innovation unit ... And we’ve had a lot of links with the specialist schools trust and done a lot with and through them. But the department as it currently is, following government policy obviously, is only interested in academies … [but] to be fair, this government is currently more open to innovative thinking than any that’s been around in the years I’ve been in school leadership.

With all the views we may have of them, they are more open to things being done differently and the whole idea I think behind academies and free schools is to create this kind of very diverse landscape. Now there’s problems round that, but there are also huge opportunities for schools if you are going to be innovative and different and creative. So I felt able to be pushing what we are doing and to delivering what I think is the missing piece of comprehensive education, around preparing kids for what lies beyond. Not just academically but also in terms of their wider employability skills, and wider social skills, that’s what this is about.

(Principal: interview, 2012)

The Professional School was presented throughout the process of the research, as a necessary innovation, which not only met the needs of a powerful and vocal business and industry sector which had been positioned as future employees of local children (and representatives of whom were being incorporated into the governing body), but also as a necessity in terms of operating as an autonomous institution in a competitive and diverse marketplace, where on several occasions staff discussed the need to maintain and ultimately boost numbers as a matter of survival:

As for becoming a Professional School as in that tag, I think it was what we have talked about – a marketing thing, try to give the school an edge – something that no other school has. I wouldn’t ever say that [the principal] doesn’t have the genuine interest of the students here and I think it was to generally give students an opportunity that they won’t get anywhere else. Especially with the fact that university fees have rocketed and fewer students are going – so to give them a bit of a boost.

(Middle Leader: interview, 2012)

In this extract the linking of the innovative approach to the schools re-structuring as a result of the autonomy embodied within the Academies Act with both the need to compete in a choice-based market system of educational provision and with the wider implications of funding changes in Higher Education in England (specifically the increase in student fees across all universities for undergraduate admissions) illustrates the complex relationship between macro-, meso- and micro-conditions which may lead to certain decisions being made on a local level regarding the educational provision being developed and delivered. The Chair of Governors also spoke at length about how ‘differentiation’ in a diverse marketplace was essential in terms of how the school constructed its future:

So there was a pragmatic aspect as well in terms of we need to be differentiating ourselves in terms of what we are offering and the sorts of things that we think will continue to make it an attractive school both for the people of Kingswood as well as people outside of the catchment area … so I suppose in a way what we have been slowly doing is waking up to that potential threat and building that into our thinking in terms of what do we need to do as a school here in order to be able to sustain it long term in that way that is viable.

(Chair of Governors: interview, July 2012)

What these extracts do is to illustrate the centrality of the neoliberal framework of choice and competition in driving localised development plans. Within this framework innovation is conceptualised as doing something differently which will ultimately ensure that the school both survives and thrives, and such survival is about ensuring the school has accumulated the right type of capital, and is able to stave of threat from other ‘providers’ in the locality. This is not to say that innovation cannot be conceptualised differently within this paradigm, or that it is fair to present such an analysis in a negative light. However, due to the nature of the research project, in which accumulatively 3 years were spent in the school, undertaking a wide range of research activities with a broad spectrum of people, provides a persuasive account that whilst the intentions of the school leadership team were without a doubt honourable, there was an uncomfortable tension as to how innovation in this instance was being conceptualised as aligning the schools purpose and organisation with the desires and needs of big business and industry. This was positioned as the way forward for innovative thinking, to strike out alone as a beacon of opportunity that looked different to other provisions families had to choose from, shored up by powerful players in the private sector.

Despite some ideological reservations from some members of staff there was overwhelming support for the conversion into the academy and the attendant Professional School as being a preferable approach to restructuring where the Principal was producing a model of change on his own terms. This is an important aspect of the narrative, as in England there have been a number of instances of high profile ‘forced’ academisation (Rateliffe, 2014; Ward, 2014) and there is a general agreement that all schools will eventually become academies, so do you...
‘jump before you are pushed?’ (Deputy Principal: interview 2011). In this sense it is possible to posit that the successful ‘buy in’ from the staff is linked to the explicit strategising of the Principal in terms of packaging and presenting the idea as turning something that was inevitable (conversion to an academy) into something exciting, different, and innovative. In this regards the participants in the research were committed to the development of a model of schooling that embraced autonomy and diversity in order to offer innovative provision that would ensure the survival of the school in the long term. However, as noted above, despite honourable intentions, it appeared that the commitment to the ‘neoliberal imaginary’ of schooling provision overshadowed any in-depth discussion as to the impact of such a re-structuring on the young people’s experience of schooling themselves (Ball, 2012). That only three members of staff (out of a total of 28 interviewed in the project as a whole) talked about this in their interviews was noteworthy, and these members of staff were keen to discuss their reservations regarding how the re-organisation of provision along more academic and professional and vocational pathways may effect students from low socio-economic backgrounds:

I’m just a bit unsure as to what kind of impact it’s going to have for the whole cohort of the school. So the kids I was talking about the kids from [the social housing estate] and the poorer areas of [metropolitan borough] – I don’t know that they will benefit from it. Especially if it means a reduction in B-Tech kind of qualifications, I don’t know if it will have a dramatic reduction in that, but not all kids that the school churns out are going to be working for banks or engineering companies or graphic design companies. As much as I see a huge benefit in having links with those kinds of companies, for some of the students … (Senior Leader 1: interview, June 2012).

Outside of this concern the way in which the proposed model of splitting children into particular pathways depending on their ‘ability, aptitude or skill’ was not reflected upon by any of the research participants in anyway that indicated engagement with potential criticism that could be levelled at an ‘innovative’ idea that divided children in such a way. In particular there was no acknowledgement that the idea was reminiscent of the 1944 Education Act and its ‘failed’ tripartite system. In this sense what was being conceptualised as innovative was in some respects both distinctive (in the way that the school is the only school to their knowledge who is currently re-organising provision along such lines) and normative (in that the role of business and industry in the development and delivery of educational is not a wholly new phenomena and it speaks directly to what successive governments have been attempting to achieve with legislation which atomises a national system into independent units supported and run by networks outside of traditional, democratically elected, educational networks). The innovation in this respect comes from the bold moves made by the Principal and the leadership team in their mobilisation of symbolic capital to develop and deliver a model of provision on their own terms, in collaboration with big business, whose involvement is positioned as essential in offering that uniqueness which is seen as such an imperative in differentiating the school from its competitors:

There is some very different thinking and if you can build the relationship between an employer and an individual student and that progresses well, the benefit to the employer is that they have the chance to almost run the selection process through their mentoring involvement in the 6th form and they might really want x as she leaves cos they know her – no money on an advertising campaign, they know and have worked with this individual for more than a year … and yes it’s cheaper, but they can take x and can develop them. And that’s an amazing realisation, so we can say in any kind of 6th form prospectus, for each of these curriculum pathways there are 3 jobs at the end, 3 paid jobs, but to do that there are certain skills and attributes that you are going to need to demonstrate at all times an don’t forget that some of you will be fired! So you still get you’re A Levels but you are playing for big stakes. (Senior Leader 2: interview, June 2012)

Revealed through this extract is a professional illusio by this senior leader in how he conceptualise the necessity of the Professional School in the current context of marketisation of education. Bourdieu argues:

Illusio, in the sense of investment in the game, becomes an illusion, in the originary sense of an act whereby one deceives oneself … only when one grasps the game from the outside, from the standpoint of an impartial spectator who invests nothing in the game or in its stakes. This strangers point of view, which ignores itself as such, leads one to overlook that fact that investments are well found illusions. Indeed, through the games it proposes, the social world procures for agents much more and something quite other than the apparent stake, manifest ends of action: the chase counts as much as the capture, if not more, and there is a profit of action that exceeds the profits explicitly pursued, wages, prizes, rewards, trophies, titles, and positions, and which consists in escaping indifference and in asserting oneself as an active agent, caught in and by the game, occupied, an inhabitant of the world inhabited by that world, projected towards ends and endowed – objectively and thus subjectively – with a social mission. (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 195)

Such a professional shared illusio amongst school staff and leadership enables the theorisation of misrecognition with regards to how innovation has been conceptualised and used in the development and delivery of localised
educational provision as a means of privileging the students at Kingswood with opportunities for work preparedness. Positioning such preparedness as unique negates the possibility that the way in which such opportunity is organised privileges some students in the school over others. Drawing on previous research findings it would be unsurprising if those students who remain in the Professional School and have access to an academic curriculum with some input from ‘professional’ organisations such as the global consultancy firm, are likely to be children from the middle classes, whose parents are likely to actively engage with the choice agenda at the age of 13 which will decide whether the student continues in this vein or attends the Studio School aimed at offering a more vocational curriculum (Ball et al., 1996; Gewirtz, 2001; Gillies, 2005; Vincent & Ball, 2007). Whilst it is important to note that students having access to a range of experiences during their schooling is a good thing if done well, the categorisation of young people into routes which may reduce the full range of opportunities at the end of the formal process is to be treated with caution (Bol & Werfhost, 2013).

There was no indication from the data produced from these seven participants specifically, or the wider data set including the interviews from 21 other staff members more generally that time was being taken to carefully consider the potential implications of a system, which reproduced the hierarchical character of the more divisive element of the English system, which effectively splits children into academic (high) and non-academic (low) streams (Ball, 1981; Ball et al., 1996; Reay, 2012). That the model effectively did so was less of a concern than the fact that the school was, as Senior Leader 2 said to me, tapping into the current ‘zeitgeist’ of thinking regarding using autonomy to affect innovation. 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 reproduction of advantage and disadvantage (Exley & Suisa, 2013; Higham, 2013; McInerney, 2007; Thiem, 2008).

The doxa of misrecognition works in producing conditions in which agents work to compete for ‘what is at stake’ in the field rather than to look to ‘change the rules of the game’ which ‘constitute its winning formula and its contribution to the wider mission of the state and the field of power’ (Thomson, 2010, p. 16). The school has accumulated symbolic power through the leadership decision to convert to an academy on their own terms and to subsequently develop the Professional School idea, which bears remarkable similarities in many respects to the ideas that underpinned the City Technology Colleges in the late 1980s, as well as shadows of the tripartite systems of education that was largely abandoned in the 1970s in favour of all in comprehensive education. The importance of acting with autonomy in this decision making process in order to maintain a successful position within the field of power reveals how the doxa of misrecognition works in providing ‘a teleological rationale through which failure is able to be attributed to poor playing, rather than the nature of the game itself’ (Thomson, 2005, p. 746). Thus, through playing the game successfully, on their own terms, the school also reveals alignment with the logics of practice as structured by the neoliberal imaginary in what the school is for: that is reflective of a human capital approach to the purposes of education.

Conclusion

Using data collected from an ‘innovative’ secondary school in the north west of England this paper has argued such a conception is limited to the structural re-organisation of the provision on offer at the school along three interconnected lines. Firstly innovation is linked with conceptions of autonomy, that is independence from traditional, democratic networks (in the case of England, Local Authorities). Secondly innovation is linked with entrepreneurialism within political rhetoric, and that private business is positioned as having a necessary role to play in the development and delivery of public education in order to raise standards specifically through an employability agenda, and thirdly that leadership innovation and entrepreneurialism is imbued with high levels of symbolic capital which schools, operating within a diverse and competitive marketplace must take seriously if they are to survive and thrive. Within this analysis, the ‘innovative’ division of the schooling provision at Kingswood along ‘professional’ and ‘vocational’ lines is reminiscent of the tripartite system that was developed as a result of the post-war social democratic settlement, and which was subsequently abandoned due to criticism that such a system was divisive (Power & Frandji, 2010; Thomson, 2005).

