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Autonomy and Solidarity in School Culture: A Relationality Perspective on Teacher Autonomy

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ABSTRACT

This study examines teacher autonomy through a relationality perspective that challenges traditional conceptualisations of autonomy as solely individual control. Through an in-depth reflexive thematic analysis of interviews with nine Finnish teachers, the research reveals five interconnected themes showing how autonomy emerges within organisational structures and collaborative practices: sense of autonomy and organisational socialisation; interdependence and shared responsibility in school culture; curriculum-infused sense of responsibility; planning mindset synchronised by coursebooks; and testing as more than assessing students. These themes demonstrate that professional decision-making develops through socialisation, supported by curriculum frameworks and coursebook-guided practices. Additionally, testing practices exemplify how autonomy operates through relational dynamics, serving both assessment and stakeholder engagement functions. The data illustrate how teacher autonomy operates through these relational dimensions, offering valuable insights for reconceptualising it beyond individualistic frameworks that position autonomy in opposition to social and institutional structures and attempt to measure it as freedom from external constraints.

1 | Introduction

Teacher autonomy is widely recognised as a desirable professional attribute and traditionally understood in terms of teachers' control over key professional domains such as planning, instruction, and assessment. The Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) 2018 report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2020) exemplifies this understanding of autonomy by measuring teachers' control over these domains in their comprehensive analysis of teacher professionalism across educational systems worldwide. This measurement approach reflects an underlying assumption in educational discourse that greater teacher control over professional practices enhances autonomy and ultimately improves teaching and learning.

This assumption about autonomy reflects a broader trend in contemporary education policy where data and numbers have become key mechanisms for knowing and governing educational practices (Grek 2024, 4), often leading to what Mertala (2024) terms 'datafixation'—an obsessive focus that reduces complex educational phenomena to superficial indicators while disregarding the negative consequences of such simplification. In the context of teacher autonomy, this quantification mindset manifests in the notion that autonomy can be measured as a value that increases as external control decreases. Although autonomy and its associated external forces may not operate in mutual exclusivity (Ingersoll 1996), both academic literature (e.g., Parker 2015; Salokangas et al. 2019) and influential international reports like TALIS continue to analyse teacher autonomy through a linear, dichotomous framework that positions

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teachers' individual decision-making capacity against external factors such as policies, evaluations, administrators, curriculum, and parents.

This quantification approach to teacher autonomy reveals significant inconsistencies when examined against teachers' actual experiences and perceptions. It is noteworthy that while teaching practice typically entails adherence to curricular frameworks and prescribed instructional materials, teachers consistently report high levels of perceived autonomy—for example, the OECD average for autonomy in determining course content is 84.3% (OECD 2020, 202). This widespread reporting of high autonomy challenges conventional understandings of autonomy as freedom from external control, particularly when teachers professionally embrace such structures as valuable tools for practice and experience this as autonomous decision-making rather than external constraint (Erss 2018). This paradox suggests the need to move beyond understanding autonomy merely as individual freedom and instead adopt more nuanced conceptualizations offered by philosophical traditions. A more refined definition, for example, frames autonomy as 'the capacity to be one's own person, to live one's life according to reasons and motives that are taken as one's own and not the product of manipulative or distorting external forces' (Christman 2020, 1). This perspective is particularly relevant in educational contexts, as the key distinction lies not in the presence of external influences per se, but in their nature and how they are engaged with. It follows that external factors accompanied by professional consensus cannot be characterised as *manipulative* or *distorting*, and their presence may not equate to diminished autonomy, reinforcing the need to examine how professional autonomy emerges within the complex social and institutional contexts of teaching practice.

Given the complexities in both the concept of autonomy and its application to teaching—a profession that is inherently social and embedded within organisational structures (Vanderstraeten 2007)—recent research has acknowledged relationality perspectives through concepts such as relational autonomy (Paradis et al. 2019; Romero et al. 2023) and collegial autonomy (Lennert da Silva 2022) in addition to earlier conceptualizations such as collective autonomy (Cribb and Gewirtz 2007). When conceptualised from a relationality perspective, autonomy shares significant conceptual territory with *agency*, particularly regarding the 'quality of the engagement of actors with temporal-relational contexts-for-action' (Biesta et al. 2015, 626). Some researchers employ both autonomy and agency in their analyses, distinguishing autonomy as the capacity for affecting teaching conditions while agency refers to the capacity to work within existing conditions (Lennert da Silva and Mølsted 2020). Even when autonomy is not explicitly described with a relational qualifier, some research examines it alongside the concept of collaboration to demonstrate their interconnection (Vangrieken et al. 2017; Vangrieken and Kyndt 2020). Indeed, collaboration emerges as one of the most frequently recurring themes in teacher autonomy research, as confirmed by recent comprehensive bibliometric analysis (Çolak 2024).

Despite varied terminology, the fundamental phenomenon examined operates through professional relationships, collaborative practices, and organisational structures rather than existing as an isolated individual attribute. Among these conceptual

options, this study specifically adopts 'autonomy' qualified as 'relational', acknowledging its conceptual overlap with other uses such as collegial/collective autonomy and agency. The choice of autonomy is for maintaining a consistent dialogue with the comprehensive studies on Finnish teachers' autonomy (e.g., Wermke and Salokangas 2021) and the TALIS report, while the choice of relational is grounded on this study's theoretical framework of relational justice.

Relational justice, as in relational autonomy approaches, acknowledges people's social embeddedness and brings attention to important dimensions like interdependence and solidarity in achieving social justice (Mackenzie 2014; Stoljar and Voigt 2021a). Political philosophers have usually examined autonomy within broader justice theories, positioning it as intrinsically connected to social justice goals (see Christman 2020). Yet educational research has largely decoupled these concepts, treating autonomy as a standalone ideal—a tendency evident in both individual-centric frameworks like TALIS and, surprisingly, in studies that adopt relational perspectives. To exemplify, Paradis et al. (2019) examine Finnish and Canadian teachers' autonomy and highlight the importance of trust in relationships within a school context for their autonomy. Despite their relationality perspective, the absence of a justice perspective in their theoretical framework leads to overlooking teachers' trust in other stakeholders such as parents and principals, thereby overshadowing the interdependence in their autonomy. This study thus contributes to the growing body of research on autonomy with a relationality perspective by explicitly integrating a justice perspective into the examination of teacher autonomy, offering a framework that better captures how autonomy emerges within networks of professional relationships and institutional structures.

