



PRIMARY RESEARCH

Curriculum designers: A critical analysis of the concept of teacher autonomy in the Finnish schooling system

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Abstract

Teacher autonomy has been one of the most increasingly popular research areas in education since the turn of the 21st century. As one of the main components of teacher professionalism, it has gained increased significance in public discourse reflecting wider global and local education policies. Finnish schooling system, lauded as one of the top-performing education systems thanks to its consistent success in PISA rankings, attaches huge significance to teacher autonomy as one of the main pillars of its “educational miracle”. While there are sufficient studies that have researched teacher autonomy in the Finnish education context, there has been little systematic research on the critical analysis of teacher autonomy from educational policy perspective. This paper conducts a systematic literature review of existing studies and policy documents to construct a holistic analysis of the concept of teacher autonomy in Finnish education system from a public policy perspective and sheds light on its unintended consequences.

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INTRODUCTION

Finland has been one of exemplary countries in terms of high educational attainment and performance for almost two decades. Finnish students have constantly been excelling in PISA and TIMSS (Martin, Mullis, Foy, & Hooper, 2016) in a stable manner since the beginning of the 21st century with slight declines over the period. According to the latest PISA results in 2015, for instance, Finnish 15-year-olds were third among all OECD countries in science and second in literacy (OECD, 2016). Such high results have certainly sparked a huge interest in Finnish education system, what some educational researchers call Finland’s “education miracle” (Sahlberg, 2011). Teacher’s role in education can never be underestimated and the success of Finnish education system serves as a reliable evidence of inimitable role teachers play in it. Most importantly, teacher professionalism is one of the main components that accounts for a “high-performing Finnish education system which successfully combines high quality with widely spread equity through reasonable public financing” (Lavonen, 2018; Waheed, Khan, Khan, & Khalil, 2012). And

without any doubt, it can be argued that teacher autonomy is a powerful tool that is implicitly linked to teacher professionalism and commitment. It should be noted that teacher autonomy has been a long-standing issue and has recently become an increasingly important research topic in the field of education.

“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) have immensely impacted the definition of teaching profession. Such neoliberal and NPM measures have posed a great threat to teacher autonomy which has brought to trust erosion and “degradation of teaching as a profession” (Lundström, 2015). Nevertheless, Finnish teachers’ “high degree of autonomy, ensured by the absence of extensive control and surveillance systems” (Simola, 2005), has been an outstanding exception and immune to international “policy epidemic” (Levin, 1998) in this era of strict regulations, increased accountability and reduced teacher autonomy in most parts of the world, especially European countries.

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The main aim of this paper is to analyze teacher autonomy in the context of Finnish education system from public policy perspective as a major contributing factor to Finnish education success. First, the paper will highlight theoretical framework on the concept of teacher autonomy, focusing on individual and collaborative autonomy. Further, by drawing from Finnish government curriculum policy agenda, I will briefly overview major reforms since the end of the 20th century until Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (FNCC) (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014) was adopted and analyze how effective policy-making led to teachers changing roles from being “curriculum implementers” to “curriculum developers” and exercising greater autonomy in their teaching practice. I will then touch upon two major challenges faced by teachers as increased autonomy and trust also mean higher level of expectations and responsibility and rising volume of workload that stem from it. Moreover, I will critically explore how FNCC (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014) created a level of uncertainty and indicated lack of background in practicing collaborative teacher autonomy in designing and implementing the curriculum. In the final part of the paper, future perspectives of teacher autonomy in Finland and the issues that need to be addressed for further investigation will be highlighted as a lesson to be learnt for other countries.