The schools re-organisation speaks to the commitment within England’s long history to the development of a diverse, hierarchical and increasingly autonomous educational landscape, which has latterly been bolstered by the neoliberal principles of choice and competition between such provisions.

Kingswood’s successful accumulation of symbolic capital in the field of educational policy-making, in no small part down to the Principal’s entrepreneurialism in anticipating and strategising in response to the national picture that has been emerging since the 2010 Academies Act, illustrates the strength of the schools commitment to differentiation as a means of achieving distinction in a
competitive context. That this is a restrictive position that is in some part as a result of the pursuit of neoliberal policies by successive governments is not considered by the participants within the study, and as such leads to the theorising that such position taking actually *misrecognises* the role that ‘innovation’ as a strategic process plays in having the potential for (re)producing inequalities between schools as well as students within schools. In the data presented in this article the lack of engagement with the restrictions that a system designed to separate children at the age of 13 into either academic and professional or vocational pathways may witness such division along class lines is not verifiable yet, but experience indicates that such an outcome would not be surprising (Ball, 1981).

As such, the potential that studies such as this have for contributing to understanding of how individual schools and school leaders are interpreting and responding to a policy context that promotes diversification of provision and increased school autonomy from the state at a time when the gap in attainment between rich and poor is widening is significant. Whilst this study is a single case study, that in this instance has drawn predominately on data produced with seven middle-senior leaders it is a part of a bigger study in which 28 staff in total were interviewed, along with 18 students and five parents, and as such provides findings on how a successful school in England has engaged with rapid policy reforms which locate autonomy from the state at their centre. Through further research in which a range of case-study schools undergoing conversion to academy are investigated in-depth it will be possible to engage with school leaders on issues that this research has to date thrown light upon, as a means of both understanding how innovation within a development trajectory which locates autonomy at its heart, has been conceptualised but also how axiomatic position taking along neoliberal, human capital lines, may need to be challenged.

Furthermore, whilst a single case-study and the limitations that are implicit within this, the research offers some important contributions to the field in theorising how conceptions of autonomy, in both policy and practice, can be understood to be about how an individual school responded to top down, highly regulated conditions in their re-structuring of provision along autonomous lines. In this sense the knowledge produced highlights the centrality of the link between innovation and autonomy and the way in which these are used to deliver centrally derived, neoliberal policy aims. In such a context, autonomy and innovation are not about thinking freely to do things differently but instead are symptomatic of the tightly regulated and bureaucratic conditions developed by the UK government, particularly since the inception of the 2010 Academies Act. This position somewhat paradoxically, undermines what is revered in the policies surrounding autonomy – freedom – and thus indicates that autonomy may be reducible to responding to the requirements of government policy, rather than exercising real innovative freedom to re-structure provision in ways which are less restrictive. As the policy of autonomy looks set to be accelerated further under the new Conservative government, the ‘laboratory’ of English education policymaking remains an important site of interest for those concerned with the study of the delivery and enactment of policies relating to autonomy in the schooling field (Finkelson & Grubb, 2000).

**References**


Ruth McGinity is a lecturer in educational leadership and policy at the Manchester Institute of Education, University of Manchester, UK. Her primary research focus is in localised policy-making and she recently completed an ESRC-funded project examining how students, teachers, school leaders and parents at a case study secondary school positioned themselves and were positioned through the development of localised policy processes during a period of rapid educational reform in England. She uses socially critical theories to illuminate ways in which power works and the associated inequities that emerge as a result of such social, political and economic relations.
AUTONOMY IN EDUCATION

Teacher autonomy in the era of New Public Management

Ulf Lundström*

Department of Applied Educational Science, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden

This article examines how upper secondary school teachers perceive and respond to the consequences for their professional autonomy of recent school reforms and restructurings. Based on empirical material from interviews of 119 teachers in three studies conducted between 2002 and 2014, the findings indicate that teacher autonomy has been reduced by school reforms and restructurings since the late 1980s. Regardless of their individual aims, these reforms have collectively created a power structure that distributes power to the state, municipalities, principals and the school market, including 'customers', that is, students, at the expense of teacher autonomy. Teacher agency follows certain policies at the discourse level, such as decentralisation and management by objectives and results, but in practice seems to be based on individuals’ and groups’ capacities to exploit opportunities for agency in combination with more or less facilitative management and organisation cultures. This development is multifaceted and varies locally, but the overall trend can be described as a shift from occupational to organisational professionalism and from 'licensed' to 'regulated' autonomy but emphasising the influence of market logics.

Keywords: teacher autonomy; school reform; New Public Management; upper secondary school

*Correspondence to: Ulf Lundström, Department of Applied Educational Science, Umeå University, SE-90187 Umeå, Sweden, Email: ulf.p.lundstrom@umu.se

The last few decades of intensive school reform, including the ‘inevitable’ adoption of neo-liberal policies and New Public Management (NPM) in the ‘global education policy space’ (Lingard & Rawolle, 2011, p. 490), have affected and continue to affect teachers’ work, teachers’ working conditions and the construction of the teaching profession. This trend has challenged teacher autonomy as it has eroded trust and degraded teaching as a profession, backed by the claim that professionalism generates opportunism, sets self-serving standards and is prone to provider capture (Besley & Peters, 2006; Codd, 2005). Research into how autonomy and professionalism are affected by education policy in everyday school practice is scarce (Evetts, 2009a). Analyses of professions often focus on the macro or meso levels, implying that ‘the complexities of micro levels are particularly interesting and worthy of further analysis’ (Evetts, 2009b, p. 248). In the present study, the voices of those who actually make or enact education policy, that is, the teachers, are heard (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012; Lipsky, 1980).

Based on teachers’ interviews, this article examines how upper secondary school teachers perceive and respond to the consequences for their professional autonomy of recent school reforms and restructurings. The analysis addresses what these reform policies are, how they affect teacher autonomy and how they interact at the school level. The article is based on empirical material from interviews of 119 teachers in three studies from 2002–2004, 2008–2009, and 2013–2014.

In step with the emergence of NPM, a growing body of research is critically examining the consequences of NPM for education (Ball, 2003; Codd, 2005; Gewirtz, Mahony, Hextall, & Cribb, 2009; Green, 2011; Ravitch, 2010, 2013; Robertson, 2008). Apple (2009, p. xiv) writes that a ‘new alliance’ of neo-liberal, neo-conservative and audit cultures has led to major shifts in teacher professionalism involving deskilling, reskilling, intensification and ‘what counts as legitimate knowledge and legitimate teaching’. Hoyle and Wallace (2009, p. 204) connect undermined classroom autonomy, professional ethics and status to the accountability movement that ‘succeeded in its tacit intention to curtail the power of the public service professions’, which Clarke and Newman (2009, p. 45) regard as a result of NPM. Evans (2008, p. 21) claims that autonomy has ‘given way to accountability’ and that the ‘new professionalisms’ imply a shift of power. This shift of power will be examined here, based on the concepts of occupational and organisational professionalism. Sachs (2001, p. 150) notes the dilemma facing the teaching profession, which ‘is being exhorted to be autonomous while . . . under increasing pressure from politicians and
the community to be more accountable and to maintain standards’ – a dilemma that is topical today in the Swedish case.

Some researchers emphasise complexity and that there may still be latitude for teacher autonomy even within an overall trend towards reduced autonomy (Frostenson, 2012; Mausethagen, 2013). Lipman (2009, p. 67) claims that there are ‘possibilities for agency within an overall retrograde erosion of public education’. Another aspect of this multifaceted issue is the range of accountability regimes – such as bureaucratic, consumer, ethical, state, marketplace, professional and democratic accountability regimes – all with varying implications for school staff (Besley & Peters, 2006, p. 819; Moos, 2009, p. 401). Some researchers claim that privatisation promotes autonomy in contrast to the control and regulations of bureaucratic public schools (Chubb & Moe, 1988).

Trust is a key component in discussions of professions and autonomy (Codd, 2005; Olssen, Codd, & O’Neill, 2004, p. 187). Gewirtz et al. (2009) discusses the contract between professions and society that implies that the profession is trusted to do its job in exchange for providing expertise and high-quality outcomes. Trust improves collective decision-making, the realisation of school reform and school development (Bryk & Schneider, 2009). It is also well documented that the opposite, distrust, has profound negative consequences for teachers’ commitment and motivation, resulting in, for example ‘a pervasive sense of demoralisation and loss of autonomy’ (Peck, Gallucci, & Sloan, 2010, p. 452). Furthermore, trust is a prerequisite for discretion and the ability to make discretionary judgements (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

Current Swedish research has examined various aspects of the issues treated here, such as the development of a standard-based curriculum (Sundberg & Wahlström, 2012), the impact of marketisation on teachers’ work (Fredriksson, 2009; Lundström & Holm, 2011), marketisation policy (Lundahl, Erixon Arreman, Holm, & Lundström, 2013), teacher responsibility and ethics in light of NPM (Solbrekke & Englund, 2011), a model for comparing different forms of autonomy (Wermke & Höstfält, 2014) and the development of the quality discourse in state documents (Bergh, 2011). Frostenson (2012) reasons concerning three levels of autonomy and concludes that collective and individual autonomy can exist in spite of eroded professional (overall) autonomy. Stenlås’ (2011) analysis, based on policy documents, examines the consequences of educational reforms, concluding that they have reduced teacher autonomy and de-professionalised teachers. This article contributes by examining the actual consequences of relevant school reform policies for upper secondary school teacher autonomy, how these policies interact and how teachers perceive and respond to the development at the school level. These issues are examined and analysed in the following sections. First, the background of the Swedish policy context is described, followed by the theoretical framework and methodology. The findings are then presented thematically, followed by a concluding discussion.

The policy context

The Swedish school system has been influenced by the international ‘policy epidemic’ (Levin, 1998, p. 138), though with specific national characteristics. It includes policies such as management by objectives and results (MBOR), decentralisation, devolution of funding and employer responsibility to municipalities, upper secondary school reforms including new grading systems, a new Education Act and national curriculum, and changed systems for allocating teachers’ time and salaries. An individual performance-related pay system was a result of an agreement between the teachers’ unions and the employers’ organisation in 1996. The introduction of school choice and marketisation in 1992 is especially notable in the Swedish case, in light of the long tradition of Social Democratic governance, and the school system has become more market-like than in most other countries (Lubieniski, 2009). School choice is universal, independent schools are publicly funded via a voucher system and profits are allowed. Among all, the reforms constitute an ‘education reform “package”’ (Ball, 2003, p. 215).

The introduction of MBOR and decentralisation presupposed substantial teacher autonomy. Teachers were ascribed ‘a large measure of freedom in their teaching’ (Government Bill 1988/89:4, p. 15, author’s translation), and it was emphasised that the school provider would not intervene in methodological or pedagogic issues of a professional nature (p. 19). Teacher autonomy was referred to in several other policy documents of the time (e.g., SOU 1992:94). Evaluation was described as a prerequisite for the reforms, as ‘the cornerstone of future management by objectives . . . an important prerequisite for school development’ (Government Bill 1989/90:41, p. 9, author’s translation).