This research examines relational autonomy by using a sample of Finnish teachers as its empirical base. Finland provides an ideal setting for this investigation because its education system features both extensive teacher autonomy (OECD 2020) and the absence of external accountability mechanisms common elsewhere, such as school inspection regimes and high-stakes testing. This combination creates an environment where the relational aspects of autonomy can be studied without the confounding influence of formal performative pressures. The main aim of the study is to understand how teacher autonomy emerges from and operates within organisational structures and school cultures, guided by the following research questions:

1. In the context of Finnish education, what are the dimensions of teacher autonomy and solidarity in school culture?
2. In what ways does Finnish teachers' decision-making reflect principles of relational autonomy?

2 | Towards a Relational Understanding of Teacher Autonomy

2.1 | Teaching as an Ascriptive Profession

Teaching as an ascriptive profession is embedded within organisational structures where tensions between individual teachers and broader organisational interests are expected

(Vanderstraeten 2007, 629). In this regard, teaching differs fundamentally from professions like law and medicine in that ‘teachers only can teach as best as possible in the conditions given to them’ (Wermke and Salokangas 2021, 148).

The unique nature of the teaching profession creates several paradoxes in autonomy research. First, increased individual autonomy can lead to heightened accountability pressures, potentially causing teachers to self-restrict their decision-making (Wermke and Salokangas 2021). Second, autonomy can be manipulated to justify increased workload (Erss 2018). This points to the concern that complete autonomy may not be ideal in all contexts since it does not necessarily improve teaching practice and can potentially overwhelm teachers (Wermke and Salokangas 2021). Third, higher autonomy may undermine collaborative work in schools, as argued to be the case in the Finnish context (Lähdemäki 2019). Fourth, reduced official regulations may lead to informal control mechanisms, particularly from parents (Shamsuddinova and Nisa 2021).

These paradoxes reveal the limitations of conceptualising teacher autonomy primarily as individual autonomy. Accordingly, the crucial question should shift from how constrained or free teachers are to whether they have appropriate support in managing the complexities associated with autonomy (Wermke and Salokangas 2021, 2). This necessitates a theoretical framework that accounts for the relational dimensions of teacher autonomy.

2.2 | Autonomy From a Relationality Perspective

The conceptual vagueness often noted in teacher autonomy research (Usma Wilches 2007) reflects the broader ambiguity surrounding the concept of autonomy itself, ranging from its complete denial to its elevation as a fundamental liberal value (Svendsen 2014). This study thus embarks on specifying a framework suitable for examining teacher autonomy within its complexity: the relationality perspective, which draws on both relational justice and relational autonomy theories. Although historically theorised separately, recent scholarship suggests combining these two theories, as they share the critique that dominant views fail to adequately capture how autonomy is shaped by social relationships (Stoljar and Voigt 2021a).

This relational framework challenges the common positioning of autonomy against constraining external factors, an approach that reflects an overly neoliberal individualism. In contrast, relational justice theory—a key component of this framework—offers an alternative by emphasising values such as care, love, and solidarity (Lynch et al. 2021). Specifically, this perspective criticises ‘the resistance to recognising the interdependency of the human condition, [and] the lionizing of self-sufficiency as virtue’ (Lynch et al. 2021, 60). Consequently, solidarity is adopted as the conceptual lens through which this research examines teacher autonomy from a relational perspective.

2.3 | Solidarity in School Culture

Solidarity refers to people’s being ‘tied together by bonds of mutual assistance, common goals, and/or other aspects of

a situation that they share’ (Prainsack and Buyx 2012, 344). Solidarity has been conceived as ‘an antidote to the sense of alienation of the citizen in the modern nation state and the anonymity of the individual in the capitalist system’ (Heyd 2015, 55). From this perspective, solidarity may initially seem to conflict with or even stand as an alternative to autonomy in the rights based approaches, but the two concepts are in fact complementary (ter Meulen 2016). If the focus shifts from an ‘individual calculation of benefits and costs’ to a more collective perspective, not only can solidarity be strengthened (Morgan and Pulignano 2020, 21), but this enhanced solidarity could also serve to enhance autonomy rather than compromise it (Fainzang 2016).

From a relational justice perspective, the operationalization of solidarity in relation to teacher autonomy necessitates reconceptualizing teachers not as isolated autonomous agents but as integral members of a professional community. This reconceptualization suggests school culture, rather than individual teachers, as the more appropriate unit of analysis. Prosser’s foundational definition emphasises that schools exhibit ‘similarities in terms of norms, structures, rituals and traditions, common values and actions, and it is this shared vision that underpins school culture’ (Prosser 1999, 8). This understanding of school culture aligns with the concept of solidarity and suggests that within a solidarity-based school culture teacher autonomy manifests not through individual autonomy from constraints, but through collective professional practices and mutual support structures.

2.4 | Relational Teacher Autonomy

Building on the role of solidarity in school culture, relational autonomy emerges as the second key component of this study’s theoretical framework. The theoretical distinction between relational autonomy and traditional conceptions lies in its reconceptualization of autonomy as ‘a socially constituted capacity’ (Mackenzie 2008, 519) rather than a ‘capacity to be one’s own person’ (Christman 2020, 1). This perspective builds on the idea that ‘autonomous beings are, of necessity, socially situated and interdependent’ (Oshana 2020, 1). According to Mackenzie, ‘an adequate conception of autonomy must be responsive to the facts of human vulnerability and dependency rather than assuming a conception of persons as self-sufficient, independent, rational contractors’ (Mackenzie 2014, 21–22).

Like the solidarity perspective, relational autonomy critiques individualistic frameworks, and shares conceptual ground with relational justice in advocating for a balance that maintains ‘neither excessive autonomy, which erodes society, nor excessive collectivism, which erodes individual autonomy’ (Mazzoli Smith et al. 2017, 4). While maintaining individual autonomy as an ethically significant value, relational autonomy’s distinctive contribution lies in its recognition that ‘its development and exercise need to be scaffolded by the right kinds of interpersonal relationships and social environments’ (Mackenzie 2021, 33). When applied to educational contexts, this theoretical framework suggests reconceptualizing teacher autonomy as emerging from the complex web of professional relationships and responsibilities that constitute school culture.

