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**TEACHER AUTONOMY IN FINNISH PRIMARY  
SCHOOLS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY  
ABOUT CLASS TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS**

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# ABSTRACT

Nguyen Thi Hong, Duyen: Teacher autonomy in Finnish primary school: An exploratory study about classroom teachers' perceptions.

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Recently researchers have shown an increased interest in teacher education. Theoretical perspectives on the concept exist abundantly in the literature, but empirical research into the views of teachers themselves has been very little.

This study explores how Finnish primary school teachers define teacher autonomy and their perceptions towards the influencing factors on their sense of autonomy during their teaching career. The sample of this study was 8 class teachers from three Finnish primary schools. The study was conducted using qualitative research method. Data were collected using semi-structured in-depth interview. Regarding data analysis, thematic research approach was applied

In seeking out teachers' perceptions of teacher autonomy, four broad themes emerged from the analysis. Overall, findings suggest that Finnish class teachers' conception of autonomy was similar in terms of the complex nature of the concept. In this study, autonomy entails autonomy inside classrooms and at the school level. With respect to their definitions, the teachers all incorporated into their understanding of teacher autonomy several key components. The results also show that teacher autonomy played an important role in teaching profession and that not only was teacher autonomy beneficial to teachers themselves, but also to their students. Moreover, six major interrelated factors were perceived to influence their autonomy by the interviewed teachers. Last but not least, this study concludes with highlighting the importance of autonomy in teacher training programs and some theoretical and practical implications are proposed.

Keywords: Teacher autonomy, perceptions, class teacher, primary schools, Finland.

The originality of this thesis has been checked using the Turnitin OriginalityCheck service.

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# **1 INTRODUCTION**

## **1.1 Background and motivation**

Teacher autonomy has attracted attention among educational scholars and practitioners on a global scale. For a few decades now, teachers' professional autonomy has been a subject of heated debates within educational field in many different countries (Higham and Earley, 2013).

It is noteworthy that Finnish education system has received global attention due to its high-performing education system, especially due to its high performance in the PISA study (Carlgren, 2009). According to Simola (2005), among all the contributing factors to the PISA great success such as Finnish teachers' highly respected status and high-quality teacher education program, teachers' high degree of autonomy has been highlighted as a deciding factor in this regard. This is why this study has an interest in an in-depth investigation of the phenomenon of teacher autonomy in Finland.

## **1.2 Purpose and significance of study**

Teacher autonomy has been a question of great interest among researchers, scholars and practitioners over the past two decades (Wilches, 2007). Notably, throughout the literature, a considerable number of different definitions have been used to conceptualize this phenomenon. Even though the significance of teacher autonomy has been emphasized and abundantly studied, a key issue with research on teacher autonomy is that there is no common agreement about how the construct should be conceptualized and how it should be measured.

Previous teacher autonomy studies have mainly focused on three issues. The first collection explores teachers' perception and beliefs of their personal autonomy in the context of enormous school reforms. Its attempt was to study teacher sense of autonomy construct and its measurements. Specifically, a number of studies in this group were devoted to design and validate different tools for investigating and evaluating the level of autonomy that teachers perceive they have (Wilson, 1993; Friedman, 1999). The instruments attempt to measure teacher autonomy by evaluating

teachers' personal feelings regarding their autonomy. Each tool includes a set of questions related to the conceptualization of autonomy construct. Participants are asked to respond based on a given scale. Each tool has its own strengths and weaknesses. The strong point of one instrument can be the weak points of another. Obviously, there is a diversity in the approach to the measurement of teacher autonomy. Therefore, the instrument varies in their conceptualizations of the construct. For this group of studies, teacher autonomy was conceptualized as teachers' personal sense of autonomy. Researchers traditionally relied solely on quantitative methods to measure this construct.