Crucial to this ‘reform package’ was the application of the profession concept to teachers by the state (Lundström, 2007). However, the concept was used primarily in the contexts of steering and management by objectives, such as:

The professionalization of teaching entails higher expectations regarding curriculum formulation and better opportunities to realize aims and intentions. From this perspective, we could say that effective management by objectives presupposes a professional corps, professional in the sense of an occupational group that shares an ethical foundation and a particular area of vocational expertise group. (SOU 1992:94, 44, author’s translation)

The devolution of responsibility in these reforms was launched in a period when Sweden was facing its most
severe financial crisis in several decades and school funding was being retrenched, adding another dimension to the discussion of teacher autonomy and responsibility. Evetts (2009b) says that governments have long been trying to shrink their costs while satisfying demands for better and more professional services, and that NPM is one such attempt to do this.

These reforms contributed to the shift from governing to governance that influenced teachers’ positions and tasks, not least characterised by ‘governing at a distance’ assuming self-monitoring and self-regulation (Dahler-Larsen, 2012, p. 137). Although this situation implies a potential for autonomy, Fournier (1999, p. 288) believes that the network of accountability constitutes a ‘disciplinary logic’ that influences the construction of the teaching profession. This change illustrates the complexities of the autonomy concept, especially in light of current recentralisation and increasing pressures for control, evaluation and quality reporting (Lundström, 2015).

Some years after the first reforms, the Swedish state noted that local evaluations were insufficient, so compulsory quality reports were requested. This intention was later strengthened by the Education Act (2010), in terms of strengthened demands for systematic quality work (National Agency for Education [NAE], 2012a) and of increased pressure from the Schools Inspectorate. However, evaluation is still regarded as problematic as it ‘is one of the areas that has led to the most criticism in inspection reports’ (Schools Inspectorate, 2012, p. 33, authors’ translation).

The official documents preceding the second upper secondary school reform (2011) lack the explicit emphasis on teacher autonomy characteristic of the reforms from the late 1980s and early 1990s. Instead, the power of the ‘receivers’ of the students, that is, working life and higher education, is emphasised. The task of the education is to ‘satisfy the skills supply needs of working life and the higher education sector’ (SOU 2008:27, 59). It is also stated that the current situation implies ‘very strong producer control’ (SOU 2008:27, 59). Teachers are still called professionals but are given a more subordinate role, as competent deliverers of goal achievement: ‘In a school, governed by goals, [the teachers] receive and perform the task by means of their professional competence’ (SOU 2008:27, 330).

In 2011, the government decided to introduce teacher certification. The realisation of this reform has been protracted and was not fully implemented at the time of the last study. This reform likely has implications for teacher autonomy, but this is an issue for further research.

Theoretical perspectives
The teachers’ interviews were analysed from a social constructive perspective focusing on aspects of profession theory. Schools are embedded in social and political environments that affect teachers’ work (Powell & Colyvas, 2007). However, teachers are also policy enactors, as ‘policy is done by and done to teachers’ (Ball et al., 2012, p. 3) and teachers interpret and translate policies in action. This implies that both structure and agency matter in the analysis of autonomy. I assume, in line with Watson (2006, p. 510), that identity is constructed and expressed through narratives and that ‘who we think we are influences what we do, that is there is a link between professional identity and professional action’. It cannot be claimed that the teachers’ narratives are the ‘truth’, though they ‘reveal “truths” about the way an individual interprets the events and choices in their lives’ (Watson, 2006, p. 511). As teachers are key actors in realising education policy, their narratives make important contributions to our understanding of their responses to policy and what actually happens in everyday school work.

Autonomy is a crucial aspect of profession theory (Abbot & Wallace, 1990). In light of recent research literature, I found it relevant to analyse the empirical material from ‘new professionalism’ perspectives. Evetts (2009a, 2009b) uses the concept of ‘occupational professionalism’ to refer to an ideal type of traditional sociological definitions of professions. Occupational professionalism is characterised by collegial authority, competence, trust, professional ethics, discretion and occupational control of work. Occupational professionalism is challenged by a new ideal type of professionalism, ‘organizational professionalism’, constructed ‘from above’ by managers and employers to facilitate the implementation of change. It is characterised by managerialism, hierarchical authority and decision-making structures, standardisation, and external control and accountability (Evetts, 2009a, 2009b).

In organisational professionalism, professionals are expected to be competent, self-disciplined deliverers of public services.

Apple’s description of a shift from licensed to regulated autonomy corresponds to the shift from occupational to organisational professionalism. He claims that, under conditions of licensed autonomy, teachers ‘are basically free – within limits – to act in their classrooms according to their judgement … based on trust in “professional discretion”’ (Apple, 2007, p. 185). However, as a result of increased demands for control, accountability and standards, ‘teachers’ work is more standardised, rationalised and “policed”, and teachers’ actions ‘are now subject to much greater scrutiny in terms of process and outcomes’.

Autonomy implies latitude for discretionary judgement and is exchanged for specialised expert knowledge that professional practitioners are assumed to use to promote client welfare. Autonomy is, therefore, intertwined with other aspects such as professional judgement, trust and ethics (Sachs, 2001). The research literature defines autonomy in various ways; for example, Abbot and Wallace...
define it as ‘control over work’ (1990, p. 4). The concept ‘pedagogical autonomy’ as used by Eden (2001, p. 97) applies when ‘the system does not intervene in teachers’ acts and assumes they are fully competent in their work’. In this study, I use Evans’ and Fischer’s (1992, p. 1171) definition of autonomy as ‘the amount of freedom a worker has to schedule their work and to determine the procedures in carrying it out’. This includes the freedom to choose teaching methods and content, within limits defined by legislation and official steering documents, as well as the responsibility for professional development.

I do not focus on the division between collective and individual autonomy (Frostenson, 2012). Although it may occasionally digress, my analysis mainly addresses collective autonomy.

This article contributes to the ‘identification of paradoxes and surprises’ (Hood & Peters, 2004, p. 268) of the ‘middle aging’ or the ‘transcending New Public Management’ (Christensen & Laegrid, 2007). It illustrates the complexity of NPM, but the debate about NPM and post-NPM-reforms (Christensen & Laegrid, 2007; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011) is beyond the scope of this article. Broadly defined, NPM is ‘an approach in public administration that employs knowledge and experiences acquired in business management and other disciplines to improve efficiency, effectiveness, and general performance of public services in modern bureaucracies’ (Vigoda, 2003, p. 813). In this article, I use NPM as an umbrella concept to denote characteristics such as managerial power, decentralisation, MBOR, marketisation/privatisation, school choice, quality assessments and accountability that emphasise measurable indicators and output control (Goldspink, 2007; Hood, 1991; Lubienski, 2009).

Method
This study is a meta-analysis of upper secondary school teacher interviews from three studies conducted between 2002 and 2014; two of these are reanalysed and one is part of a current research project1 (Table I). The first study examined teachers’ understanding and realization of their work and profession in light of recent education policy2. The second study addressed the impact of school choice policies and marketization on teachers’ work and the teaching profession.3 The third study examines how teachers’ work and school cultures are changing and how teachers are responding to the new policy context, primarily in relation to inclusive practices in the market context, but also in relation to other policies.

Although the foci of the studies varied to some extent, I still consider it possible to describe the teachers’ perceptions of autonomy and their responses to relevant policies at the time of the interviews. The interviews in all studies were semi-structured, allowing latitude for teachers to talk about the issues on the agenda that concerned them in their everyday work, as related to current reforms and organisational change. Explicit questions about autonomy were asked only in the first study, and the findings might have differed to some extent if autonomy had been an explicit focus in all three studies. However, the material is rich and the narratives capture what the teachers had in mind regarding their work and profession, which includes substantial material that is relevant to and telling about their perceived autonomy.

The need to represent various geographic locations and upper secondary school programmes (including both vocational and tertiary education preparatory programmes) was a criterion for selecting municipalities and schools in all three studies. In studies 2 and 3, various degrees of school competition and urbanity were also sought.

The analysis not only concentrated on direct expressions of autonomy in the narratives but also took account

---

1Inclusive and competitive? Working in the intersection between social inclusion and marketization in upper secondary school’, funded by the Swedish Research Council.

2This study was carried out by the present author alone.

3Part of the project “Upper secondary school as a market”, funded by the Swedish Research Council.

---

### Table I. The interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Municipalities</th>
<th>Schools</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Study 1</td>
<td>2002–2004</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Birch School</td>
<td>23, interviewed twice, one year apart; the five teachers from Maple School did not participate in the second round</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Fir Tree School</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Maple School</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pine School</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study 2</td>
<td>2009–2010</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>City Public</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>City Independent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>North Public</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>North Independent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Regional Public</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Rural Public</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>South Public</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>South Independent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study 3</td>
<td>2013–2014</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Riverbank School</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Park School</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Heath School</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ridge Public</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Oak Free</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ash School</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Beech School</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Field School</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Cliff School</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Creek School</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total 12 22 119
of more implicit expressions concerning teachers' perceptions of their decision-making power and freedom to think and act in light of the education policies that appeared to be influential at the time of each study. I noted how the teachers described their latitude for discretionary judgement, what hampered discretion and expressions of power over and control of their work (these expressions are occasionally emotional). I sought patterns and divergent views, and selected quotations from the interviews to illustrate shared, typical, and especially telling perceptions. All quotations were translated by the author.

The emergence of the New Public Management teacher

This section, which presents the findings, is divided into subsections in accordance with themes that stand out in the empirical material as significant for teacher autonomy. The themes partly overlap as some issues are interrelated but the organisation of the text is an attempt to make the complex relation between reforms and their consequences as clear as possible. The themes also illustrate the shift towards regulated autonomy and occupational professionalism.