3 | Methodology

3.1 | Research Method

This study employed a generic qualitative approach to examine teachers' autonomy in a Finnish context through the lens of relationality. The flexibility of this approach (Liu 2016) enabled exploration of the nuanced interplay between individual decision-making and collective responsibility without the constraints imposed by any single established methodological tradition. Rather than adhering exclusively to one framework, elements from phenomenology, ethnography, and grounded theory were integrated in practice—for example, by applying phenomenological insights to interpret participants' lived experiences, using an ethnographic lens to situate the first author's subjectivity during data collection within the Finnish context, and adopting an open coding technique from grounded theory to systematically identify emerging themes. Each methodological choice was determined collaboratively between the authors, with explicit rationales provided at every stage, in accordance with generic qualitative research guidelines (Kahlke 2014; Liu 2016).

This collaboration was strengthened by the complementary insider-outsider dynamic between authors. The first author, as an outsider to Finnish education, brought critical distance that facilitated questioning of normalised practices, while the second author's insider position provided valuable cultural familiarity and contextual understanding. This insider knowledge enhanced data collection by facilitating access to participants and interpretation of Finnish-specific educational terminology. During interviews, the first author's outsider position often prompted participants to articulate aspects of practice that might otherwise remain implicit. Throughout analysis, we engaged in reflexive discussions about how our respective positions influenced interpretations, deliberately balancing analytical distance with contextual understanding.

3.2 | Participants and Context

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling from a Finnish public school at the lower secondary level (Grades

7–9), which represents the final 3 years of Finland's comprehensive school system where students aged 13–16 complete their basic education. This level was selected to enable meaningful dialogue with existing literature (e.g., OECD 2020; Wermke and Salokangas 2021). The decision to focus on a single school was aligned with the study's relational perspective on teacher autonomy. By examining teachers within one shared institutional context, the research design facilitated exploration of how autonomy emerges within common organisational structures and collective practices. This approach enabled in-depth examination of how different teachers navigate identical institutional frameworks and collaborative relationships within the particular social ecosystem of one school community.

Participants included five qualified teachers with full-time contracts and four candidate teachers with internship and substitute teaching experience (Table 1). This mix of career stages was intentional, reflecting the theoretical understanding of autonomy as a socially constructed capacity that develops through professional experience. The qualified teachers had between 4 and 35 years of teaching experience, while candidate teachers had accumulated practical experience through internships and substitute teaching.

This sampling approach was not designed to establish a clear-cut comparison between groups, but rather to capture a continuum of professional experience. The approach was deemed particularly appropriate given the study's focus on the relational dimensions and organisational structures that shape teacher autonomy rather than comparing perceptions of autonomy across groups. In the analysis process, data from all participants were examined together, with attention to patterns related to both experience levels and occupational status where relevant, but the primary focus remained on identifying shared relational practices and institutional frameworks that shape teacher autonomy regardless of career stage.

3.3 | Data Collection

The study employed verbal online interviews, each lasting approximately 40 min and conducted in English. Prior to data

TABLE 1 | Participant demographics and professional background.

No	Participant pseudonyms	Gender	Specialisation	Experience in years	Professional status
1	Juhani	Male	History, civics	1	Candidate
2	Sari	Female	Primary and special education	2	Candidate
3	Anneli	Female	English	4	Candidate
4	Veera	Female	English, Swedish	4	Candidate
5	Riitta	Female	Mathematics, physics, chemistry	4	Qualified
6	Ilmari	Male	Special education	5	Qualified
7	Marjukka	Female	Mathematics, physics, chemistry	10	Qualified
8	Sakari	Male	English, Swedish	27	Qualified
9	Antti	Male	Special education	35	Qualified

collection, informed consent was secured from each participant through the dissemination of a detailed Privacy Notice (University of Turku, FI-20014).

Semi-structured interviews were utilised to enable both systematic investigation of predetermined themes and flexibility to explore emerging topics. Our interview approach deliberately diverged from individual-centric queries typical in preceding research (e.g., Ingersoll 2003; Wermke and Salokangas 2021). Rather than asking questions like ‘who is mainly responsible for the following decisions’ (Wermke and Salokangas 2021, 57), the interview questions were intentionally crafted to reflect a solidarity perspective. The interview guide (Appendix S1) contained 20 questions structured across five sections: decision-making and collaboration processes in three key areas of teaching practice—planning, instruction, and testing—as would be expected from a typical teaching profession (Leijen et al. 2022); responsibilities of other stakeholders; and evolution of perceived autonomy. The guide was developed through multiple refinement cycles with feedback from experienced educational researchers and validated through a pilot interview with a Finnish teacher.

Another distinctive feature of this study’s methodological approach lies in its conceptualisation of teaching domains. While previous research has often compartmentalised teaching into separate domains—for instance, TALIS reports examine collaboration and autonomy as distinct domains, and Wermke and Salokangas (2021) distinguish between educational, social, developmental, and administrative domains—this study adopted an integrated perspective. Although focusing primarily on what (Wermke and Salokangas 2021, 155) term teachers’ ‘core function’ (educational and social domains), this study conceptualises these not as discrete but as interconnected domains of teaching practice. The relationships with parents and principals were not treated as separate from the educational domain but as integral parts of it, reflecting the study’s position that teaching constitutes a single, inherently social domain.

3.4 | Data Analysis

The study employed reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2019). This method was chosen for its capacity to examine the nuanced relationship between autonomy and collaboration in school culture, while acknowledging the researcher’s active role in theme construction. While the small sample size of nine participants limits the scope of observations possible, it enabled an intensive analytical approach with multiple rounds of in-depth coding and interpretation. Using MAXQDA software, an iterative process was used to group 420 individual codes into the five major themes presented in this study (Appendix S2). This systematic process was documented through detailed memos to capture analytical decisions and enhance credibility.

The concentrated sample allowed for detailed examination of each participant’s articulation of their experiences, enriching the analytical process. To enhance trustworthiness, emerging interpretations were regularly reviewed against the original data to ensure they remained grounded in participants’ experiences while meaningfully contributing to theoretical understanding. Moreover, to enhance the credibility of the findings, member

checking (Guba and Lincoln 1989) was conducted with two participants—one candidate teacher and one qualified teacher. This process involved sharing initial analytical interpretations to verify their accuracy and representativeness.

4 | Findings

The reflexive thematic analysis revealed five interconnected themes: (1) Sense of autonomy and organisational socialisation; (2) Interdependence and shared responsibility in school culture; (3) Curriculum-infused sense of responsibility; (4) ‘Planning mindset’ synchronised by coursebooks; and (5) Testing is more than testing students. The first theme incorporates the concept of organisational socialisation, which was deductively derived based on existing literature on workplace adaptation (Richards et al. 2014), while the remaining four themes emerged inductively from the data analysis. Participants’ quotes are attributed using pseudonyms followed by identifiers (e.g., Q27, C2), where ‘Q’ indicates qualified teachers and ‘C’ candidate teachers, with numbers representing years of teaching experience.