Secondly, a majority of research studies the relationship between teacher autonomy and other constructs: learners' autonomy, prominently in the context of language education (Little, 1995; Lamb, Reinders & ebrary, 2007); teachers' job commitment and satisfaction (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005); salary, levels of stress and workload (Pearson & Hall, 1993; Pearson, 1995). To be more specific, autonomy is a desirable right that the society seeks to develop in children. As a result, teacher autonomy is also naturally important due to the strong consensus that it is a fundamental foundation upon which learner autonomy flourishes (Little, 1995). For instance, the findings from a mixed-method research conducted by Awang-Hashim et al., 2017 in Malaysian classroom context concluded that teachers' characteristics, their teaching and motivating style are significant indicators for students becoming autonomous learners. Likewise, Niemiec & Ryan, 2009 suggested that teachers' support of students' need for autonomy fosters "students' autonomous self-regulation for learning, academic performance, and well-being". Regarding job satisfaction and commitment, Perie and Baker (1997) confirmed that teacher autonomy is one of the workplace conditions that has a positive link with teachers' job satisfaction regardless of the nature of the school contexts (i.e. private versus public) and school level (i.e. elementary or secondary) and regardless of teachers' backgrounds. They indicated that teachers who perceive that they have higher autonomy show higher level of job satisfaction than those who feel the opposite. Similarly, Rosenholtz and Simpson's research (1990) studied the impact of workplace environments upon teachers' commitment regardless of stages of their professional careers and emphasized that task autonomy is among the highest correlations of teachers' job commitment.

Thirdly, it has also been of interest to conduct research on comparing and describing perceived autonomy between teachers in various countries. These are important inquiries. Numerous studies have tried to link, compare teachers' perceived professional autonomy by conducting comparative analysis between different national contexts (Helgøy, & Homme, 2007; Wermke, Olason Rick & Salokangas, 2018; Erss, 2018; Erss, Kalmus, & Autio, 2016; Andréasson & Wermke, 2018). This

group of studies takes a comparative perspective on teacher autonomy in order to discuss the similarities and differences among teachers in various national settings. Among the many empirical results from this literature, it has been noted that context plays an important role in teachers' viewpoints on their autonomy.

The review above shows some research gaps as follows. Firstly, generally speaking, dominant studies devoted to teacher autonomy are usually either quantitative research or use the concept as a secondary focus (e.g., Fachrurrazi, 2017). For example, a majority of research on teacher autonomy literature investigates students' benefits (Awang-Hashim et al., 2017; Kaplan, 2018). Secondly, it could be seen from the review that the significance of teacher autonomy has been emphasized and abundantly studied; nonetheless, only a small number of studies have examined teachers' perceptions about their autonomy. Yet, few, if any, have directly dealt with classroom teachers in primary schools (teachers who teach in grades 1-6). In Finnish primary school context, class teachers are normally assigned to one grade and teach several subjects. Such studies, however, mainly focus on comparing teachers' perceived autonomy in different national contexts (Wermke & Forsberg, 2017, Paulsrud & Wermke, 2018, Paradis et al. 2018).

Besides, this study argues that teacher autonomy is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon and is contextually contingent (Wermke & Salokangas, 2015, Paulsrud & Wermke, 2018; Callan & ebrary, 1988). In other words, how teachers feel about their autonomy is more diverse and fluid in nature, which might go beyond what quantitative methods can actually measure. Therefore, for this study, qualitative method is chosen by the researcher as it furthers the understanding of teacher autonomy concept in more depth, as well as from different dimensions, that the use of statistical analyses such as surveys cannot explain (Merriam, 2009). To the best of the researcher's knowledge, there are currently no studies that address how Finnish teachers at primary school level make sense of the notion of teacher autonomy. Unfortunately, there can be conceptual distinction between the theoretical frameworks and teachers' self-perceptions of teacher autonomy through their experience and practice. It has been noted that teachers' beliefs are very important. Not only do they determine how teachers perceive of teacher autonomy but they also play essential role in shaping teachers' actual practices. This provides the rationale for the attempt of conducting research on this matter.

This thesis is significant in that it contributes to the existing body of literature of teacher autonomy by gaining insights into the mindset of classroom teachers themselves and exploring the



perspectives of teachers about what teacher autonomy means to them in Finnish primary school context. This will in turn provide significant information when future studies on teacher autonomy are conducted in other contexts. It is also anticipated that it will add in-depth perspectives to the literature of autonomy among classroom teachers in Finnish primary schools and its influence on their teaching profession.

This study involved face-to-face individual interviews of primary school teachers in Tampere. This research was necessary to understand how teacher autonomy was perceived among primary school teachers through the actual experiences of the interviewed participants.

### **1.3 Research objectives and research questions**

The purpose of this study is to explore classroom teachers' perceptions in Finnish primary schools about their autonomy. More specifically, the main research questions guiding the current study are as follows:

1. How do Finnish class teachers perceive teacher autonomy?
2. What are the perceived factors that foster/ hinder teacher autonomy?