Pressures of external demands

As mentioned, teacher autonomy is emphasised in some of the crucial state documents from the period preceding Study 1. The interviewees' responses to these seemingly generous policies are ambiguous: Most teachers are conscious of considerable autonomy 'in principle', while feeling circumscribed by external pressure, work intensification, resource scarcity and organisational change. One teacher says:

I have practically as much freedom I want. It is up to me where the limits are . . . Yes, the scope is very broad . . . so it is just an issue of having the energy and being able to use it. (Birch School, Study 1)

Most teachers claim to have considerable freedom, but such claims are often followed by a 'but' referring to factors that restrict their actual freedom, for example:

The classes are very large, I wish I could have a small group lesson now and then, which would make it possible to do really good things . . . I have lots of ideas of what I would like to do but that I cannot do. (Fir Tree School, Study 1)

The stream of continuous policy implementation has led to an increased workload that is described as an obstacle by several interviewees. Time is problematic for the teachers, including insufficient time for professional knowledge development, long-term planning and creative lesson planning. These time constraints reduce both individual and collective autonomy. The view that time and resources are scarce and that the increased workload prevents teachers from realising what they would really like to do are pervasive themes in all three studies. One teacher at Fir Tree School describes herself as a frustrated 'Florence Nightingale': '[I cannot do] exactly what I would like to in order to help all students achieve their goals . . . one has to work more than one is paid for . . . means and objectives collide all the time'. A teacher at City Public (Study 2) talks about the conflict between means and goals:

We have between 32 and 35 students in each class. We cannot achieve the goals of the national curriculum even though I am educated to see the individual. But the municipal school administration wants to reduce costs

A teacher at Birch School (Study 1) describes the dilemma arising from the collision between external pressures and his professional beliefs. He says that he tries to work the way he perceives to be best, despite the 'desperate, new pedagogical fashion trends . . . and the flood of top–down directives'. At the same time, he wants to comply with democratic decisions: 'I try to realise what is expected of me as this is not my school: It is the Swedish people's school'. A colleague signals injured professional pride:

The time allocated to each course is reduced all the time. The students who study in the electricity programme are expected to become electricians . . . but now they can nothing when they finish school

New policies are usually not accompanied by the required funding, and teachers are expected to realise policy goals without extra time or support. An example is the introduction and development of a new diploma course that the teachers at Fir Tree School worked on: 'We beat our heads against the wall. We felt quite uncertain and received little in-service training. But together we managed to cook it up'. Others, such as a teacher at Ridge Public (Study 3), mention feeling exhausted:

We do not get more time for anything. New tasks are added all the time but there is no real thought behind them and we do not get time for them . . . so I try to prioritize by myself because I cannot do everything

Another example is that no extra time has been allocated for the extra work of implementing the latest secondary school reform, especially for developing the new grading system (Study 3). The teachers think that it is very time consuming to interpret and apply new syllabuses and grading criteria.

The pressures seem to have resulted in a general scepticism regarding decision-makers and externally imposed change. A teacher at Ridge Public says that
the workload is increasing in a covert way. And now in the election campaign politicians are talking so much about school – I really get upset. They do not know what they are talking about, and I really want to phone and ask them to explain to me, who works in a school, whether they are basing their reasoning on their own school experience or whether they have visited a school or what they are talking about.

**Market influence**

Independent schools expanded relatively slowly in the years immediately after the 1992 reform, but the establishment of independent schools gained momentum between 2000 and 2010\(^2\). The proportion of students in independent upper secondary schools increased from 6 to 24% and the proportion of students in independent schools as a whole increased from 21 to 48% over the decade. The expansion was especially marked in the largest cities; for example, the proportion of students attending independent schools increased from 14 to 48% in Stockholm (NAE, 2014). The consequences of school choice and marketisation were found to be striking in the second study.

Swedish teachers had never before needed to take account of market logics such as competition, marketing and the importance of disseminating results and satisfying ‘customers’, that is, students. The interviewees describe such new elements in their work and many are critical of the consequences of school choice and marketisation. Some have adapted to their more market-oriented role, while others feel relatively unaffected (mostly at schools where competition is insignificant) or think that marketisation has both advantages and disadvantages. The dissatisfaction is partly connected to perceived reduced autonomy. This is most obvious in the increased workload created by school marketing and profiling, new tasks that take time, energy and resources from teachers’ core tasks, that is, teaching and the development of teaching. Descriptions of this problem often indicate a clash between market logics and professional judgement:

At certain times, our teacher team needs a lot of time to arrange these things [i.e., marketing events, etc.]. (North Public, Study 2)

The quality of my teaching would be better if I did not have to do other tasks as well. (South Independent, Study 2)

Instead of discussing how we can improve the students’ knowledge, we discuss how we can attract more students. (North Rural, Study 2)

The tension between professional judgement and the market demand to satisfy the ‘customer’ has affected several interviewees. The teachers often feel obliged to compromise with student wishes, even when they are convinced that something else is in the student’s best interest:

We have very good and knowledgeable teachers at this school and I think we expect a lot of the students. I think this is quality. Our knowledge goals are high. But that does not necessarily correspond to what a 15-year-old guy from X-borough [author’s anonymization] thinks is quality. (North Public, Study 2)

The pressure to satisfy the ‘customer’ may also explain grade inflation, which has increased since the turn of the century (Vlachos, 2011). A teacher at North Rural says that ‘grades are a means of competition’. A group of teachers at City Public (Study 2) are convinced that the independent schools award excessive grades and they also self-critically admit that they are influenced by this pressure, which is fuelled by mass media ranking based on grade statistics.

Marketisation has a different impact from that of many other policies. In many cases, teachers have latitude to interpret and translate reforms, or even resist their realisation. Whether teachers like it or not, however, they are obliged to become market oriented to some extent. As the funding follows the students, there is the risk that a school may not attract enough students, and few teachers would risk teacher redundancy or the closure of entire programmes or schools:

You have pressure to act like an advertisement. It’s hard to ignore. There are two aspects: the pressure from teachers and management to do a good job and recruit students, but also you put pressure on yourself. You like your job and you want to keep it. So, of course, this is a stress factor for teachers, and it increases when the number of students in the municipality is declining. (North Independent, Study 2)

This situation also implies that schools may accept students who change schools during the school year, although this entails difficulties constructing a complete study plan. The voucher sometimes becomes more important than the quality of the education: ‘Since we need the money, we allow students to come in February regardless of pedagogical and educational considerations’ (City Public, Study 2). In other cases, teachers strive to retain students who may be better served by a different school or programme, which seems to go against wise professional judgement.

Marketisation has organisational consequences as well. For example, independent schools often have a slimmer organisation than do public schools, with fewer nurses,
career guidance counsellors, and other support staff, making it possible to increase profits:

We do not have a student counsellor or nurse here – staff responsible for student-care tasks. This differs from public schools. … I think this is a bit too economically gross. (City Independent, Study 2)

This tendency is part of a new corporate culture and means that teachers are assigned other tasks than traditional teachers’ tasks. At South Independent (Study 2), for example, teachers are expected to do some cleaning and caretaking duties as well. Another aspect of the corporate culture cited by some interviewees is that corporate legislation applies to private companies, which implies that the principles of freedom of speech and whistle-blower protection do not apply to such independent schools. On the other hand, some independent school teachers claim that autonomy is farther-reaching in their schools: ‘I feel that I, as a teacher, have more influence than I had when I worked in a public school’ (Oak Free, Study 3). The teachers at North Independent say (Study 2) that their freedom of action is greater and one of them emphasises that the teachers have developed collective autonomy:

In contrast, we have a collective autonomy here that entails that the teachers work together. It is a kind of collective autonomy in which one can come up with an idea and the others join in and go for it

However, Oak Free and North Independent are new and small schools, making it difficult to conclude whether it is the perceived broader autonomy or the inflexible bureaucratic public school culture that explains the observed phenomena.

School choice policies and the consequences of competition are obvious in the third study as well, which largely confirms the findings of the second study. School choice means that students move from small places and suburbs to larger towns or cities, and students choose to associate with students of the same type, for example, academically motivated students. The teachers have little control over such trends as their association with teaching quality is insignificant (Lundström & Holm, 2011).

Furthermore, the importance of school profiling and reputation is even more obvious in the third than in the second study. For example, a teacher at Ridge School (Study 3) who had been working at an independent school talked about how the teachers there sought strategies to attract academically motivated students, and connected this to the audit culture: ‘Above all, we wanted better results. Everything is measured these days and academically motivated students definitely mean better results’.

Now that student cohorts have been decreasing for several years, competition in some local school markets has intensified. For example, teachers at Creek School (Study 3) claim that the situation has led to panic and that the school has had to intensify its marketing efforts. One teacher says that ‘lots of money is spent on marketing, but I would prefer investments in the work and quality’. Another teacher says that ‘I have never before heard so many colleagues say that they are afraid of losing their jobs’. There is a budget deficit and the school cannot afford to repair the rundown school buildings, while the main competitor, the neighbouring municipality, has made substantial investments in building more attractive premises.

However, by the time of Study 3, some municipalities have regained ‘market share’, and the rapid expansion of independent schools has slowed. The 2013 bankruptcy of one of the biggest independent school companies, John Bauer, with more than 10,000 students was a sign that private school expansion is not a law of nature. One interviewee from Ridge Public who used to work at a John Bauer school now describes it as ‘a traumatic experience’. The bankruptcy was unexpected by everyone, including the staff and students of these schools. It was publicly known that the company had been profitable; however, it was not known that the school had taken big loans to generate profits when it was sold to another provider or that the student vouchers would not cover the loans repayment in the long run. This bankruptcy implies the collective insight that schools can go bankrupt, denying their students school choice.

Reports of increased segregation as a result of school choice that were published at the time of Study 3 (NAE, 2012b; Östh, Andersson, & Malmberg, 2013) are confirmed by our findings. Segregation results in reduced teacher autonomy in low-status schools or municipalities, which lack the ability to influence school choice and are left with poorly motivated students, more social problems, and the risk of programmes and schools being closed down. Ash School is situated in a ‘deprived’ suburb and 85% of its students are of non-Swedish ethnicity. Its teachers make great efforts to maintain high-quality schooling but cannot compete in the rankings based on grades and test results. There are indications of resignation in the interviews. One teacher says that ‘we have to counter an unfairly negative reputation all the time’. Another talks about ‘white flight’ and says that ‘it is impossible to achieve high status for a school in this suburb … I think it is possible to have a fantastically good school, but it will not have high status’.

**The audit culture**

The combined school reform policies have led to a performance/audit culture in which test results, grades and school rankings tend to define quality and steer the focus of teaching. MBOR, the strengthened evaluation culture, school competition, the standard-based curriculum connected to the new grading system and performance-related pay have combined in driving educational...
change, a salient matter in Study 3. A teacher at Field School (Study 3) says that such external pressures narrow the curriculum and broad educational goals, so that goals such as fostering democratic attitudes and critical thinking disappear. She says that, over the years, she has arranged many thematic days when themes such as drugs, politics and developing countries were treated. Most of these days, the aesthetic subjects and the previously compulsory field days have now been eliminated in favour of more subject lessons:

I have just expressed my opinions and we have freedom of speech in this country . . . And now I am too old to change careers — I have got about two years left until retirement. So I think they are nasty, actually

These negative perceptions of how the pay system works, noted in the first study, persist in the third study. Field School uses a standardised student course evaluation for all courses. The teachers are convinced that this is used in setting salaries, implying that the salary-setting criteria have more or less been replaced. One teacher at Field School (Study 3) says that ‘students’ course evaluations are the only basis for salary setting’. Another says that school principals claim that the evaluations and test scores indicate

who are good teachers and who are bad teachers . . .
I do not know how they use criteria at all, it is very mysterious . . . I think that how the teacher works in

the classroom is less important and that the most important factor is how much of a pal you are with the principal

A group of teachers at Ridge Public (Study 3) are also critical. One teacher says that ‘those who engage in projects of various kinds receive higher salary raises and the system creates jealousy’. Another claims that salary raises are linked to compliance with policy implementation and embody the formative assessment trend: ‘No one dares say anything about it as it may lower one’s salary’. Another teacher adds:

Precisely! Maybe you are a very good teacher and you love your job. But you do not love formative assessment, but then you do not dare to say anything

At the time of Study 3, the teachers had been working two years on implementing the latest upper secondary school reform. The power of the receivers of students mentioned in the reform report is not evident in the interviews, but stronger steering and performance measurement are. The reform implies stricter goals linked to a more differentiated grading scale, which is appreciated by some teachers. Some teachers think that this reduced discretion facilitates work while others think it has resulted in ‘a total focus on assessment and grading’.