4.1 | Sense of Autonomy and Organisational Socialisation

The dataset revealed that the participants’ capacity for decision-making evolves through a complex interplay of experience and socialisation within the school environment. Both qualified and candidate teachers reported a progression in their confidence and decision-making capabilities over time, revealing a transformative journey from initial uncertainties to professional autonomy. Speaking about this progression, one experienced teacher reflected:

I guess I’m at my most confident time of my life concerning that, because I have been in so many bad or difficult places and situations, and I have always learned from them.

(Antti_Q35)

In addition to professional experience, their autonomy is also shaped by specific teaching environments. For example, Sakari_Q27’s confidence in teaching at the lower secondary level for 25 years contrasted with his cautious approach to upper secondary teaching, where he has little experience and feels a need for more detailed planning:

I’ve done this so many years. How many...? 25 years. And in the beginning, I used to do it a lot. [...] I have to admit that I still do that on the high school side, *lukio* [Finnish word]. Those lessons, I still plan. Because I haven’t done the *lukio* thing for a long time.

(Sakari_Q27)

Similar to Sakari_Q27’s account illustrating how autonomy can depend on specific contexts, Riitta_Q4 emphasised the benefits of a permanent position, which allows for continuous engagement in the same school context over time:

If I could get permanent job, it would make easier because then I would have the same book, same material that I would know the students. I don't need to, like, use time to, like, learn how students, like, learn things. And yeah, so I think that is something that will, like, come easier with experiments.

(Riitta_Q4)

These insights suggest that the development of autonomy is a dynamic process, closely linked to the teacher's specific educational setting as well as overall professional experience, as teachers can gain confidence in decision-making both through career progression and sustained familiarity with their teaching context. Even the candidate teachers who participated in this research exhibited a significant growth in their autonomy through substitute roles and internships.

When I started, I was very nervous. And, you know, I followed, for example, learning materials very, very strict strictly but nowadays, you know, I feel more free to do whatever I feel the best.

(Veera_C4)

The data also revealed that the teachers' growth often occurred through formal and informal interactions within the school environment, where teachers exchange ideas and develop their teaching practices. Such interactions, identified in literature as *organisational socialisation*, involve the adaptations of newcomers to the workplace (Richards et al. 2014). For example, Marjukka_Q10 illustrated the growth of her autonomy as she expressed not needing her colleagues' approval any more in her 10th year of experience; and Ilmari_Q5, who used to need positive affirmation, feels more confident in the 5th year of his professional life.

I think I have gained more trust on what I do. I don't need my colleagues' approval to do something. So, yeah, I think that has increased during time. And I trust that my methods are working.

(Marjukka_Q10)

I was very lucky; I was in a different school than I am now. But the principal was very supporting. And the other older teachers were also, like, when I came and then I told what happened or what I did and stuff like that, and then said 'yeah yeah, that's just the right thing to do'. So, I got the, like, positive affirmation, for my doings. At the moment, I'm much more confident than I was.

(Ilmari_Q5)

Formally, socialisation occurs through three distinct meeting formats at the school under study: faculty-wide gatherings, parent-teacher meetings, and subject-specific teacher gatherings. Regarding the development of the interviewees' autonomy, the data revealed the particular significance of subject-specific meetings, which offered regular opportunities for pedagogical exchange for the teachers.

Every Friday at 12, we meet, like, with the math, physics and chemistry teachers. And then we discuss whatever is in our mind. [...] So I can ask, like, 'how did you do that physics thing where there is so much history that is really boring to me and students. So how do you do that?'

(Riitta_Q4)

According to the interviewees who reflected on their current school and other schools where they had worked, the school administration, particularly principals, plays a key role in fostering an environment that supports both autonomy and solidarity. Principals can shape school culture, for instance, through their hiring decisions.

Some schools is, like, saying that we want to go more, like, using computers or something like that. So they, like, affect teaching more, like, when they hire some teachers, like, who they hire is, like, the main, probably, way to affect teaching. Like, if they want computer to be more often used in the teaching, then they hire teachers that say that 'yeah, I like to use computers pretty much'.

(Riitta_Q4)

While such hiring decisions can reflect specific priorities, they have the potential to contribute to a broader process where each school develops its own unique culture and values. As Antti_Q35 emphasised, 'That's very important thing, the values, and that we share the same values. I think that's the main thing keeps us alive, doing this job'. Beyond hiring decisions, the interviews illustrated that principals provide guidance on legal and procedural matters while maintaining limited direct engagement in teaching domains, which aligns with the literature on trust in Finnish teachers' practice (Paradis et al. 2019), with one notable exception being special needs education, where principals took a more active role in planning according to the interviewees.

This theme also reinforces the established understanding that Finnish teachers perceive significant autonomy within their teaching domains, with minimal direct intervention from school principals. This was evident in several interviews, for example: 'We are very autonomous, we can do things in a way that we want to because, you know, that's our right as a teacher.' (Veera_C4), and 'I think part of Finnish school is the freedom of teachers, that's a big thing. So, if it comes from outside, what we should do, I don't think so many teachers would enjoy their job so much.' (Marjukka_Q10). This profound sense of autonomy can therefore be understood as a product of their socialisation into their school's culture of trust, which sets the stage for analysing how such autonomy is navigated in terms of professional responsibilities.

4.2 | Interdependence and Shared Responsibility in School Culture

The data reveals that teacher autonomy is not exercised in isolation but is fundamentally shaped by a network of interdependent relationships and shared responsibilities among teachers, principals, and parents. The findings illustrated a dynamic within the

school culture where the actions, and at times inactions, of each stakeholder directly shaped the professional practice and autonomy of teachers. It is within this framework of interconnectedness that participants reported exchanging ideas with their fellow teachers to share responsibilities and emphasised the crucial role of principals' and parents' responsibilities in shaping their work.