### **1.4 Thesis outline**

This thesis is divided into 6 chapters. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the research study, also it introduces the focus of the research. The purpose of the study and its significance are also highlighted in this chapter. In addition, the gap in the literature has been identified. Chapter 2 presents the synthesis of relevant literature on teacher autonomy. It also includes the theoretical framework of the study. Additionally, chapter 2 presents and discusses the key concepts that are related to teacher autonomy. This will be followed by chapter 3 where more detailed description of the research methods will be provided. Specifically, in chapter 3, the followings will be presented: the information of methodological background, data source, sample, primary analysis method and analysis procedure. In chapter 4, the findings obtained from the analysis will be presented in details. In chapter 5, the findings are summarized and further implications are discussed. Finally, limitations and recommendations for future research are addressed.



## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

As can be seen in the introduction section of this thesis, many studies on teacher autonomy offers comprehensive theoretical and conceptual frameworks. However, little empirical research has been conducted to understand how teacher autonomy was perceived among primary school teachers through their actual experiences. Therefore, the current study will help fill the gap. But first and foremost, it is essential to look into the concept of teacher autonomy and related concepts. The literature review begins with the concept of autonomy. Then, it will focus on the teacher autonomy. In section 2.1 the historical background and diversified nature of the concept of autonomy is reviewed starting from its philosophical and political roots. Different ways of conceptualization of teacher autonomy will be also discussed in section 2.2. Similarly, section 2.3 presents several aspects of the construct, indicating its multidimensional nature. Finally, summary of the literature chapter will be presented in the last section.

### 2.1 Autonomy

Autonomy is a very complex and important concept in various fields throughout the literature. Historically, the concept of autonomy arised in western moral and political philosophy (Parker, 2015). Autonomy is regarded as a basic moral and political value of any individual in the western tradition. The term autonomy originated from ancient Greek term *autonomos*, *autos* meaning “self” and *nomos* meaning “rule, law or government” (autonomy, 2018; Sneddon, A., 2013; Castle, K., 2006). During the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the most influential autonomy theorist is Immanuel Kant who established the foundation for the modern view of autonomy.

In addition, the idea of moral autonomy was developed by Kant. (Formosa, P., 2013; Sensen & ebrary, 2013). He defined autonomy as a property of the will of every rational being that is not subject to the governance of any external authority or standards or bound by any principles (Reath, 2006). According to Kant, one is autonomous only when his actions and choices are not influenced by any external factors but solely directed by his rationality and his own laws (Reath, 2006; Sensen, 2013;2012; Sneddon, 2013). However, Kant also held that the autonomy of moral agents had to be

universally valid. This means that certain ‘universal’ principles and norms are still adopted by the moral agents and guide their actions. He also asserted that autonomy has both a negative and positive aspect. Therefore, in his conception of autonomy, Kant contrasted autonomy with heteronomy - being ruled by others (Sneddon, 2013). Nevertheless, Kant’s account of autonomy has attracted quite many critics and controversies.

In the review of literature, several distinctions have been made inside the concept of autonomy. This is due to the fact that the term has different interpretations when functioning in a variety of fields. For example, existing in the literature are moral autonomy, political autonomy and personal (individual) autonomy. In liberal political context, autonomy theorists use the term political autonomy to refer to the capability to participate in political institutions and exercise political rights such as voting (Sneddon, 2013). Moral autonomy, as mentioned above, refers to the capability to govern oneself, to act, reflect and choose on the basis of one’s own moral standards and without the manipulation of external forces. In analysis of Kant’s theory, Sneddon (2013) developed a detailed theory of personal autonomy. He proposed that personal autonomy consists of two components: self-knowledge and self-shape. Self-knowledge assumes that “the more one knows about one’s own nature, the more autonomous a person one will be” (Sneddon, 2013, p.50). Sneddon added that self-knowledge also involves knowledge about other sources, not just about oneself. Another closely related component with self-knowledge is self-shaping. In Sneddon’s view, “to shape oneself is to exercise control directly over one’s identity” (Sneddon, 2013, p.59). According to this theory, without self-knowledge, it is impossible to exercise control over ourselves, our choices and our identities (Sneddon, 2013, p.71). It can be observed that the notion of “self-governance” and “self-rule” (Epright, 2010) is visible throughout the earlier literature on autonomy and that being politically originated from the ancient Greece, the concept of autonomy has evolved considerably over time.