Evaluation systems seem increasingly important at most of the schools examined in Study 3. Some teachers say that they have always used course evaluations and that they are useful in improving their teaching. However, the increased total audit pressure is problematic and teachers find certain systems counterproductive. For example, a teacher at Oak Free mentions a new ‘goal prognosis’ system in which teachers must grade in advance how well they think each student will perform. She thinks that ‘from a pedagogical point of view it is a kind of suicide’, as it may lead to lowered expectations for some students, which can serve as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

\textit{Changed power relations}

The previous sections identified power shifts resulting from the marketisation and audit trends; other policies also imply a transfer of authority. There is still lingering discontent with the ‘municipalization’ reform of 1991, and many teachers do not trust the municipalities as providers and employers. A teacher at Field School (Study 3) says that the reform implied the ‘proletarization of the teaching profession’ and that ‘the municipality does not give a damn about their teachers’. She also thinks that municipalities handle school funding in a way similar to that of independent schools, as they use resources for priorities other than schools. A teacher at Ash School (Study 3) says that ‘the organization is steered by politicians, we act according to political instructions, but they can also stab us in the back’.

\textit{Citation:} NordSTEP 2015, 1: 28144 - http://dx.doi.org/10.3402/nstep.v1.28144
Study 1 found that the vocational teachers were more affected by MBOR and decentralisation than were the academic teachers. In the previously state-regulated system, the equipment for courses was specified and linked to resources; now it is up to the municipalities to budget and allocate resources. This entails a potential for extended autonomy, but some of the teachers complain that the municipality does not allocate sufficient resources. A teacher at Pine School says:

Money rules. If I ask for something, there is no money ... I think it was better when it was state-governed, at least regarding resources. Now there are cutbacks – they cut through larger class size, fewer teachers, and we cannot buy new books as we did before but have to use ten-, fifteen-year-old books

The then new systems for allocating time and salaries were crucial elements in regulating the teachers’ work. They allocate more power to the principals and teachers perceive the systems as unreliable and arbitrary, expressing discomfort, uncertainty and loss of control. The system for time allocation implies that the previously fixed number of lessons per year and teacher was replaced with a system incorporating a flexible number of lessons within a frame of 35 hours per week ‘owned’ by the employer, with lesson preparation and follow-up largely conducted outside that time. The interviewees find it difficult to understand how time is allocated in the new system.

One of the most controversial issues addressed in Study 1 was the top–down implementation of interdisciplinary teacher teams at the schools. Based on arguments about more holistic teaching and teacher cooperation, municipalities reorganised the teachers in interdisciplinary teams instead of the traditional teams organised around school departments/subjects (e.g., mathematics teacher teams and history teacher teams). This caused discontent and resistance among most interviewees and a severe clash between teachers and management at one school. Most teachers perceive the change as threatening their professional cultures and identities. A teacher at Fir Tree School (Study 1) says that this team system is

a ridiculous construction. We have no students in common, we have no courses in common. I feel that we meet just because the timetable says that we have to meet

Another at the same school calls this system a ‘catastrophe’ for cooperation and the work climate. She says that

I am against top–down composition of teams. It should be a natural process in which you find each other and share the same views of students and knowledge

A teacher at Maple School (Study 1) emphasises the value of informal cooperation, which is a part of the work culture he is afraid will be destroyed: ‘The pedagogic discussions with colleagues who work on similar things are often very fruitful. We continuously discuss problems that we face’.

In Study 3, several teachers said that management had changed and become more top–down oriented and less sensitive to teachers’ views and working conditions. One aspect of the dissatisfaction concerns the fact that non-teachers have been employed as principals for some years. Especially at Field School, teachers regard it as a municipal strategy to employ preschool teachers or directors as principals, because they are more compliant, for example, regarding budget cuts. This upsets them, especially as they think that the new principals do not really understand their work. One teacher claims that this municipal strategy has created principals who ‘are very loyal to the municipality and ... do not know what I do in the classroom’.

A teacher at Oak Free (Study 3) thinks that management of the municipal schools is too bureaucratic: ‘Unfortunately, I think that many public school principals are too administratively inclined, that is, their role is that of the administrator and they have a background as administrators’. In contrast, she is content with her principal and her background as a teacher: ‘We have someone who understands us, which is comforting’. However, she thinks that ‘it is difficult for the principal to steer when there is a management level above her’, referring to the fact that the school is part of a corporation that owns many schools. One example is a new time allocation model, ‘and regarding that, I do not think the company is fair’. The company wanted to schedule many more hours for the teachers:

but we work hard and it is impossible to stick to a 40-hour week when we are working with national tests. It is impossible and it is the same with grading – during that period we work here in the evenings until the alarm goes off

Notably, various policies interact and merge so that the outcomes add up to something other than the purpose of each policy. For example, the implementation of interdisciplinary teacher teams was a result of decentralisation and became part of the school development trend at the studied schools. This trend merged with the purpose of the new pay system to promote school development and this at least partly constructed the definition of ‘the good teacher’, namely, the interdisciplinarily inclined teacher, who was rewarded in the performance pay system.

Concluding discussion

The teachers’ narratives illustrate how reforms and restructurings, based largely on NPM, affected teachers’
professional autonomy over a decade. The findings largely confirm earlier descriptions of the shift from occupational to organisational professionalism (Evetts, 2009a, 2009b), including the shift from licensed to regulated autonomy (Apple, 2007). The findings illuminate the consequences of various policies in practice and how they interact and combine as regards teacher autonomy. It is not a black-and-white situation, as schools are highly complex contexts with local, group and individual variations. This concerns my description of the emergence of an NPM teacher as well: The concept is an ideal type that does not exist as a pure professional identity but describes a trend evident throughout the decade.

Concerning autonomy, teaching as a profession has been under continuous pressure throughout the studied period. Opportunities to protect a ‘zone of autonomy’ for teachers do not inherently follow certain policies but instead seem to rely on individuals’ and groups’ capacities to take charge of possible latitude for discretion. These opportunities are facilitated or hampered by school organisation and culture, including the degree of managerialism.

The massive influence of the whole ‘reform package’ was a definite cause of reduced teacher autonomy throughout the examined period. The unending stream of externally imposed reforms and changes and the perceived discrepancy between goals and means are main threads in the narratives extending through all three studies. The intensification of teachers’ work is not a new finding (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 118), but it is novel and relevant to illustrate how various policies work in practice over a long period. From a management perspective, the development can be interpreted as indicating that management at a distance (Dahler-Larsen, 2012) is effective as some teachers have adopted a more organisational professional role and become competent deliverers of subject teaching, tested, measured and ranked in a performance culture. The findings indicate resignation and compliance, however, and that this effectiveness comes at the expense of motivation, professional pride and creativity.

A combination of policies has diminished teachers’ professional power, consequently reducing their autonomy, although this was not the aim of each individual policy. Power has shifted from teachers to principals and municipal administrations as well as to ‘customers’ (i.e., students) and other market actors. The state has strengthened its power as well, mainly through demands for stricter goal fulfilment, evaluations and systematic quality work. Both MBOR and decentralisation imply a potential for autonomy that is occasionally realised. There is always latitude for teacher autonomy and, for example, some strong teacher teams have the capacity to exploit it, while many teams are overloaded with demands over which they have little control. This is in line with Hargreaves’ (1994, p. 195) concept of ‘contrived collegiality’, which is more administratively regulated and implementation oriented than is a ‘collaborative culture’. Decentralisation has distributed power mainly to the school providers and the principals.

MBOR is assumed to give employees latitude to interpret and translate objectives into practice (Nusche, Halázs, Looney, Santiago, & Shewbridge, 2011, p. 36), and many teachers had been doing that in the years before the first study. The last study found that the teachers had been working on implementing the new upper secondary curriculum and grading system, but that the latitude for interpretation and translation was now smaller due to the standard-based orientation (Sundberg & Wahlström, 2012). The increased demands for evaluation, testing and control also contributed to the decreased freedom. The situation also illustrates inherent contradictions in MBOR, which assumes ‘precise, concrete, specific and hierarchically structured indicators’ (Laegrid, Roness, & Rubecksen, 2006, p. 251). This emphasis is in conflict with the broad goals of the curriculum that are also part of professional values, goals such as the development of democratic citizens, equity, analytical and critical thinking, and creativity. The contradiction is reinforced by another basic assumption of MBOR, namely, the idea of rewarding good and punishing bad performance (Laegrid et al., 2006, p. 251), an idea that merges with the individual performance-related pay system. Consequently, a power structure has emerged consisting of MBOR, the more standard-based curriculum linked to the grading system, the audit culture and the pay system.

School competition and marketisation add to the above-described power structure and its reduction of teacher autonomy. As mentioned, market logics (Freidson, 2001) can hardly be negotiated or resisted as they are linked to the survival of the school, the programme and/or employment. Whether they like it or not, teachers become market oriented to some extent, which implies that they have to compromise their professional values concerning work tasks, professional judgement and the narrowing of the curriculum. The main concern in a market is satisfying the ‘customer’, which results in a shift of power from teachers to students, managers and various market actors (e.g., shareholders, assessment technology companies and advertising agencies). For example, the grade inflation occurring since the turn of the century (Vlachos, 2011) is likely a result of the perceived need to satisfy the ‘customer’. The schools are ranked based on grades and test results, and this measure of ‘school quality’ is publicised and determines what are considered ‘good’ or ‘bad’ schools when students choose schools.

Apple and Evetts are aware of the market logics when they use the concepts regulated autonomy and organisational professionalism, though the logics of the bureaucracy are emphasised. For example, Evetts (2009a) emphasises control by managers, rational-legal forms of
authority and hierarchical structures of authority, and Apple (2007) underlines control, accountability and standardisation. My findings testify to the on-going emphasis on the significance of market logics and on how these work together with bureaucratic logics to devalue occupational professionalism and licensed autonomy. Such a conclusion is nuanced by some independent school teachers’ views that their autonomy is now greater and that municipal bureaucracy is stiff and hampering. Although their criticism may be accurate in several municipalities, however, I still believe that the overall outcome of marketisation and school choice has been reduced teacher autonomy, due to changed power relationships, increased segregation and the diminished control of work content, professional judgement and values.

Hierarchy is strengthened as principals gain more power at the expense of teachers’ professional judgement and autonomy, having acquired the right to define ‘quality’ and identify who is a good or bad teacher. Jarl, Fredriksson and Persson (2012) claim that NPM has enhanced the professionalisation of Swedish school principals, supported by the state but at the expense of teachers’ power. For example, changes of time and pay regulations give managers priority of interpretation concerning salary setting and time distribution to an unprecedented extent. Because many teachers regard these basic administrative systems as arbitrary and untrustworthy, this adds to the uncertainty caused by the high pace of change. Several interviewees believe that control has increased while discretion has decreased, and others think that managers exercise power by rewarding compliant teachers. Accountability, target setting and performance review are traits of the pay-setting process that correspond to the organisational professionalism concept (Evetts, 2009a).

This analysis represents my interpretation of teachers’ perceptions of autonomy in connection with significant education reform and restructuring policies. Perceived ‘truths’ about lived experience can be disputed, but they are still important for understanding policy enactment as well as professional action and development.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the other members of the study 2 and 3 project teams: Lisbeth Lundahl in the study 2 team, Inger Erixon Arreman and Ann-Sofie Holm in both project teams, and Marianne Dowemark in the study 3 team, who have contributed to the empirical material.