Conceptualizing Teacher Autonomy

Teacher autonomy is an integral part of teacher’s professional identity and in most cases directly linked to better student performance and outcome on grounds of increased job satisfaction, commitment and professionalism (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005). Teacher autonomy has been a hot potato in public discourse in the field of education. There has been immense research conducted (Nieveen, van den Akker, & Resink, 2010; Schratz & Westfall-Greiter, 2010) on the concept of autonomy and how it is interpreted depending on the context and nature of the autonomy itself. Generally, autonomy has been associated with self-directedness, taking independent decisions and freedom from external control, according to Smith and Erdoğan (2008). It should be highlighted that teacher autonomy is also perceived as freedom to use one’s own judgment and reasoning, otherwise known as professional discretion (Harrits & Møller, 2014; Khan, Jam, Akbar, Khan, & Hijazi, 2011). Teacher autonomy is a feature of input regimes which resonates with German/European continental curriculum tradition of Didaktik (Hopmann, 2015), which focuses on teachers as civil servants who hold high level of decision making power and

subject to almost no outside control as opposed to outcome regime in Anglo-American countries, based on NPM values of increased accountability. Autonomy, is in turn, divided into general and curricular autonomy, where the former involves decisions on classroom standards and on-site discretion while the latter refers to the organization of lessons, materials, approaches and methodology of teaching (Erss, 2018; Shahbaz, Jam, Bibi, & Loganathan, 2016).

What is more, modern researchers challenge traditional interpretation of teacher autonomy as having total independence through isolation and alienation (Wilson, 1993), which, in a broader sense, should be replaced by a relatively new definition of autonomy, based on collaboration and collegial decision-making (Ali et al., 2010; Pearson & Moomaw, 2005). Collaboration, in most literatures, has been defined as a collegial interaction concerning all the input involved to perform shared tasks and responsibility (Haapaniemi, Venäläinen, Malin, & Palojoki, 2021). Collective teacher autonomy implies that teachers should use their collaborative power to design curriculum and assessment (Wermke & Forsberg, 2017; Waheed, Klobas, & Kaur, 2017) as “to be isolated in a classroom without collegial interaction or meaningful feedback is not the intended spirit of autonomy” (Fraser & Sorenson, 1992). Moreover, collegial autonomy is an indication of collaboration where responsibilities and risks are shared accordingly. Most significantly, there has been a debate around the very nature of collegial autonomy in educational research based on the Michel Foucault’s concept of governmentality. To be more precise, collegial decision-making was seen as a sort of subtle control of teacher’s work, where teachers think they are autonomous, even if they are not (Erss, 2018). As Erss puts it, ‘the control is merely transformed from being exercised through external authorities to the school, teaching profession and/or each individual teacher’ (Erss, 2015).

Nevertheless, it can be argued that collegial and collaborative autonomy has been favored over individual autonomy (Paulsrud & Wermke, 2020), as the one that leads to better teacher performance in terms of sharing the workload, responsibility and the risks associated with individual teacher autonomy.

Theoretical Foundations of Teacher Autonomy

The necessity for autonomy among teachers has been supported by a number of theories (Erss, 2015). The self-determination theory, new ideas about teacher professionalism, and teachers’ roles within Didaktik/Bildungstheorie and curricular theory are all explained in the overview that follows.

THE THEORY OF SELF-DETERMINATION

According to the self-determination theory, autonomy is the key concept to comprehending behavioral regulation and motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2006). Since autonomy is seen as one of the fundamental needs of all humans (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013), it serves as a powerful motivator for teachers to do their jobs well. According to this theory, autonomy is viewed as self-governance as opposed to heteronomy, which refers to rules imposed by forces perceived as outside or pushing the phenomenal self (Ryan & Deci, 2006). The tension between being a professional practitioner in the classroom and being confined by the school and the

centrally mandated curriculum characterizes teachers' job (Hopmann, 2007; Wermke & Forsberg, 2017). These limitations prevent teachers from ever having full autonomy. Instead, the difference between their autonomy and heteronomy is one of degree. According to the self-determination theory, individuals can be autonomous even if they adhere to external laws and guidelines as long as they completely support them (Ryan & Deci, 2006). Teachers can still feel independent in their work if they approve of the curriculum because it makes sense to them or because they agree with the principles it espouses (Erss, 2015).