Within social theory in the contemporary period, autonomy is referred to as a multi-faceted, contradictory concept and variably manifested in different fields of study (Pitt, 2010; Benson, 2013). For example, autonomy has been one of the key concepts in the literature of language teaching and learning for over four decades (Lamb, Reinders, & ebrary, 2007; Al-Busaidi & Al-Busaidi, 2014). According to Benson (2007), the rise of literature on autonomy in the area of language education traced back to the mid-1970s when a vast number of books, articles and journals have been published around the world. The significance of autonomy in language education has been highlighted both in western and eastern world (Ivanovska, 2015). The notion of

autonomy in the context of language education is often represented as a learner-centered approach (Al-Busaidi & Al-Busaidi, 2014; Bajrami, 2015). The concept of autonomy mostly refers to a particular kind of autonomy which is learner autonomy. Therefore, research on autonomy in the field remains mostly focused on learner autonomy which has been widely recognized as a desirable goal for all learners in language learning and teaching (Ciekanski, 2007; Hu & Zhang, 2017; Manzano Vázquez, 2018; Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019).

Many scholars and researchers have frequently discussed the characteristic traits of autonomous learners from different perspectives (Holec, 1980; Oxford, 2015). In language education, several attempts have been made to define the concept of autonomy. There are different definitions and views in the literature regarding learner autonomy. However, a general and widespread consensus has been achieved. The core of learner autonomy is based on learners “ability” and “willingness” to “make choices”; “take charge of”, “control over”, or “responsibility for” their own learning (Holec, 1980; Little, 1995; Littlewood, 1996; Pemberton, 1996; Benson, 2007; Oxford, 2015). There are different important aspects of one’s language learning that autonomous learners have to be able to hold responsible for, namely, “determining the objectives”, “defining the contents and progressions”, “selecting methods and techniques to be used”, “monitoring the procedure of acquisition properly speaking (rhythm,time, place, etc.)”, “evaluating what has been acquired” (Pemberton, Toogood, & Barfield, 2009, Benson, 2007; Benson, 2013). Benson (2007, p. 23) argues that the missing point is there have been several attempts figuring out the qualities of autonomous learners and what they are capable of doing, but they do not clearly describe how to do autonomously. Since the late 1990s, the concept of autonomy has been operationalized as a matter of degree progressing between low and high level (Benson, 2007, p. 24). It has been suggested that autonomy in language learning includes control over three areas of the teaching and learning: “learning management, cognitive processing and the learning content” (Benson, 2007).

In the large body of learner autonomy literature, the idea of learner autonomy has been associated with teacher autonomy for a very long time. Specifically, the mutually supportive relationship between teacher autonomy and learner autonomy has been strongly highlighted (Little, 1995; Littlewood, 1999; Manzano Vázquez, 2018; Mello, Dutra, & Jorge, 2008). Even though previous language education literature has reached the conclusion that learner autonomy is highly dependent on teacher autonomy, the idea of teacher autonomy being produced from learner autonomy literature and has not yet been widely discussed. Therefore, there are not any definitions that capture the inclusive nature of teacher autonomy in language education research. Most of the

attempts on defining teacher autonomy are based on the relationship and its essential influence on the development of learner autonomy (Benson, 2010; Bajrami, 2015). The most classical definition of teacher autonomy suggests that teacher autonomy is “the capacity, freedom, and/or responsibility to make choices concerning one’s own teaching” (Aoki, 2002, p. 111 as cited in Benson, 2007, p. 31). But this definition was unfortunately found to be somewhat “problematic” by the author himself because it doesn’t claim any relevance regarding that teachers with autonomy have the capacity to foster the development of the autonomy in their learners. Collectively, teacher autonomy has recently been understood as an ability to professionally promote learner autonomy, and the willingness to actively engage in this process beyond the walls of the classroom (Benson, 2007; Benson, 2010).