References


Teacher autonomy in the era of NPM


Ulf Lundström is an associate professor at Umeå University. He holds a PhD in Educational Work and his research is directed towards the teaching profession, education policy and evaluation. He is currently engaged in two research projects: on how inclusion aims can be paired with competition on a school quasi-market, and on how evaluation is enacted in comprehensive school. Lundström is a member of the Nordic Centre of Excellence ‘Justice through Education’.


Citation: NordSTEP 2015, 1:28144 - http://dx.doi.org/10.3402/nstep.v1.28144
AUTONOMY IN EDUCATION

Negotiating learner autonomy: a case study on the autonomy of a learner with high-functioning autism

Sara Sjödin*

Department of Education, University of Uppsala, Uppsala, Sweden

The purpose of this article is to describe how the learner autonomy of a student diagnosed with high-functioning autism is regarded in regular education in a longitudinal perspective and how her educational strategies are managed by school representatives. The main data include unstructured interviews with the student and educational personnel and passive observations in the class room. The student’s intellectual orientation and scientific interests are discouraged by most teachers throughout her school years. School narratives of her perceived cognitive and educational shortcomings overshadow and counteract her autonomy. The student’s scientific interests can be seen as a means to deal with perceptions of a world that is incomprehensible and frightening. It is possible that persons with weak central coherence, more often than others, have interests concerning how things are structured and strive to organise and explain their environment. This specific kind of learner autonomy can be described as intellectual induction and could be understood as compensatory strategy of the mind. In school, however, it is discouraged with reference to the student’s problems in areas traditionally associated with learner autonomy.

Keywords: autism; hermeneutics; learner autonomy; narrative

*Correspondence to: Sara Sjödin, Department of Education, University of Uppsala, SE-751 05 Uppsala, Sweden, Email: sara.sjodin@live.se

The continuing international debate on autonomy in education comprises several perspectives. It is a complex and multifaceted theme that can be discussed in a philosophical, legal or psychological context and on several organisational levels. Autonomy is often associated with, and sometimes explained with reference to, independence, integrity and responsibility, to such qualities as self-reflection, reasoning and individuality (Dworkin, 2015). In a time focused on individuality and individualism, the only joint understanding of autonomy is that it is a quality much desired. Regardless which of the above-mentioned aspects we focus on, the question of autonomy in education is closely related to our definition of the term autonomy itself. Autonomy can be perceived as a basic human right: the right to be respected as an individual in so far as being able to make decisions concerning aspects of one’s own life and to be able to act on those decisions, assuming the somewhat descriptive position that an individual is autonomous in so far as his or her opinions, values and actions are not explainable without reference to his or her activity of mind (Dearden, 1972). On the other hand, our definition of the term can be regarded as related to the individual’s perceived capability to make just and objective decisions based on moral reasoning (Wolf, 1970). Autonomy, in this definition, is an acquired quality based on sense and reasoning and the ability to take responsibility for one’s actions. It is, in essence, conditioned by the authority of others and in an educational context assessable. Regardless of which perspective one adopts, an individual may be more or less autonomous, not only concerning to what extent they are able to act on their wishes and desires but also regarding how they see themselves and others and their respective positions and relations concerning the forming of one’s person; opinions and wishes. Some people are more perceptive to social and normative pressure, peer or authoritative, whereas others are more indifferent. This may be related to our perception (Frith, 1991). In reality, of course, the positions are rarely as clear or fixed as they may appear in theory but the dichotomous definition of autonomy is a recurring issue in political, biomedical and educational debate (Dworkin, 1988).

In an educational context, the concept of autonomy is equally as complex and when discussing autonomy in education, we are not necessarily talking about the same thing (Berka, De Groot, & Penneman, 2000). We may discuss the autonomy of the educational system in relation to the legislative state, to religious authority or to any other social, financial or political power (Berka et al., 2000). We might also refer to the autonomy of specific schools in
relation to the educational system and its policies, curriculums and assessment criteria (Berka et al., 2000) or the autonomy of principals, educational teams or individual teachers concerning their ability to determine their teaching methods in relation to all of the above as well as to the local community and its wishes and expectations. Finally, autonomy in education could have reference to the individual student and his or her learning. These aspects are not necessarily consistent or correlating. On the contrary, it may sometimes be the case that a strong autonomy on one level presupposes weak autonomy on another (Glenn in Berka et al., 2000; Little 1995 in Benson, 2011). Depending on which of these aspects we focus on, the discussion and its applications in school-life take on different forms. In this article, I focus solely on the autonomy of the student as a learner. In comparison with the aforementioned aspects of the term autonomy itself where autonomy could be regarded as either a general human right or an acquired quality, one might assume the position that learner autonomy can be described as an innate quality, a desire to structure and understand the world that leads us to question how things are constructed and connected (Benson, 2011). In this understanding, learning is not exclusively related to a school setting but something that permeates our lives (Habermas in Berka et al., 2000). An individual’s development and learning is then closely related to his/her personal capabilities, conditions and interests (Göransson, 2006) as well as shaped and structured by the individual’s relations to others in a somewhat interdependent manner (Benson, 2011) but may take a form or direction not desired or encouraged by the school and its representatives. Learner autonomy in this understanding of the term holds reference to the definition of autonomy itself (Dearden, 1972) and implies individual educational strategies to structure, explain and understand things to be autonomous to the degree that they cannot be explained without reference to the learner’s activity of mind (Dearden, 1972). Then again one might perceive student autonomy in an educational setting as the ability to plan, structure and evaluate one’s own learning in relation to goals and conditions defined in school. In this understanding of the term, learner autonomy becomes an acquired and assessable quality based on reasoning and responsibility and the willingness to assume the school goals as one’s own and pursue them independently and with diligence.

In reference to learner autonomy, as was the case with the term autonomy itself, an individual may of course be more or less autonomous, regardless of which of these perspectives one adopts. Understanding learner autonomy as a general human desire to understand and learn, some individuals have a strong urge to question, structure and explain things around them, whereas others are less inclined to do so. On the other hand, some have a developed ability to plan, organise and evaluate their learning in relation to time, environment and the expectations of other people while others focus primarily on one thing at the time and may be more or less indifferent to the educational efforts of others. These individual degrees and aspects of learner autonomy may, or may not, coincide. It is safe to say that the latter understanding of the term is more or less predominant in schools today, among its professionals and educational standards and requirements. Contemporary emphasis within the educational system on individualisation, learner-focused teaching and requiring students to take an active part in planning, conducting and evaluating their own learning conform to the traditional understanding of the concept of learner autonomy. However, a strictly one-sided view of the term may lead to a simplified understanding of learner autonomy and cause us to overlook potential pathways to children’s learning.

How then, do we understand and deal with, the autonomy of those who fail to meet the criteria of an autonomous person and in the eyes of others lack the desired abilities to reason and make logical, independent and just decisions for themselves (Wolff, 1970)? Assuming the position that the right to autonomy coincides with the capability of a developed form of reasoning and the ability to take responsibility for one’s actions allows for the possible exclusion of a number of groups and individuals from making choices concerning aspects of their own lives and gives others the power to act, by proxy consent (supposedly), in their best interest (Dworkin, 1988). The conception of autonomy in others tend to coincide with the authority to make decisions on behalf of those others, in such a way that it is frequently the very same people or groups who presume the right to decide if others meet the requested criteria to be counted as autonomous as the ones who assume the position of acting by proxy consent.

Assuming the position that learner autonomy can be seen as a general human quality, not necessarily conditioned by one’s level of development or reasoning, related to our basic cognitive functions, the question of its application in a school context rather than a question of assessment becomes a matter of human rights.

**Autism and autonomy**

Autism and autonomy both derive from the Greek *Autos*, meaning *self*, and consequently describe aspects of the conception of the self, but while autonomy is a term that describes self-governance and independence in anyone autism depicts the reclusiveness and self-absorption of a select few (Kanner 1943 in Ullman & Krasner, 1969). Autism is currently regarded as a neuropsychiatric disability and there is widespread consensus concerning the biomedical description of the phenomenon. There is some debate, however, as to the singular adequacy of the medical paradigm (Dahlgren, 2003; Spensley, 1997).
Current medical research concerning cognitive specificities associated with autism focuses on three main, mutually overlapping, areas. The first derives from research in the area of perception and focuses on how individuals experience the world: the central coherence of the mind. The second, and perhaps most predominant although in this context of marginal interest, is commonly referred to as the Theory of Mind and describes the ability to read and decode other people’s emotions and intentions. The third area of research, the field concerning executive functions, focuses on abilities to register, recall and apply information in new contexts. As the theory of mind primarily focuses on social and relational aspects in explaining autism (Baron-Cohen, 2008), it is perhaps of minor importance concerning the question of learner autonomy, and I will not discuss it further. The fields of central coherence and executive functions, however, can be seen to coincide with the earlier-mentioned dichotomous views on learner autonomy.

The theory of central coherence originates in perception research and is used to measure how people sort, experience and generalise understanding from impressions. In short, the theory is based on the premise that the brain perceives the world and all its impressions through a filter designed by our past experiences. This filter summarises and generalises our experiences in order to make them coherent and understandable and helps us focus on what we regard to be essential. Coherence varies in everyone and weak central coherence is not in itself necessarily an indicator of autism but some argue that people with autism, to a greater degree than others, have a weak central coherence in general (Frith, 1991). The term reduced central coherence is relatively widespread but is probably an unfortunate choice of words. Instead, central coherence can be seen as a sliding scale where there are advantages and disadvantages to both ends, and it can be associated with difficulties to be far out on the scale either way. According to this theory, individuals with autism perceive the world in details rather than as a whole, something that can be experienced as chaotic and exhausting. At the same time, the ability to put together various details into a whole requires a mental image, a vision, of what the final result will look like. Without a vision of the end-result the pieces would be just pieces and trying to put them together would be futile. Nevertheless, it is often assumed that the weak central coherence is without direction and that the child with autism has difficulties constructing context and making connections in general.

In this article, I propose that the mind, in cases of high-functioning autism, strive to compensate the weak central coherence through what can be described as an intellectually, albeit not necessarily conscious, inductive process which may coincide with learner autonomy.

The executive functions are a system of neurological utilities that is thought to regulate the lower cognitive processes, what is popularly known as the working memory (Baddeley, 1996). It also relates to abilities such as self-evaluation and motivation, space- and time-perception, planning, organisation, structure and automation. Recently, Miyake and colleagues (Miyake, Friedman, Emerson, Witzki, Howarter, & Wager, 2000) proposed a sectioning of the term into three sub-areas: the ability to hold and shift focus or keep multiple focuses at once; the ability to register and manage conflicting information; and the ability to reconnect and recall information from memory and relate it to new impressions and situations.

**Researching Alice**

The purpose of the study behind this article is to describe the inclusion of a student with high-functioning autism in regular education in a longitudinal perspective. There are two sides to the study. One describes the narratives formulated in school about the student by her teachers and the other focuses on the student’s own experiences of herself and her situation in school.