Beyond the regular collaboration described in the previous section and other forms of exchange illustrated throughout this report, the participants also shared responsibilities with their fellow teachers on sensitive issues and school rules, particularly when making what Wermke and Salokangas (2021) term 'risky decisions'. This was evident in how they collectively handled disciplinary matters and approached controversial topics like geopolitical conflicts. As Juhani_C1 explained regarding such sensitive topics, 'If there's some very controversial topics, for example, right now, there is, well, Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Palestine [...] It is needed to have conversations on those.' Regarding disciplinary matters, Riitta_Q4 talked about her process:

But after I discuss [a disciplinary action], like, my colleagues and ask it whether they have something like that happening in their class and what they did. They were all same, like, yeah, they did the same thing. [...] It was, like, okay, I did everything right.
(Riitta_Q4)

The significance of shared responsibilities became particularly evident in the interviewees' reflections on principal's roles. A potential lack in commitment from principals would have widespread effects, with Sakari_Q27 noting it 'would affect everything', Juhani_C1 observing it could 'compromise the whole working atmosphere', and Sari_C2 stating it 'affects their job greatly'. Marjukka_Q10 further exemplified this point, suggesting that a principal's lack of engagement not only impacts teacher motivation but also the cohesive community feel of the school.

I think that [principal's lack of commitment] reflects also on the teacher's commitment, and the whole schools' feel of community if it's not coming from up to down. And also, in school the curriculum and the daily schedule rules, it will be really hard to follow the rules if there isn't someone, like, who make sure that the most difficult things get done. I think it gives me more and more work if it's a bad principal. And the good principal is easy to rely if I have a difficult situation, say, with one parent, so it's easy to rely that we are at the same side with the principal rather than on the opposite sides
(Marjukka_Q10).

This, taken together with principals' hiring power in shaping school culture discussed in the previous theme, highlights the crucial role of leadership in fostering an environment conducive to both autonomy and collaboration within an educational context—a finding, which has been observed also in a previous

study on teacher autonomy in Finland, Norway, and the USA (Maaranen and Afdal 2022).

Similarly, a lack of commitment by parents was also deemed to affect teaching at school. Participants reported that parents should primarily be responsible for aspects such as 'educating children', implying their overall upbringing and development (Juhani_C1, Veera_C4, Marjukka_Q10), and teaching how to behave (Riitta_Q4, Sakari_Q27).

If the parents are inattentive, it will reflect how the children will be at the class. So, in that sense it will affect because it's kind of their work becomes my work, because teacher is also a custodian in a sense, well, that's not the right word. But we also have the responsibility of raising up kids to some extent. So, if the parents don't do it, I have to, obviously, take the full responsibility for it. It's just a matter of fact that I will have to deal with those kinds of things more.
(Juhani_C1)

The overwhelming view among participants was that a deficit in this parental duty detrimentally impacts the quality of teaching and learning within the school environment, thereby complicating the relational dynamics through which teachers exercise their professional autonomy. For instance, Ilmari_Q5 noted that issues stemming from home life not only challenge a teacher's ability to conduct lessons effectively but also permeate the classroom and affect other students.

When the child is not well, and it's because of the situation at home. Of course, it's affects you as a person, because they are so fragile, the students, and it's not their fault. And if they are having any troubles at home, of course, it affects them here. [...] So, then I need to find ways to get them through the day sometimes or then motivate them to do the things we need to do, and stuff like that affects the most to my teaching. And it also affects the other students also because they see the one that is not doing so great.
(Ilmari_Q5)

While this study was not designed to investigate special needs education (SNE) as a distinct domain, the inclusion of three SNE teachers in the sample provided an emergent and valuable lens on the theme of shared responsibilities. Their accounts revealed how SNE at the participants' school functions as a systematic framework built upon shared responsibility, which in turn necessitates extensive collaboration. They reported extensive collaborative practices across all teaching domains, often emphasising the adaptation of curricular goals to suit individual student needs rather than strict adherence to a standard curriculum or specific textbooks. For instance, developing individualised learning plans involves partnership with parents and students, as highlighted by Antti_Q35: 'That [individual educational plan] is a plan which we go through with student and with parents.' Furthermore, SNE teachers often benefit

from subject teachers' support, such as the development of exams among subject groups, as noted by Ilmari_Q5: 'I know that the subject groups are doing collaboration for their exams and then because I'm working with them, I get the fruit of their work because they are very, very glad to share their exams with me.' This collaboration from planning to assessment, although involving principal supervision, cultivated a distinctive sense of heightened autonomy among these teachers, with Antti_Q35 stating, 'I guess I have the most freedom that any else teacher in my school [has].' This, along with their reported job satisfaction (Ilmari_Q5), led them to describe a unique freedom and enjoyment in their roles.

I love this job because it's so different, because when I was studying, I did some substitute things like a general subject teacher. And the days were so boring because you are going through the same class over and over again. Now, like, every day, and every class is a little different. So, it keeps you on the edge much better. And then you need to develop your own doing every year because every group is so different.

(Ilmari_Q5)

Another aspect emerging from the dataset was the fact that some participants (Ilmari_Q5, Antti_Q35, Sakari_Q27, Veera_C4) reported the possibility of involving school social workers available in Finnish schools for addressing home-related issues. From the perspective of shared responsibilities, this aspect seems crucial because home-related issues faced by students inevitably impact the classroom environment, as illustrated through participants' views on parents' roles, and in the cases of severe difficulties, teachers have the opportunity to pass on these responsibilities to specialised professionals.

4.3 | Curriculum-Infused Sense of Responsibility

The findings illustrated how the curriculum serves as a crucial reference point that both guides and legitimises teachers' professional practices. For instance, Antti_Q35 mentioned being 'so familiar with the curriculum', Ilmari_Q5 found it to be 'in check with my [their] teaching philosophies', and Riitta_Q4 used it as a checklist to confirm 'am I teaching everything that I should do?'. This alignment appeared to foster a sense of professional security among the interviewees, particularly when responding to external feedback. As Ilmari_Q5 explained:

I would react [to criticism] by taking the curriculum out and giving the points from there, like, why I'm doing this stuff this way, and then show them that that is actually the way that the curriculum says and supports it.

(Ilmari_Q5)

In the interviews, the curriculum's role extended beyond a mere reference point as it acted as a unifying force ensuring consistency across classrooms. In the participants' words, 'the curriculum is always there in the back' (Antti_Q35) and teachers 'can't really deviate too much from that' (Juhani_C1). This unifying

role becomes particularly critical in a system where teachers are autonomous enough to 'do whatever they want' (Sakari_Q27). The curriculum provides the foundational framework for maintaining uniformity while preserving professional autonomy, addressing the question of how standardisation can coexist with teacher autonomy in classroom practice.