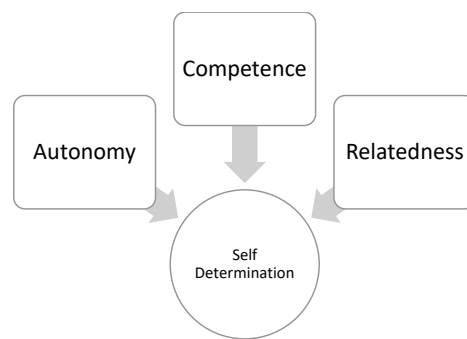


FIGURE 1. Self determination theory

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

My approach to the research was that of systematic review (EPPI-Centre, 2007) in order to establish a reliable analytical and critical evidence base for educational policy-makers, school leaders and teachers. Systematic review has been defined as: “a scientific process governed by a set of explicit and demanding rules oriented towards demonstrating comprehensiveness, immunity from bias, and transparency and accountability of technique and execution” (Dixon-Woods, 2010). Although this approach has been criticised as employing a reductionist perspective on research evidence,

characterized by limited findings (MacLure, 2005), the recent increased significance attached to meta-analytical studies can address this perceived narrowness of scope. In this systematic literature review, all of the studies used predominantly qualitative data.

To ensure that the review was systematic, I carried out the following steps, as recommended by (EPPI-Centre, 2007):

1. Scoping the review: I started by developing explicit criteria for specifying which studies would be included in the review (Table 1).

TABLE 1. Inclusion criteria for the review

Topic	Literature must relate to one of the key words: teacher autonomy, teacher professionalism, Finnish education system, curriculum design and implementation.
Recency	Literature should have been published between 2000 and 2022 (although some older papers were reviewed to conceptualize teacher autonomy and analyze educational policy reforms in Finland dating back to late 20th century).
Geographical spread	Literature should relate primarily to studies in Finland, together with examples from other countries with similar education systems or where the context of the study was similar to that in Finnish schools.
Research-base	Literature must be based upon empirical research (mainly qualitative).
Reliability/validity	As far as can be determined, the findings upon which the literature is based must be valid and reliable, taking into account the type of study.

2. Searching for studies: I identified relevant studies in particular types of literature (peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, Finnish government websites, Finnish “grey” literature) using a prescribed set of search terms (teacher autonomy, teacher professionalism, teacher self-efficacy, curriculum design, Finnish education system, education policy-making in Finland, individual and collegial autonomy).

3. Screening studies: each piece of literature was screened against the inclusion criteria. This helped to avoid hidden bias, by having clear consistent rules about which studies were being used. By appraising each study against the same criteria and recording the results, the basis for the review’s conclusions was made transparent.

4. Describing and mapping: I outlined the methodology and findings from each included study, including variables such as population focus, study design and key findings.

5. Quality and relevance appraisal: I evaluated each paper in terms of: a) The trustworthiness of the results judged by the quality of the study within the accepted norms for undertaking the particular type of research design used in the study (methodological quality); b) The appropriateness of the use of that study design for addressing their particular research question (methodological relevance); c) The appropriateness of focus of the research for answering the review question (topic relevance).

6. Synthesising study findings: all the findings from the existing studies were critically analyzed triangulated with data from policy documents.

7. Conclusions/recommendations: I drew up a set of recommendations based on the synthesis and critical analysis of the findings from the reviewed literature. This included identification of potential limitations in the generalisability or transferability of long-held beliefs about teacher autonomy beyond Finnish context.

Curriculum Reforms in Finnish Education System: 1970-2014

Until the 1960s, education attainment level in Finland was fairly low where “only one in ten adults had completed more than just nine years of basic education” (Sahlberg, 2010). Despite this, Finland has been one of few countries whose education system has sustained equality for over four decades starting in the 1970s when comprehensive school system came to existence where all schools followed the same national curriculum framework with shared objectives and values (Pollari, Salo, & Koski, 2018). It should be highlighted that the period starting from the 1970s is mostly characterized as the beginning of neoliberalism and