The study mainly resides in the critical hermeneutics but accommodates methodological and ontological aspects. This article, which derives from the study but discusses altogether different aspects of the student’s life in school, focuses in particular on the question of her learner autonomy in the context of inclusive education.

The research design consequently consists of two mutually complementary methods. The project is designed as an ongoing longitudinal case study and this article describes empiric materials collected over a period of 5 years. The main data are unstructured interviews with the student and educational personnel and passive observations of her in school. Interviews and observations were conducted on three separate occasions in the student’s life: at the ages of eight, eleven and thirteen. All observations were conducted during the course of the school day and the interviewed teachers all have main responsibility for Alice’s educational development in their capacities as her class teacher, special educator, tutor or educational assistant.

The research design of the study: the interviews, the observations and the conversations with Alice, as well as the longitudinal character, can be seen as a kind of triangulation in order to describe and validate the results. I have also conducted additional interviews with, for example, Alice’s parents and other school personnel than those who appear in the study, for validation purposes.

Interviews were decisively unstructured as I asked the teachers to describe the student and her challenges and capabilities. This method was chosen to give the informants an opportunity to talk more freely about Alice in the hope that this would reveal the stories they formulate about her rather than simply answering specific questions. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded and finally rewritten into coherent narratives which were in turn analysed from a hermeneutic–narrative perspective.
My conversations with Alice were not recorded, due to the unpredictability and sensitivity of our relationship. Instead her thoughts and reflexions were subsequently documented by hand. In my retelling of the observations, it is my ambition to show samples as close as possible to the experiences of Alice herself in order to interpret and depict what I perceive to be Alice’s own story. The observations were documented, colour-coded and transcribed into short observation narratives which were subsequently sorted and analysed.

In order to show how school narratives influence and affect Alice’s self-image and respond to her specific learner autonomy and communicative strategies, I construct a narrative of my own. This can perhaps be perceived as a methodological problem but is, in this design, a necessity. To abstain from using Alice’s perspective in this study would be to leave the school narrative un-contradicted and in essence to acknowledge the categorical depiction of Alice and her conditions and capabilities that is already predominant. In order to outline any potential bias, I will briefly describe the origin of the study and how I came to take an interest in Alice and her life in school. A few years ago I worked as a substitute teacher in a variety of capacities ranging from preschool to secondary school; some temporary posts were brief, other a little longer. On one such occasion, I met Alice. At the time she was 8 years old and attended a regular class with the support of an educational assistant. Alice fascinated me. I perceived her reasoning and behaviour to differ from that of her peers and I subsequently asked her parents if they would consider allowing me to study her and her situation in school. They were positive and I conducted a series of observations and interviews. At this point, I had no intention of continuing the study beyond this occasion. A couple of years later I accidentally met Alice and her parents and we came to talk about what had happened since and agreed that it might be interesting to follow up on the study. This led to the second and third parts of this longitudinal project. I have no private relationship with either Alice or her parents and I have never, after the brief initial posting, worked with her in any capacity other than that of a researcher.

This study was conducted in a manner consistent with the requirements of the Swedish Research Council. All participants, that is, educators, children and their parents, have been duly informed of the academic conditions and consequences of the project and have given their written consent to participate in the study and subsequent publications. All persons have been subject to a process of anonymisation, where their names and other personal information has been removed or altered. Due to the sensitivity of the material all data are confidential and may be released only after assessment and consultation with concerned parties, most importantly Alice and her parents. These parties hold the right to refuse any request of release.

Educating Alice

This study describes Alice and her life in school at the age of 8, 11 and 13. At the age of 5, Alice was given the diagnosis Autism Spectrum Disorder. Her autism is described as high functioning, which means that she does not have additional developmental or intellectual disabilities. She attends a regular class, at the age of eight with the support of an educational assistant, and later without additional educational support.

Alice displays a clear interest for, and an intellectual orientation favouring, the understanding of structures and constructions. Given the choice, she prefers an intellectually inductive approach to learning that differs from that of her peers and leads her to specific interests and actions that are not uncommon among persons diagnosed with high-functioning autism or Aspergers syndrome (Grandin, 1996). This can be described as a specific kind of learner autonomy (Habermas in Berk et al., 2000). These results, though most evident in the observations, are confirmed in the interviews:

She has these specific interests. The interests vary, but it is variations on a theme, you know. For the moment, it is skeletons. For the most part animals but sometimes humans too. She does not really draw the animals; more build them from the inside. Starting with the bones and adding muscles, skin and fell.

Assistant, year two

Alice’s interests are not static but evolve over the years.

Alice has had strong interests from the start. It was stones, shells and fossils, then bones and skeletal remains, animal skulls and carrions. Animals have been an ongoing focus but it is interesting to note how her interests evolve and change over the years. Today it is mechanical things and structures.

Special educator, year five

Through her scientific interests, Alice obtains a body of knowledge, in specific areas, uncommon for her age. She sometimes has a hard time understanding that her peers do not know the things she does and may pose a demanding student, as she requests substantial accuracy and precision from her teachers.

It is important that you’re correct in what you say. Other children do not notice if you’re careless or stretch a point but Alice gets upset if I call a moth a butterfly or a sparrow a passerine. [...] Alice wants to understand. It is important to her, I think, to understand the world.

Teacher, maths and natural sciences, year seven

Not all teachers see this questioning as something positive.

Sometimes she questions or corrects her classmates, or even me as a teacher, if she thinks we’re wrong.
We’ve been trying to explain to her that it is not acceptable. She has to understand that she cannot do things like that.

Tutor, year seven

Even though Alice, and her autism, changes over the years, the school narrative describing her remains essentially the same. This narrative is based on her autism spectra diagnosis and allows the teachers to disregard her educational strategies with reference to educational method and her weak learner autonomy. The predominant narrative is decisively categorical and the few teachers who express a more relational view are discouraged. These teachers do not have the licence to act independently (Berka et al., 2000) in the matter of Alice’s educational strategies. Hence, the autonomy of the teachers is correspondingly restricted by the college and by the school’s educational guidelines. Alice’s intellectual orientation and interests are equally discouraged and she is subject to an ongoing educational method that relies heavily on the implicit idea that her inclusion in class is, in essence, a question of her learning, sometimes by force, to adapt to regular conditions, rules and methods.

She has certain interests, of course. In a way I suppose it is good she has them, because it means that she reads, but sometimes I feel these interests take up too much of her time. Time she should spend on other things.

Tutor, year seven

From this perspective, Alice’s interests are simply a distraction and disruption to school routine. The interests of the school in these cases do not coincide with Alice’s (Glenn in Berka et al., 2000; Little 1995 in Benson, 2011). However, in her scientific orientation and detailed accuracy, Alice shows examples of a distinct strategy to structure and understand the world around her. An educational strategy that is, compared to that of her peers, decidedly autonomous.

The class is working with animals and Alice’s assistant is drawing a giraffe on the board. When she’s drawn half of it Alice says, without raising her hand:

- It will not fit.
- Be quiet, Alice, her teacher says. Raise your hand if you want to say something.
When the assistant is almost done drawing it is evident that Alice was right. There is not enough room on the board to fit the giraffe. The teacher says to leave it but Alice says:
- It is not done.
The assistant goes to sit down but Alice does not leave it. She stands up and says out loud:
- Finish it!
- Sit down, Alice, the teacher says.
- Finish it!
- What is missing, the assistant asks.
- Finish the tail, Alice says in a hard tone of voice.

- Come on then, and help me finish it. The assistant tapes a sheet of paper to the wall end and lets Alice finish the tail. At recess the teacher corrects the assistant, saying:
- It becomes unclear to her what we expect, if you let her have her way like that.

Observation, year two

Alice expresses a need to see things finished and closed. When something is finished or an event completed she can move on but to leave something unfinished appears worrying and unsettling to Alice. It interferes with her need of structure and control. It is also interesting to note how Alice early on predicts that the drawing will not fit the board. It is often claimed that persons with autism have a predisposition to view the world in details rather than in ensembles, that they have a weak central coherence, and that this inability to make coherent structures from perceived details is a basic neurological disability in autism (Frith, 1991). In this episode, Alice displays an ability to predict an entity based on detail. She shows the same capability in her constructing of animals:

Alice is building a collie. Her assistant has given her books on anatomy and she reads them conscientiously. For the moment, she’s working with the fur, tearing up papers to make strips. A teacher passes by and says to the assistant:
- Do you really think she should be allowed to tear up all that paper? We only have so much material to go around.
The assistant and Alice go searching for something else and find shredded paper in a bin. Alice discusses the various qualities of collie-fur with her assistant. They try to curl and colour the strips and glue them onto her figure.

Observation, year two

Starting with the teeth, the eyes or any other physical detail, she constructs the skeleton, muscles and hide of a proportionately plausible dog before moving on to the characteristics of the fur. In other words, she may start in detail, whereas most other children would start with a preconception of a “dog” (Vygotskij, 1978), but end up with a full dog, that is, fur and all; a dog that is in proportion with detail much more similar to an actual dog than any of her peer’s dogs. An important point in this is to stress the role of the other. Alice has specific educational interests that pose an interesting opportunity for learning but for her interests to lead her further she needs to be challenged by others (Vygotskij, 1978). The initiative to learn, structure or explain something comes from Alice herself but, especially in recognition of her problems with her executive functions, she needs the guidance of others to introduce new things and to contextualise and structure her learning. Here lies the substantial difference between Alice’s learner autonomy and the school’s conception of it (Dam, 1995; Dearden, 1972).
In a way, she is more attentive than most children. She sees things as they are. In other children, it is perhaps more that they draw a mental picture they have of a horse but Alice wants to know how many teeth the horse has; what the skull looks like; how many vertebrae there are in the throat. There are such possibilities in it but as it is now it is more important that she completes the same five pages of math as everyone else.

Hence, her central coherence may be weak, but through her intellectual interests she finds ways to compensate, or complement, this weakness. In order to structure and deal with her impressions, Alice shows an autonomous strive to organise and explain things around her that can be seen as a specific educational strategy.

Several of the interviewees testify that Alice has difficulties accepting noisy and loud environments, such as sports and music lessons, perhaps due to specific perceptual sensitivity and difficulty sorting impressions. An interesting detail is a music lesson in year two, where the assistant states that Alice tolerates trying conditions better when she is allowed to work with something she is interested in (Sjödin, 2013). The results imply that Alice finds it most difficult to sort impressions and cope with chaotic surroundings if she has to be idle. Idleness can be difficult to handle for any child and perhaps Alice, through her specific conditions, is particularly sensitive to it. It is possible that Alice may be using her interests as a sieve to help her structure and manage surrounding impressions.

Alice and her class head out at six in the morning to look for migratory birds. The teacher gathers the students and talks about migratory birds in general and cranes in particular. Some listen, others talk to each other about other things. Alice is sitting on the ground some distance away looking into the reeds, at the small birds that chatter there. She chirps for herself and draws meticulous pictures of the birds in her notebook. The teacher sends the other students to the observation tower and addresses Alice:

- Why are you sitting here all by yourself? If you do not go up with the others, you might not see any cranes. Did you hear what I said back there?