This coexistence became even more intriguing when examining how participants linguistically framed the curriculum. Some participants referred directly to the government when discussing curriculum. Marjukka_Q10 described it as 'the one [plan] that the Finnish government prepares' and Anneli_C4 emphasised her 'teaching plan has to be aligned with the government's plan'. Similarly, Riitta_Q4 expressed, '[the] government says that these things we need to teach, but everything out of that, it's completely like what we want'. This pattern of directly invoking the government when discussing curricular matters emerged across multiple interviews, though the data did not illuminate why participants adopted this particular framing. What is evident, however, is that this explicit acknowledgment of governmental authority coexisted with participants' strong sense of professional autonomy.

The coexistence of explicit governmental references with strong professional autonomy might appear paradoxical, yet participants' accountability relationships help explain this dynamic. While they invoked the government when discussing curricular requirements, their actual sense of accountability operated through more immediate professional relationships. Whereas accountability to the principal was explicitly mentioned only by one of the interviewees, many of them reported feeling accountable primarily to students; for instance, 'The feeling of accountability is more with the kids themselves and their parents and me.' (Sari_C2) and 'Students, absolutely students. Absolutely. Yeah. That's why we are here, that's why I'm doing it. It's my responsibility that they will learn English or Swedish. Yeah, absolutely. That's the highest accountability there is.' (Sakari_Q27).

This pattern of accountability suggests that the interviewed teachers have transformed the curriculum from an external directive into an internalised professional framework that allowed them to balance standardised expectations with responsive stakeholder engagement. It is noteworthy that the interviewees referred to the curriculum or government rather than principals, which might seem contradictory to the aspects discussed in previous themes such as the principal's role in shaping school culture and their responsibilities. This theme, however, revealed that while principals were deemed crucial in shaping school culture, the articulation of less accountability to them and attributions to the curriculum (sometimes with reference to the government) is evidence of a solidarity culture positioning principals as colleagues rather than someone higher in hierarchy to whom they felt accountable.

4.4 | 'Planning Mindset' Synchronised by Coursebooks

The data revealed a nuanced interplay between individual planning practices and collective alignment mechanisms in the school where the interviewed teachers worked. There was no

formal planning requirement for qualified teachers, with the notable exception of SNE teachers, and daily planning was described as an individual endeavour.

It [planning] depends on the teachers, and also a little bit on the community. [...] Maybe the yearly planning is something that is in common in every school, that is done somewhat in collaboration. And the lesson planning is on me, myself.

(Marjukka_Q10)

The findings suggest that planning practices are guided by an internalised approach developed during teacher training, as many of the teachers had developed, through detailed planning activities in their training period, what Sari_C2 characterised as ‘a planning mindset, so when you go to work, you don’t have to write down minute by minute because you have it in your head’.

While the absence of formal planning requirements might suggest purely individual autonomy, the interviews revealed a more nuanced dynamic. The planning mindset, though developed individually, manifested within the collective framework of teaching practice. This mirrors the earlier discussion of curriculum internalisation, where individual autonomy operates through shared professional understandings. The collective dimension of planning became particularly evident in how teachers approached coursebook selection and implementation.

Coursebooks served as concrete manifestations of the curriculum’s standardising role in daily practice. The data revealed how coursebooks create a substantial standardising effect across schools. As Veera_C4 noted, ‘we use a lot of the same materials, for example, the books, they’re pretty much the same in every school’. This standardisation occurs partly through market constraints, as Sari_C2 explained: ‘there aren’t so many publishers [...] there’s either one option, or maybe four at the most to choose from [...] So that somehow in its own way creates coherence’. Also, Marjukka_Q10 acknowledges this unifying effect: ‘the book is something that combines us, so we do approximately the same things’.

According to the interviewees, the structural aspects of coursebook selection further reinforced this standardisation while simultaneously creating spaces for collective decision-making. Materials are chosen for extended periods, with new teachers adopting existing coursebooks until the next selection period (Marjukka_Q10). In some cases, the selection process extends beyond individual schools to the local authority level, as Anneli_C4 described: ‘A teacher can have an opinion or a wish for the Town Council what books series they would like to use, sometimes the Town Council just choose the series by themselves’. This multi-layered selection process creates a framework that aligns teaching practices while maintaining channels for teacher input.

Within this standardised framework, teachers exercised their autonomy through the development and sharing of [Supporting Information](#). Sakari_Q27’s description illustrates how teachers build their professional resources over time: ‘I’ve been accumulating, like, stuff on the computer or in the cloud a lot. Digitizing,

like, old material so whatever I’m teaching, I already have kind of a library where I can choose whatever I use’. This individual development of materials can be enhanced through collaborative practices, as Veera_C4 explained: ‘I remember one school that they had, you know, one, it was a file on Google Drive, and all the teachers put some materials there, and everybody was free to, you know, use whatever they needed’. Such collaborative sharing of materials demonstrates how teacher autonomy operates relationally, with individual experience contributing to and being enriched by collective engagement.

4.5 | Testing Is More Than Testing Students

The findings revealed testing as a distinctive domain where professional autonomy, collaborative practices, and social relationships intersect in ways that differed from planning and instruction domains. Testing distinguished itself particularly through its relationship with parental involvement and teacher self-evaluation.

Before elaborating on the findings of this theme, it is important to note that the absence of national examinations at the lower secondary level in Finland significantly shapes testing practices, as performance-based accountability through high-stakes exams typically limits teacher autonomy as teachers become ‘conditioned by external assessment, performance metrics, and related policies’ (Parcerisa et al. 2022, 17). In this context of limited external assessment pressures, the interviewed teachers appeared to maintain flexibility in their assessment approaches while still adhering to curriculum standards, which was again referred to the government authority.

It [testing] is really individual, every teacher should do their own unless they want to share their exams. But [...] it would match as well as it can with the government saying, but yeah, mostly I do my exams myself.

(Riitta_Q4)

The flexibility in testing approaches mirrored the findings in earlier themes regarding the participants’ relationship with the curriculum in describing their professional responsibilities and direct accountability to the curriculum or in Riitta_Q4’s words ‘the government saying’. The data illustrated that operating within a curriculum framework but without national standardisation created a system where professional autonomy coexisted with collective responsibility. The teachers prepared their own testing practices based on their individual and collaborative approaches. Their autonomy in testing brought more responsibility, and this led to more collaboration—a pattern previously observed for SNE teachers too. This was especially pronounced in ‘testing groups’ referring to the fact that teachers ‘use the same test and they make it in a group’ (Antti_Q35).

In the interviews, a distinctive feature of testing was its role in mediating parent–teacher relationships. Unlike planning and instruction domains where parental involvement was more limited, testing created structured opportunities for

parental engagement through both digital platforms and direct communication.