new public management era in most aspects of governance, including educational policy-making. 1970 for Finland is highlighted as the year when first national curriculum was published (Vitikka, Krokfors, & Hurmerinta, 2012), with exposure to NPM agenda of strongly centralized curriculum with strict rules, guidelines and instructions teachers should follow. The curriculum was reformed in 1985 following the adoption of Basic Education Act in 1983 with a more decentralized agenda and direction set for teacher autonomy. More decision-making power was granted to local municipalities, a practice which continued until the 1990s and reached its peak in 1994 when new curriculum reform was enacted. It marked a shift from fairly strict accountability regime of the 1970s to high level of autonomy local authorities, schools and teachers had in organizing school activities, funding, education process and formulating the curriculum. Moreover, practices of inspection and external evaluations of schools and teachers were abolished altogether (Vitikka et al., 2012), encouraging independent assessment methods by teachers supporting their professional ethos. Although, there has never been a comprehensive national testing system in Finland (Niemi, Toom, & Kallioniemi, 2016), later, 2004 curriculum reform had a more centralized direction with a set of national criteria for student assessment, main guidelines and instructions for teaching practice (The Finnish National Board of Education, 2004). Analyzing this curriculum from public policy and management perspective, it can be considered the incarnation of “loose-tight principle” with “the coexistence of central firm direction and maximum individual autonomy” suggested by management gurus Peters and Waterman (Hoyle & Wallace, 2006). Although, curriculum in Finland education system, namely, the curriculum did not have a firm central direction, being a bit looser than that definition, it definitely granted teachers with maximum autonomy. Following this decade, the latest reform was introduced when the national core curriculum was published in 2014 and a school and municipality level curricular localization process was set in motion (Soini, Pietarinen, & Pyhältö, 2018). Apart from the officials at the Finnish National Agency for Education, each phase of planning this curriculum had in-service teachers as members.

The latest Finnish national core curriculum is dual in its formation as being both centralized and de-centralized, based on loose-tight principle mentioned above. While it sets framework for common objectives, values and structure of education, it also leaves space for stakeholders like educators, teachers, local NGOs as well as parents to participate in forming local curricula. National core curriculum is con-

sidered as a continuous dialogue which assisted professionals (teachers) to identify issues to be enhanced taking into account interests of all stakeholders, in the first place, students (Lähdemäki, 2019).

Overall, as Jenna Lähdemäki suggests, “over the course of the latest development cycle, the curriculum evolved from a fairly typical bureaucratic process to a leading example of co-created public policy” (Lähdemäki, 2019).

Teacher Autonomy in Finnish Educational System

Flexibility and autonomy provided to choose educational content, teaching and assessment methods encourage strong teacher professional identity, a phenomenon that is one of keys to Finnish success in education (Erss, 2015). Finland does not have external standardized testing system and rigorous inspection system of schools and teachers. Instead of these measures, it relies on professional accountability and expertise of teachers (Hargreaves, Halász, & Pont, 2008). Teachers enjoy immense degrees of trust by parents, local communities and wider society, in their exceptional high quality of teaching and ability to apply their professional discretion (OECD, 2010). This level of autonomy and trust is guaranteed by many factors, including, public policy on education. One of the policy aspects to be underlined is the 1979 decision of government to extend teacher preparation and training to university level, namely, Master’s degree programs (Haapaniemi et al., 2021). Subsequent to this, Finnish government decided to devolve increasing level of responsibility and authority for education from the Ministry of Education to local municipalities and schools (Sahlberg, 2011). These reforms mainly reflected growing Finnish skepticism of Western neoliberal ideology with implementation of rigorous accountability measures, inspection and decreased trust in public sector (Burton, 2013). Finland government focused on high quality teacher preparation as the means to replace strict inspection, which eventually guaranteed high school performance.