In health care setting especially the nursing literature, autonomy is also of significance and because it’s one of the four key elements of ethical care practice. The literature also reflects that autonomy is desirable and difficult to achieve due to bureaucracies. The existing literature reveals that there is a lack of consensus on the meaning of this ethical concept (Ballou, 1998, p. 102). Thus, a wide variety of definitions are evident in the literature. For example, Epright, 2010 defined autonomy as ““a law onto oneself” — to be self-ruling, to participate in self-governance. In practice, it is the notion that rational, adult persons must be permitted to determine for themselves what they ought to value and to exercise self-determination for their self-regarding actions — that is, for any action that impacts only his or her self.” (p. 800). Through a systematic review of the concept of autonomy in the nursing literature, Ballou (1998) viewed autonomy as “being self-governing”. She also put forward a definition which the researcher believes reflects the core meaning of this complex concept: “autonomy is the capacity of an agent to determine its own actions through independent choice within a system of principles and laws to which the agent is dedicated.” (Ballou, 1998, p. 105).

Taken together, throughout the theoretical, philosophical, and empirical literature on autonomy, it is obvious that there are conflicts, mismatches or overlaps between aforementioned definitions in different fields and that a diversity of viewpoints on what autonomy entails. The researcher attempts to find the common grounds that they all nearly share with one another. Generally, there are a certain number of themes that are central to the concept of autonomy in the literature. They are self-governance, self-control, professional capability, decision-making, responsibility, self-reflection, freedom and choice within a system of rules and principals. The researcher shall regard these words as defining attributes of the same concept - autonomy. Thus, it should be kept in

mind that several dominant features of autonomy remain similar among various research studies when literature review is being investigated.

## **2.2 Conceptualization of teacher autonomy**

Teacher autonomy has been a one of the most interesting topics for research among researchers in educational field for decades. This section of the study presents conceptual frameworks to define teacher autonomy. In this chapter, previous research concerning the concept of teacher autonomy has been intensively searched and explored by the researcher so as to obtain both in-depth and broad understanding of how teacher autonomy can be conceptualized. Existing literature offers a wide variety of definitions for this concept (Vangrieken, Grosemans, Dochy, & Kyndt, 2017; Pearson & Moomaw, 2005; Usma Wilches, 2007). Teacher autonomy plays a key role in language education as well as in general education.

As mentioned earlier, in the context of language education, teacher autonomy has been closely connected with learner autonomy. Several scholars have greatly contributed towards the definition of teacher autonomy in language education. Firstly, it was David Little (1995) who highlighted the interdependence between learner autonomy and teacher autonomy in different contexts such as schools, colleges and universities. He emphasized that learners cannot strive to nurture a sense of responsibility for their learning by themselves without teachers' help. In other words, in classroom practice, teacher autonomy is the starting point and also precondition for the development of learner autonomy (Little, 1995, p. 179). He also suggested a definition of teacher autonomy in the area of second language teaching as “a strong sense of having personal responsibility for their teaching, exercising via continuous reflection and analysis the highest possible degree of affective and cognitive control of the teaching process, and exploiting the freedom that it confers” (Little, 1995, p. 179). Later, in 1996, William Littlewood provided a conceptual framework for autonomy which is composed of two essential elements: “ability” and “willingness”. The former refers to the capacity for independent decision-making. This entails necessary knowledge and skills to exercise independent choices. The latter depends on two elements of motivation and confidence. Lacking either of these two does not enable learners to perform autonomously and effectively. He also held that these components are distinctive by nature but closely linked at the same time (p. 428). Within the same line of thought, Jing Huang defines teacher autonomy as “teachers' willingness, capacity and freedom to take control of their own teaching and learning” (Huang, 2005, p.4 as cited in Usma

Wilches, 2007, p. 248). This definition is considered to be the most recent and comprehensive in the case of applied linguistics. Generally speaking, teacher autonomy has been defined from different aspects.

Likewise, in general education, the concept of teacher autonomy has been variously defined due to the fact that different scholars tend to include one aspect and exclude the others (Usma Wilches, 2017, p. 247). Also, there is a tendency to regard teacher autonomy as a workplace condition (Rosenholtz & Simpson, 1990, p.244; Clement & Vandenberghe, 2000, p. 81). Teacher autonomy similarly appears to be one of the ideal job conditions teachers strongly desire. The definition of teacher autonomy varies in the literature and there is terminological confusion. This shows that a variety of viewpoints being held among scholars and researchers. For some authors, teacher autonomy is conceptualized as “the perception that teachers have with regard to whether they have the ability to control over their work environment” (Pearson & Hall, 1993, p. 173; Pearson, 1998, p.35). This definition highlighted teachers’ subjective sense of freedom and power to perform instructional tasks and professional activities. Pearson’s viewpoint resonates with those of other researchers (e.g. Friedman, 1999). From this perspective, teacher professional autonomy refers to an internal sense of freedom. It is represented as a “process of building a sense of personal identity as professionals in conjunction with the interests of the educational community” (Usma Wilches, 2007, p. 247).