When I give the test back to the student. He or she shows it to his or her parents and the parents sign test. And then I check that it has been seen by the parents. [---] If one test goes very poorly, it's mostly so that I phone them before they have a chance to phone to me. So, I phone them in advance, telling them that now the test went very poorly.

(Antti_Q35)

Once parents have been really, like, surprised that students get really low grade from exam. So, they ask if they can see the exam, and, like, student's answers, and after that, they really didn't, like, say anything.

(Riitta_Q4)

Rather than creating tension, this involvement appeared to strengthen professional relationships. Participants did not express negative views about any potential parental involvement; instead, their responses suggested that such engagement enhances professional accountability and responsibility.

Testing also served as a crucial mechanism for teachers to reflect on their instructional effectiveness. The consensus among participants was that exam results can act as a mirror, revealing the success or shortcomings of their teaching methods. As Sari_C2 noted, 'if you make a test and everyone fails, it probably means you did not teach the thing very well and you don't do your job'. This self-reflective aspect of testing created an internal accountability mechanism that complemented external feedback from parents.

5 | Discussion

This study set out to examine teacher autonomy through a relationality lens, questioning the dominant individualistic frameworks in educational research and policy. While our findings reaffirm the extensive autonomy attributed to Finnish teachers (e.g., OECD 2020), they simultaneously challenge the nature of that autonomy. Rather than an individual attribute defined by freedom from constraints, teacher autonomy, as experienced by our participants, emerges as a socially constituted capacity, deeply embedded within a complex network of professional relationships, organisational structures, and shared norms of their school culture.

As shown in the findings, our participants' autonomy both develops gradually over time and is shaped by micro and macro aspects of the school culture. The gradual development of their autonomy through time aligns with the literature on 'expert performance' achieved through 'natural experiments' (Ericsson 2014, 43), a pattern that can be expected in most professions. How this autonomy is shaped and exercised within school culture (Research Question 1), however, requires a cautious interpretation given the need to distinguish between

aspects particular to the school our participants referred to and those that might have commonalities across other schools. Participants' frequent references to the national curriculum and the government suggest some degree of shared framework across Finnish schools since such aspects represent the 'wider' dimension of school culture referring to broader systems that permeate all schools (Prosser 1999, 8). Nevertheless, we must limit our inferences to the school our participants referred to. This limitation stems from two factors: first, the data was gathered from only one school whose immediate culture might be uniquely shaped in its interaction with the wider culture, and second, this study was primarily designed to explore immediate school culture rather than broader national patterns, which would require a more focused analytical approach to explore the role of wider culture, especially in regard to how teachers' professional identity is formed in their national context.

Within this limitation, our analysis suggests that teacher autonomy exists within a space bounded by curriculum requirements at national level and implementation practices at school. This can be characterised by minimal regulatory mechanisms but strong professional responsibility and accountability, a dynamic also conceptualised as 'professional space' in a previous study on Finnish teachers' autonomy (Maaranen and Afdal 2022, 134). This space indeed exists for the teachers this study's data was based on, yet interpreting it as the source of or equivalent to individual autonomy can be misleading. While participants' autonomy developed through gaining experience, confidence, and expertise over years, this development cannot be understood in isolation from organisational socialisation processes. Viewing growing autonomy through the lens of socialisation suggests that becoming an expert is not solely about developing one's skills in isolation but involves active participation in the linguistic and social practices of the profession (Collins and Evans 2018). The significance of this socialisation in relation to autonomy became particularly evident through our investigation of stakeholder responsibilities from participant teachers' perspectives. Fellow teachers, principals, and parents' commitment to their respective roles was intertwined with how participants described their decision-making processes (Research Question 2). This interconnection manifested in their decision-making both directly through sharing plans, resources, and ideas with colleagues, and indirectly through the supportive frameworks principals established, and through how parents' fulfilment or neglect of educational responsibilities shaped classroom dynamics and pedagogical choices. Thus, what appears as individual teacher autonomy in decision-making actually operates through a network of both direct and indirect relationships and shared responsibilities within the school community.

While socialisation processes are integral to how autonomy develops, they alone cannot fully explain the nature of teacher autonomy observed in our study. The curriculum emerged as another crucial dimension, functioning as a framework within which teachers exercised their autonomy. However, this framework operated not through formal procedures or external mandates but through internalisation, as evidenced by how participants viewed the curriculum as a source of professional authority and described their planning as emerging from an internalised mindset rather than compliance. This internalisation enabled participants to maintain their professional autonomy

while aligning their practice with broader educational goals. We argue that this internalisation, also evidenced by Erss (2018) for Finnish teachers, becomes an integral part of teachers' professional identity and contributes to solidarity in school culture.

This internalisation process, however, did not create a simple continuum with curriculum at one end and teachers at the other; coursebooks, testing practices, and shared materials mediated how curricular goals translated into practice in our participants' context. Despite the absence of formal supervision or compliance mechanisms, these mediating structures shaped how participants engaged with curricular frameworks. Coursebooks emerged as particularly significant, creating what Moate (2021) describes as the 'textbook-based character of Finnish education' that serves functions of 'quality control, pedagogical management and source of information' (p. 10). While participants were not bound by strict planning procedures, their planning operated within frameworks established by these shared materials and resources, creating de facto standardisation through collective practice rather than mandate. Testing revealed similar complexity: participants experienced it as a domain of professional autonomy, yet it simultaneously functioned as a mechanism for accountability to multiple stakeholders. Through testing, teachers evaluated their own instructional effectiveness, communicated student progress to parents, and demonstrated alignment with curricular objectives. These findings suggest that what appeared as autonomous practice in participants' context actually operated through these layers of mediation that created coherence across classrooms without formal enforcement. Thus, for our participants, the relationship between curriculum and teacher autonomy was neither one of simple compliance nor complete autonomy, but rather a negotiated process where standardisation emerged relationally through professional practice itself.

Recognising autonomy as relational based on our analysis uncovers three significant critiques of existing frameworks. The first concerns the artificial dichotomy between autonomy and collaboration presented in frameworks such as OECD's 2018 TALIS report. When examined as interconnected rather than separate constructs, these aspects reveal a form of relational autonomy that better characterises the professional practice of the teachers interviewed for this study.