Observation, year five

Later on, Alice walks along the shore:

She strides away from the others looking through her binoculars. She peeks out to the water, into the reeds and up the slope into the woods. She stops by a grove of aspen trees dressed in autumn colours. Alice sits down under the trees and starts to play with the leaves. She sorts them carefully by colour while talking [inaudible] for herself. She compares every shade and every nuance before placing each leaf on the ground. When the class comes down from the observation tower the teacher is already talking about something. She interrupts herself and says:

- Let’s gather over here. She walks up to Alice and stands in the leaves beside her.

Observation, year five

Alice shows signs of specific scientific and creative interests not only in her sorting of the aspen leaves but also in observing and drawing the birds. She does not get to see any cranes this particular morning but then again neither do any of the other students. However, what she does and does not know or learn is not really the question; the real issue seems to be that she does not conform to the ways of the other students. Alice follows her own agenda, an agenda that allows and encourages her to study things in particular detail and to learn through her interests and impressions. This strategy is decidedly discouraged by school representatives:

You have to make sure she always has something useful and relevant to work with and knows what to do. It does not really matter what it is. This monotonous kind of work, that other children may find boring, is not the problem. It is good for these children to be a little bored. They benefit from it. Perhaps she sometimes finds all the repetition and rehearsal boring and meaningless, if she thinks she already understands, but one has to be firm. It is all about being clear and definite, is it not? She has to conform to the ways of the school.

Tutor, year seven

Several of the teachers address Alice’s resistance to rehearsal and repetition and it is evident in the observations that she resists any occupation or task she perceives as meaningless. If she chooses her employment or is made to take an interest in it, she can go on indefinitely but if she does not understand the purpose of the task it can be difficult to get her to accept it at all.

When she chooses what to do she is tireless; she can go on forever. It is not easy to introduce new things; new questions, to her. She often shows great resistance to new tasks and subjects but it is not impossible. I feel that the most successful strategy is to present the new via something she is already interested in and feels confident with. She is not a stranger to learning new things; it is just a matter of how you present it. If she does not understand why she should do something, she does not even try.

Teacher, maths and natural sciences, year seven

However, views on how this resistance should be handled in school vary. Some teachers claim that repetitive work is beneficiary for children with autism and that Alice should be made to accept her tasks. Some believe that it is a question of discipline: Alice must simply learn to abide to the same rules and conditions as everyone else.
That is what she has to learn. She must learn to be one of us. To function in a social context. She is like any other student. I ask the same things of her as I do of any of the others.

Teacher, year two

These teachers also address the importance of Alice learning to follow the timetable and adapt to the authority of the current teacher. They focus on her weakness as an autonomous learner (Dam, 1995) and her educational independence and integrity, qualities traditionally associated with the concept of learner autonomy, are seen as a disciplinary challenge. Though autonomy is traditionally seen as a desired quality, when it does not conform to school authority and expectation it is regarded as a problem and subsequently relabelled as defiance, resistance or disability.

On the contrary, others question the relevance of such tasks and advocate flexibility and responsiveness (Dewey, 1938). They propose that Alice’s autonomous educational interests lead her to intellectually structure and sort her impressions and search for answers and insights and that this characteristic should be nourished and reclaimed by her educators instead of discouraged.

On the one hand it is the class and what Alice is required to do there. She’s supposed to do everything the others do, that is the idea. They have been very clear about that. On the other hand, it is Alice herself. She has these specific interests and I understand that she has had them for quite some time but I’m not supposed to encourage them at all.

Assistant, year two

The predominant school narrative, however, stresses the importance of Alice conforming to school requirements. At the end of her seventh year some of the teachers feel that Alice spends too much time and attention on her interests and the college decides to forbid Alice from working with anything related to her interests during the school day:

- How do I know if she hears me when she is not listening when I speak to her? Seeing as how she sits with that stuff all the time, how will she be able to concentrate on what she is supposed to do?

The special educator says:

- It is not good for these children with too much stimuli, we should try to help her focus on what is important. She needs clear rules to relate to. We must help her to focus so she can listen properly and do the things she’s expected to do.

Observation, year seven

In relation to this, Alice says:

- I have to do something. If I do not do something I cannot hear what they say to me. Their voices blend together with the other sounds. If I do something while I listen I can focus but they do not believe me when I tell them. Sometimes it is like the volume is up too loud inside my head and sometimes there’s no sound on at all. When it is that loud I cannot stand it and I break. Inside.

Eventually, Alice assumes the school narrative and its biomedical explanations as her own and comes to understand her problems in school as a result of her own shortcomings:

- I do not know what is wrong with my mind, why I am so stupid. I cannot hear what they say; I cannot explain to them so they understand and they do not want to listen. They do not think I hear them when they talk about me; they do not think I understand; but I hear everything.

**Conclusion: in defence of Alice L.**

The study behind this article aims to describe how life in school can appear to a student diagnosed with high-functioning autism; however, it is not essentially a project about autism but about normality and what happens to a child who is measured against the expected student normality and its presumed learner autonomy and deemed insufficient. Alice fails, because of her different conditions, to adapt to the school’s supposed normality and the school, through its professionals, responds by discouraging her and further consolidates her otherness. From an early age, Alice has shown sincere interest in structure, construction and coherence, interests she expresses through her varying, and sometimes immersive, hobbies. Her interests and strategies can be seen as a specific kind of learner autonomy based on a process of intellectual induction related to the perceptive strategies of the mind. These interests, however, are strictly discouraged by most of her educators.

From the school narrative’s point of view Alice’s capacity to autonomy as a learner is quite weak. Many of the things traditionally associated with learner autonomy (Dam, 1995; Wolff, 1970) are things that are challenging to Alice and many other persons with similar diagnoses. From an Executive Functions’ perspective Alice has problems with planning, structuring and executing her work within the school provided timeframe (Dam, 1995; Dam & Legenhausen, 2011). Within the school narrative, this disqualifies her as an autonomous learner. To have her follow the rules become the measurement of her adaptation to school normality. This supersedes her inner desire to examine how things work and her constant strive to understand how the world works (Benson, 2011). However, there is more to the concept of learner autonomy than this.

Most people have an inductive understanding of the world. Most of us strive to systematise, explain and understand the world we live in and there’s no reason to think that Alice would be an exception. Since she has a different perception than most, and experiences the world around her in a different way than others, her structuring...
strategy is perhaps somewhat different. The inductive process that, in persons with strong central coherence is automated, in Alice can be seen an intellectual, though not necessarily conscious process. It manifests itself as a scientific interest, an inquiring attitude to her environment and a constant need for things to be structured and coherent. In this article, I propose that this intellectually inductive process could be compared to a specific kind of learner autonomy; a scientific urge to sort, structure and explain the world that, if perceived as an possibility instead of as an inconvenience, present interesting opportunities in a school context. According to the theory of central coherence (Frith, 1991) people with autism generally perceive the world in details and find it difficult to merge these parts to wholes. It is clear that Alice’s view of the outside world is based on details and that she prefers to focus on the parts rather than the context but at the same time she shows a willingness and desire to organise and structure these separate impressions. Perhaps the mind, in high-functioning autism, strives to compensate for the weak central coherence and look for alternative ways to structure impressions and make the world manageable and understandable (Grandin, 1996). This scientific orientation, however, is not a trait usually associated with autism nor is it exclusive to what is commonly described as neuropsychiatric diagnoses.

The attitudes towards Alice and the way the teachers describe her are rather dichotomous (Sjödin, 2013; 2014). Whereas a majority of the teachers use medical words to describe her and lean heavily on disciplinary measures and recommendations, there are a few who refrain from the use of such words and instead speak of Alice’s alternate way of thinking. They are, however, discouraged by the school community and do not have licence to act autonomously towards Alice (Berka et al., 2000). The school’s attitude to Alice’s researching, investigative interest is distanced, if not negative. Her teachers argue that she uses too much material and that she is littering and subsequently justify their disapproval through the use of educational arguments. It becomes unclear to her what is expected of her in school if she is allowed to do things that she wants or likes, but the disciplinary measures aimed at Alice are not just directed to her but to all the students. It is said that the most important thing is that she learns to follow the rules; accept to sit in class with the other students and learn to get to class on time, with the proper equipment. The conducting of repetitive assignments becomes something of a symbolic issue. Many of the things we do in school lack evident meaning. Some children accept this without question, some negotiate with their teachers and obtain, through these negotiations, additional agency or independence (Markström & Halldén, 2009) but Alice does not parley, she wants to know why. This could be viewed as an educational opportunity but is instead generally seen as a problem. A general truth in contemporary educational theory is that repetition leads to reflection, which may be true for most children but not necessarily for children with autism. To Alice repetition is just repetition. For repetition to lead to reflection, she needs something more, for example responsive communication with another (Benson, 2011).

Alice’s learner autonomy is, as we have seen, ignored and discouraged throughout her school years with reference to her supposed weaknesses as an autonomous learner (Dam, 1995). Alice’s independence and integrity as a learner, qualities traditionally associated with the concept of learner autonomy are seen as a disciplinary challenge. While autonomy is traditionally seen as a desired quality, when it does not conform to school authority and expectation it is regarded as a problem and subsequently relabelled as resistance. The conflict between the learner autonomy of individual students and the school’s expectations of them as learners is a question of relevance not only to Alice but to all children regardless of their abilities and conditions. In essence, it revolves around the question of student agency versus institutional authority and how children manoeuvre between their own interests and sense of self and the school’s expectations of them. The conflict of interest between the expectations of the institution and the vested interest of each individual to obtain and execute certain degrees of personal autonomy, as learners and otherwise, are managed by most students through the use of various strategies (Markström & Halldén, 2009), some more successful than others. This is a process acceptable to and even to some degree encouraged by school representatives and the children who see through this expectation can negotiate some liberties and adaptations in reference to school regulations. Due to her different cognitive conditions, Alice does not comprehend this expectation to parley and when she voices opposition or displays a desire to act on her interests she does so in a way that is not regarded as acceptable. This is not unique to Alice or to children with diagnoses but a process applicable to the relationship between the school as an institution and the individual student in general.

It is explicitly stated in interviews, as well as visible in the observations, that the school and most of its representatives, views itself as an unchallengeable constant. The institution, its goals, habits and educational methods are as they are and the purpose of the inclusion of Alice is that she, through disciplinary means, should learn to adapt to school rules, regulations and requirements and, subsequently, conform to be as similar to the normative perception of a standard student as possible. This requirement leaves no room for Alice’s autonomy. From this perspective, the conditions in school, which are said to be the same for everyone, aims to measure each student’s ability to respond and adapt to the expected student role (Säljö & Hjörne, 2008). But the conditions in school are not the same for all students, simply because all students are not the same. Considering this, it is reasonable to assume.
that the requirements aimed at Alice, that is, the implicit, and on occasion explicit, expectation that she become as similar to the normal student, makes her situation in school quite different to that of her peers. In doing so, Alice must abandon her intellectually inductive strategies and scientific interests and conform to school routines, habits and timetables.

The general educational policy in many countries today, some 15 years after the Salamanca agreement, favour inclusive education. However, policy documents and standards still assume the position that the curriculum and educational goals are the same for all students but standards, methods and developmental/educational requirements are not neutral. They favour certain characteristics, abilities and conditions over others and assume that some children’s capabilities and diversities are deviations from student normality.

References


Sara Sjödin is a postgraduate with the Gothenburg AMBLE project and an upper secondary school teacher of Swedish and Religious Studies.