Nevertheless, what seems to be autonomy to one teacher may be referred as isolation by another. Not everyone understands teacher autonomy in the same way. Anderson (1987) and other scholars viewed the concept of autonomy in relation with teacher isolation and independence as a direct result of how schools as a system are organized, excluding coordination by definition. Friedman (1999, p. 59) cited the work of Chauvin and Ellet (1993) and Charters (1974) who developed notable scales for measuring teacher autonomy, namely Attitudes of Professional Autonomy (APA) and Sense of Autonomy Scale (SAS) respectively. These authors conceptualized teacher autonomy mainly with regard to freedom from governance or influence of external forces such as school administration, colleagues, parents and students, etc. Under certain formal structure of schools, teacher autonomy may be viewed as a means to gain substantial freedom from external pressures and control. Teachers tend to work in isolation in close-doored classrooms, which results in the lack of professional collaboration with their colleagues and inconsistencies in educational goal planning and implementation (Anderson, 1987, p. 359). Teacher autonomy is sometimes thought as total independence from parents, students or complete isolation from educational communities.



This reflects the fact that teachers and academics fail to distinguish the construct of teacher autonomy from independence or isolation (Chirkov et al. 2003). According to Usma Wilches (2007), while isolation implies “being apart from others” and independence refers to “doing things by oneself and not relying on others”, autonomy means “to act freely, with a sense of volition and choice” (Deci, 1995, p.89). According to this viewpoint, autonomous teachers are those who view themselves as self-reliant professionals and work alone behind their individual classroom doors with no willingness to be coordinated or controlled. As a consequence, very often, indeed, teachers tend to label coordination as a threat to their autonomy. This dominant conceptualization of teacher autonomy is based on Murray’s work in 1938, *Explorations in Personality*, where the author defined autonomy as “To resist influence or coercion; to defy an authority or to seek freedom in a new place. To strive for independence”(p. 82). This conception of autonomy was referred to as a “reactive autonomy” (Koestner & Losier, 1996, p. 468). According to Koestner & Losier (1996), reactive conception towards teacher autonomy demonstrates the orientation of being resistant to external influences. In other words, it focuses on an interpersonal aspect of autonomy.

The contemporary trend towards collaboration in educational settings does challenge the aforementioned viewpoint. According to self-determination theory perspective on teacher autonomy, Deci and Ryan (1985) state that “to be autonomous means to behave with a sense of volition, willingness, and congruence; it means to fully endorse and concur with the behaviour one is engaged in”. The work of Deci and Ryan (1985), *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*, has led to a newer conceptualization of teacher autonomy. The more recent conception of teacher autonomy is described as “reflective autonomy”. In contrast with reactive attitude, reflective conceptualization defines teacher autonomy in terms of intrapersonal processes (Koestner & Losier, 1996, p. 468). This sense of autonomy makes reference to teachers having the capacity to take decisions in line with their own values and interests. This approach entails a personal sense of ownership and originality of actions. As Koestner & Losier described, “autonomous actions and choices are those that partly result from committed self-reflections of options and attentive considerations of one’s values and needs, rather than from reflexive opposition to any outside influence” (p. 467). This description does not narrowly define teacher autonomy in terms of negative resistance to external governance on actions nor does it exclude working with others. But it calls attention to a sense of choicefulness in one’s own actions and behaviours. Vangrieken et al. (2017) presented an alternative view that disentangles the tensions between the notions of autonomy and collaboration. The authors confirmed that autonomy operates

as a facilitating factor for successful teacher collaboration. Within this line of thought, teacher autonomy necessarily involves shared “decision-making and freedom to make professional choices” (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005, p. 37; Vangrieken et al. 2017, p. 304). Similarly, in 2017, Usma Wilches suggested that teacher autonomy should be better perceived as a personal sense of freedom to execute professional actions towards school matters, discretion within limits of the school community, interdependence and support (p. 254). Therefore, it can be concluded that teacher autonomy does not refer to either isolation or total independence. Hence, from this reflective perspective, teacher autonomy demonstrates freedom to make choices in accordance with one’s own authentic interests, values or desires. Stated differently, these authors define teacher autonomy in terms of a reflective evaluation of any outside influence within the framework of social interaction, along with one’s own values, feelings and desires.