Indeed, national teacher preparation and training policy has been exceptionally successful in many aspects. First of all, teacher education in Finland is research-based, implying that besides becoming familiar with subject-specific pedagogy, educational theory and content, teachers are expected to write a research-based master’s thesis on an issue related to educational practice (Salokangas, Wermke, & Harvey, 2020). Secondly, teachers are prepared to diagnose students who have learning difficulties and tailoring their teaching styles to student needs (OECD, 2010). Therefore, this student-centered approach of learning gives

teachers autonomy to choose their own textbooks and design their own lessons where national core curriculum serves as a framework to be interpreted individually rather than a roadmap (Paradis, Lutovac, Jokikokko, & Kaasila, 2019). Last, but not least, teacher education involves having professional insight into such educational practice as student assessment. Educational policy in Finland prioritizes curriculum, teaching and learning over testing in tracking progress of students. Given the absence of external standardized assessment apart from National Matriculation Exam, teachers are trusted by municipalities, headmasters, local communities and parents, to assess students and help them grow and develop in a holistic way. Moreover, Finland does not have formal teacher evaluation just like formal student assessment, they merely receive feedback from their principal and their colleagues. Thus, as Sahlberg puts it, “teacher education curricula are designed to create a systematic pathway from the foundations of educational thinking, to educational research methodologies, and then on to more advanced fields of the educational sciences and each teacher thereby builds an understanding of the systemic nature of educational practice” (Sahlberg, 2011).

Challenges and Unintended Consequences of Teacher Autonomy as ‘Curriculum Designers’

There is no doubt that delegating the task of designing curriculum to teachers in local level has shifted “the certainty and constraints of nationally prescribed topics and themes to an environment of diversity in knowledge selections” (Ormond, 2017). However, there is a flip side of the coin that presents a different picture. First of all, according to (Hopmann, 2007), despite negative impacts of standardization and external control on teacher autonomy, “certain level of bureaucracy and steering is important to organize education in a mass schooling system”. From public policy perspective, it partially resonates with Max Weber’s view on bureaucracy, stating, bureaucracy constitutes an efficient way in which human activity can be organized and systematic hierarchies are necessary to maintain order (Serpa & Ferreira, 2019).

Secondly, although autonomy mostly means freedom from control, it can also be associated with uncertainty and fear. Namely, in Finnish context, case study conducted in several schools like Ritaharju and Simpele to research teacher autonomy after the enactment of National Core Curriculum of Finland in 2016 (Lähdemäki, 2019), indicated that some Finnish teachers hoped for some clarity, structure and guidance on which knowledge to choose, to keep balance between breadth and depth of knowledge in interpreting Na-

tional Core Curriculum. There was a considerable evidence of uncertainty associated with autonomy, in terms of choosing the content and topics for teaching.

Thirdly, although autonomy is regarded as an important feature of their work, Finnish teachers also highlighted greater challenge it brought in terms of having to spend great amount of time in interpreting curriculum objectives individually and planning the lessons accordingly. Moreover, numerous concerns about the increasing level of stress related to time-consuming nature of designing curriculum and assessment methods are also highlighted among Finnish school teachers in a comparative study conducted in Finnish and Swedish schools (Paulsrud & Wermke, 2020). It is paradoxical as opposing NPM agenda, imposing strict accountability regime and reducing teacher autonomy, also puts immense stress on teachers, who try to reach set exponential targets and objectives. On one hand, the absence of standardized external testing removes a lot of stress, but on the other, as an unintended consequence of teacher autonomy, arises the stress which comes along the responsibility of carrying out individual assessments.

Furthermore, high degree of teacher autonomy, free from external and formal control, can be subject to informal control by parents. Finnish teachers feel that parents are more and more involved and present in everyday life of schools, challenging the organization and teaching in the school (Webb et al., 2004). In the wake of rising parental expectations of teachers' responsibilities, parents start to exercise strong level of informal control, and teachers find themselves in a situation where they have to defend their professional integrity from parental interference (Salokangas et al., 2020).

Last, but not least, the concept of collegial autonomy, should notably be discussed, as it represents one of weaknesses of too much individual autonomy teachers exercise in Finland. The issue of independence individual teachers have, is commonly raised as a challenge among Finnish school teachers, specifically, when their colleagues apply "closed door policy" (Salokangas et al., 2020) and do not readily and actively engage with their fellow colleagues. As H. Janni put it, "the lack of a team-centric approach may well be seen as a byproduct of high teacher autonomy in Finland" (Haapaniemi et al., 2021).