The second critique addresses the separation of educational and social domains in teaching as in Wermke and Salokangas' (2021) work. Their analysis reveals an unresolved contradiction, characterising testing as a domain of 'increasing parental pressures and involvement' (p. 5), while simultaneously arguing that 'Finnish-style, trust-based professionalism' grants teachers substantial autonomy in the educational domain (p. 92). The distinction between educational and social autonomy leaves this contradiction unaddressed and overlooks how social relationships are inseparable from all domains of teaching practice—whether in planning, instruction, or assessment. This study, rather than maintaining such artificial divisions between domains, demonstrates how testing exemplifies the integration of educational and social dimensions, revealing it as a space where professional autonomy and social relationships mutually reinforce each other through relational dynamics.

The third critique extends beyond the common narrative of Finnish teachers' autonomy being based on trust. For example, Paradis et al.'s (2019) work, also adopting a relational autonomy perspective, has focused primarily on trust in teachers. The findings of this study, however, suggest that the acknowledgement of trust as reciprocal and multidirectional within the school community could better serve in the analysis of teacher autonomy. This reciprocal understanding of trust aligns with recent empirical work on *organisational trust*, in which Çolak (2025) examines trust as an integrated construct that operates across all stakeholder relationships in schools, creating conditions where teachers develop stronger efficacy beliefs and, consequently, greater willingness to exercise autonomy in their practice. This understanding of trust aligns with emerging perspectives on professional collaboration in education, particularly Hargreaves and colleagues' concept of 'collaborative professionalism', which emphasises building 'trusting relationships with one another' and 'using precise strategies and protocols, where appropriate, and engaging in rigorous dialogue together' (Hargreaves et al. 2018, 32). The alignment extends to broader discussions of 'connective professionalism' where professionals 'navigate relations, get wired in, understand social experiences, navigate risks, and gain respect' (Noordegraaf 2020, 219).

The data from this study highlight two aspects that warrant further investigation in understanding relational autonomy. First, SNE emerged as an exemplary case of how relational autonomy operates in practice. The SNE teachers among our participants reported experiencing great autonomy precisely through their intensified collaborative practices—working closely with subject teachers and parents while adapting curricular goals to individual student needs. This paradox, where increased interdependence enhanced rather than diminished professional autonomy, suggests that SNE contexts may offer particularly rich sites for examining relational autonomy in action. Second, testing practices in our participants' context revealed how assessment functions as a multifaceted relational tool in the absence of high-stakes examinations. While teachers experienced testing as a domain of professional autonomy, it simultaneously served as a mechanism for self-evaluation, parental communication, and informal accountability. Future research could explore how these testing dynamics operate across different accountability contexts, particularly comparing systems with and without high-stakes examinations to understand how assessment practices shape relational autonomy.

Our analysis offers valuable insights into relational autonomy, yet several methodological limitations shape the scope of our conclusions. First, the sample size was relatively small and drawn from a single lower secondary school context, which necessarily limits the transferability of the findings to other Finnish schools and international settings. Second, conducting interviews in English rather than Finnish may have influenced participants' responses in subtle ways. For instance, participants' references to the government when discussing the curriculum might partly reflect their effort to explain the Finnish educational system to a non-Finnish speaking interviewer, potentially adopting a more generalised, system-level discourse than they might use when discussing their practice with Finnish colleagues. Finally, the study did not include observations or data from principals,

parents, or other key stakeholders, which could offer a more holistic picture of how relational autonomy functions within the wider school community. Future research might address these limitations by employing larger samples, incorporating classroom observations or stakeholder perspectives, and comparing different school contexts to deepen understanding of how teachers' relational autonomy operates under diverse conditions.

6 | Conclusion

The relational perspective adopted in this study offers insights into how the teachers in our sample experienced and exercised professional autonomy within their specific school context. Our analysis uncovered five interconnected dimensions through which their professional autonomy emerged: organisational socialisation processes that developed expertise over time; networks of interdependent responsibilities across stakeholders; internalised curricular frameworks that guided professional practice; coursebook-mediated coherence across classrooms; and multifaceted testing practices serving relational rather than merely evaluative functions.

A notable pattern in our data was the apparent paradox where participants reported strong professional autonomy while simultaneously adhering to standardised materials, embracing curriculum, and engaging in intensive collaboration. For these teachers, standardisation and collaboration appeared to function as vehicles through which autonomy operated rather than as constraining forces. This suggests that conceptualising autonomy solely as individual control measured against external constraints may not fully capture the complexity of teachers' professional experiences, at least within the context we studied.

7 | Theoretical and Practical Implications

The contrast between relational and individual autonomy uncovered in this study exposes critical shortcomings in how contemporary education policy approaches teacher empowerment. Shaped by New Public Management reforms, the influence of standardisation and external control has significantly constrained how teachers exercise their autonomy while paradoxically promoting individual competence and self-discipline (Lundström 2015). As Grek (2024) argues, there has been a transformation in educational governance from 'social accountability and user reflexivity' to 'datafied accountability and expert reflexivity' (p. 185). The inclusion of teacher autonomy as a measurable value in TALIS 2018 reflects this approach. The TALIS report's promotion of enhanced teacher autonomy as a means of professional empowerment could be seen as attempting to counterbalance the constraints of standardisation and external control. However, attempts to increase individual teacher autonomy through measurement and policy interventions appear naive when confronted with teaching's social nature.

The emphasis on measuring and quantifying teacher autonomy reflects deeper problems in how educational policy approaches complex social phenomena. As Saltelli and Giampietro (2017) warn, 'evidence based policy may result in

a dramatic simplification of the available perceptions, flawed policy prescriptions and in the neglect of other relevant world views of legitimate stakeholders' (p. 62). In the context of this study, such neglect might manifest as an unquestioned presupposition that teachers always need—or even desire—greater individual autonomy, overlooking the possibility that relational structures and collaborative practices may better support teaching. In Popkewitz's (2020) words, 'the numbers are not merely describing and correlating. They are anticipatory. The future is calculated as desires that have algorithmic formats that are prefigure in the abstraction of the school as a system' (p. 309). This tendency towards abstraction in measuring teacher autonomy mirrors what Stoljar and Voigt (2021b) identify as a problem in liberal policy thinking: the reliance on idealised, atomistic conceptions of autonomy detached from social contexts. This suggests that educational policy would benefit from examining how teacher autonomy actually operates within school contexts rather than attempting to inscribe equivalency and comparability through numerical indicators of 'more autonomy'. This understanding suggests reorienting educational policies towards fostering school cultures where professional solidarity can flourish, thereby supporting the relational nature of teacher autonomy.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section. **Data S1:** ejed70248-sup-0001-Supinfo1.docx. **Data S2:** ejed70248-sup-0002-Supinfo2.docx.