From a review of teacher autonomy literature, it is obvious that the definition of teacher autonomy is far either from straightforward or concrete. A variety of definitions and interpretations of teacher autonomy are put forward through time. Throughout the literature, there have been some changes in the conceptualization of teacher autonomy from interpersonal perspective to intrapersonal one (Koestner & Losier, 1996, p. 468). This demonstrates the definitions of teacher autonomy have constantly evolved over the years (Parker, 2015; Wilches, 2007).

In this study, the researcher contends that respective attitude towards teacher autonomy induces negative feelings among teachers themselves and pushing them away from others. It should also be noted that this approach fails to account for the fact that teaching and learning is an activity of negotiation and interaction within a social framework. As Little (1995) asserted “total independence is not autonomy but autism” (p. 178). And Wermke et al., (2014) argued that teacher autonomy does not simply mean freedom. Not to mention the absence of external influencing factors is impossible as these external influences such as curriculum, school organization structures and pedagogical limitations are inherently parts of the teaching profession (Wermke & Höstfält, 2014, p. 60). Moreover, Wilches (2007) argued that having more abilities to make decisions does not result in higher perceived sense of teacher autonomy without adequate professional competence, sufficient support and other favourable conditions. One excellent example for this can be found in a research study by Bjork (2004) exploring local responses to curricular reform in Indonesian education context. He found that school-based actors including teachers rarely have a comprehensive understanding of how to read and interpret the educational decentralization policies. As a result, the implementation of policies is either incomplete or inaccurate at the local level. Even

though local educators are empowered and supported to increase their autonomy, many teachers are still hesitant to take actions autonomously and chose conform to the national directives instead. This was due to the lack of support and assistance provided by the national authorities. Also, it was because of the traditional core culture of the education system conflicting with the new vision drafted that teachers failed to embrace the role of autonomous educators. Therefore, the researcher argues that the traditional conception of teacher autonomy does not give enough consideration to the complexities of this phenomenon as a social construct.

Reflective conceptualization, notwithstanding, concerns the way teachers interpret the situations and make choices on an adaptive and responsible basis to regulate their behaviours. This cannot take place without teachers' awareness of their own values, needs and beliefs, and of course, in conjunction with the institutions' rules and regulations. In order to realize autonomy, teachers first need to genuinely reflect on their own wants, desires and so on and then take an evaluative stance towards them and finally act in accord with them. According to reflective standpoint, teachers can still be fully autonomous while relying on the advice of others; at the same time, they can easily fail to act autonomously even when rejecting such recommendations. To give a concrete example, a qualitative study conducted by Clement & Vandenberghe (2000) suggested that there is a close relationship between autonomy and collegiality in schools. And this relation can be shaped with great openness, either positively or negatively, depending on the structural design of the organizations. Simply put, in order to cooperate efficiently, teachers need to work individually sometimes and, vice versa, in order to work autonomously efficiently, teachers need to cooperate sometimes. In other words, it is all about teachers managing the extent to which they can exercise their autonomy to determine their behaviours in response to social influence. Therefore, teacher autonomy can vary under different working conditions and educational settings. Importantly, it has been also shown that teachers still play a proactive role in this conceptualization of autonomy.

In a review of more than thirty conceptual and empirical research studies on teacher autonomy, Wilches (2007) put forward a clear definition of teacher autonomy as follows:

Teacher autonomy can be conceptualized as the perceived and actual capacity to exercise control over teaching and assessment, curriculum development, school functioning, or professional development matters, within the limits of the educational goals accepted by the school community. (p. 269)

According to this definition, teacher autonomy is described as a personal sense of freedom to determine teachers' own behaviors, it also involves teachers' professional competence in order to exert their autonomy. The statement takes into consideration the relationships among teachers' personal factors and social-cultural contexts that might have a significant impact on teacher autonomy. It also implies that such freedom to make decisions exists within and is constrained by larger social relations and political conditions.