It should also be highlighted that, the latest curriculum reform of 2014 highlights integrative learning as one of its core objectives, putting an emphasis on multidisciplinary learning, transversal competence-based approach of teaching, shifting away from traditional subject-centered curriculum. 2014 National Curriculum put a strong emphasis on

competence-based multidisciplinary approach in teaching where knowledge and skills from multiple subjects would be integrated to facilitate a synthesis of the subject being studied (Haapaniemi et al., 2021). This, as a matter of fact, was an important call for teacher collaboration, inter-professional learning and working. Obviously, these aims will not be reached without teachers working in collaboration, designing their teaching and assessment methods together which will prove challenging for Finnish teachers who are accustomed to doing everything independently relying on their own autonomy and professional discretion. Possible misuse of individual autonomy by opting out from collegial decision-making is an already observed phenomenon in Finnish school, data drawn from research conducted in Koivula School and Kuusikko School in Finland suggests (Salokangas et al., 2020). Therefore, this aspect of teacher autonomy, could be a topic for further and deeper investigation, especially, in the context of successful countries in education with high degree of autonomy.

CONCLUSION

This paper highlighted that teacher autonomy has always been a relevant topic in the field of education as one of the most important elements of professional identity, expression of professionalism and discretion both by theorists and educators themselves. These, in turn, can guarantee high level of job satisfaction and teacher commitment which significantly boosts teaching quality and student performance. Finland's case has been an evidence of an educational system which through multiple layers of decision-making has encouraged school and teacher autonomy in each level starting from resource allocation to curriculum, which was the focus of this paper. Although, policy making has played a great role in establishing firm bottom-up approach in ensuring teacher autonomy at school level, cultural context should not be underestimated given long-held respect and trust for teaching profession in the country.

It is true to say that strong teacher autonomy has been one of the pillars of strong educational outcomes and PISA success for Finland. However, simply copying Finnish style of policy-making in education for other countries may not easily work as effectively as in Finland. First and foremost, teacher autonomy is not only backed up by the government decisions and policies, namely, curriculum, but also it is embedded in the whole culture of teaching profession, teacher education, teacher training and professional development. In order to grant teacher autonomy, there should be a firm trust by schools, parents and local communities in teachers to use professional discretion. And the trust itself should

have a reason, in other words, foundation, in form of highly qualified teachers with immense background, preparation as well as practice. Therefore, educational policies should embrace all the aspects of teacher autonomy.

Secondly, countries with strong neoliberalism approaches and mechanisms already in place, in the field of education, should be cautious of unintended consequences of teacher autonomy, like increased workload and stress in terms of curriculum designing and self-assessment. Reducing control by regulatory bodies can result in informal control by parents and local communities.

Thirdly, Finnish education policy makers themselves, should also take into account the consequences of having too much individual autonomy for teachers as the evidence from several studies reveal its 'side effects'. As the latest Finnish curriculum underlines multidisciplinary learning and transversal competences, collaborative teaching, collegial autonomy and inter-professional learning are important to successfully translate curriculum policy into reality. However, as the case studies and research indicate, these

are serious weaknesses Finnish teachers have as a result of too much exposure to individual autonomy. Moreover, possible misuse of individual autonomy by opting out of collegial decision-making and other similar actions is an area that should be further studies and researched.

Last, but not least, as observed by OECD study (OECD, 2010) "what if the pendulum begins to swing back to more centralized control of schooling in Finland?". That is, what if other countries start to surpass Finland in PISA results, as there have been a decline in performance in PISA test in Finland, for instance, in 2018 (Ashman, 2020). Is it possible that the Finnish government will take the lead in centrally managing education and implement neoliberal policies like in most western European countries? These questions remain opened in the discourse of public policy and education as some evident drawbacks of teacher autonomy prove that it may be time for a different and more blended approach in decision-making power over education, namely, curriculum in schools.

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