Hereafter, in this study, the researcher would specifically use this definition as a foundation for later analysis. Based on Wilches' conceptualization, the researcher takes the position that the nature of teacher autonomy means both the capacity to make and take personal responsibility for one's actions based on one's inner values, needs and interests. It is to some extent characterized by reflectively evaluating the external social influences. Therefore, under whatsoever external influences, teachers with autonomy will still be able to adapt and determine their work processes. This way of looking at teacher autonomy considers the balance between teachers' personal preferences and the specific requirements of educational contexts. In the present study, Deci and Ryan's (1985) conceptualization of autonomy is used as a broader framework.

In summary, teacher autonomy can be viewed from various perspectives depending on factors such as context and culture. Since there is no such thing as a culture-free environment, careful attention needs to be paid to the context of schools as a social system that teacher autonomy is being investigated (Pearson & Moomaw, 2006, p. 50).

## **2.3 Teacher autonomy: a multidimensional construct**

As discussed above, there appears to be a lot of conceptual variations concerning teacher autonomy. Marilyn Friedman (2003) once stated, "autonomy is a controversial value, prized by some but scorned by others" (p. 01). Also, the previous body of research confirms that teacher autonomy is of complex nature. Throughout the literature, teacher autonomy has been studied from various theoretical and methodological perspectives. Despite the difficulties in reaching agreement on a definition, a vast majority of researchers agree that teacher autonomy is not a purely black and white issue but it has multifacets (Strong and Yoshida, 1994; Wilches 2007; Wermke, et al., 2017). According to the literature, several scholars have attempted to identify several aspects of the construct.

In an attempt to create a reliable and valid instrument to measure teacher autonomy, Pearson and Hall (1993) concluded that “teacher autonomy is not a single trait but it is composed of two dimensions: general teaching autonomy and curricular autonomy” (p. 176). The former entails “selection of activities and materials and classroom standards of conduct; while the latter includes instructional planning and sequencing and personal on-the-job decision making” (Pearson and Hall, 1993). As indicated in these studies, the general teaching autonomy meets the needs of teachers to be able to develop critical thinking skills and creativity. In addition, curricular autonomy provides teachers with the opportunity to have flexibility and ability to make decisions on matters concerning their teaching and student learning. The authors also confirmed that if these needs are fulfilled, it will keep teachers remaining in the teaching profession and also promote their job satisfaction and motivation (p. 117). In 2006, Carolyn Pearson and William Moomaw conducted another study to validate the Teaching Autonomy Scale designed by Pearson and Hall (1993). The results of this study replicated the earlier study and supported the two theoretical dimensions of the teacher autonomy construct.

Sharing the same view on the multi-dimensional character of teacher autonomy, Wermke, et al., (2017), however, depicted from a governance perspective. The researchers in this study believe that teaching profession mainly involves the balance between teachers’ pedagogical work and the expectations and constraints dictated by local and national authorities. Thus, they propose a different dual dimensionality of the phenomenon which is institutional dimension and service dimension. The authors argue that institutional aspect refers autonomy as “a characteristic of teachers as professionals”, whereas service dimension is viewed as the autonomy that individual teacher has inside classrooms and also schools. More specifically, service dimension of teacher autonomy refers to what happens inside the classrooms and schools in relation with colleagues and pupils; institutional aspect focuses on the relation to other stakeholders inside and outside the schools. This perspective views schools as a complicated social system that has multiple actors, which in some aspects also can have positive or negative effects on one another’s autonomy. It is important to point out that teacher autonomy is seen in the relation between teacher’s pedagogical practice and its governance.

Similarly, Friedman (1999) found that teachers function at school on two fundamental areas: the pedagogical and institutional. She made a big contribution to this part of the literature by categorizing teacher autonomy into four different domains, namely, “curriculum development, teaching and assessment, professional development, and school functioning” Friedman (1999).

Friedman also agreed that teacher autonomy is not simply being against pressures exerted on the individual teachers, but rather it is a means for teachers to advance their personal and professional capability “to adapt to” the rapidly “changing conditions and situations” in schools (Friedman, 1999, p. 60). It is evident, as discussed above, that teacher autonomy consists of both pedagogical as well as organizational facet. This is important because pedagogical component has been more emphasized in the literature.

Another important characteristic of teacher autonomy is that it is not a finite matter but it has different, more or less, autonomous forms (Friedman, 2003, p.07; Wermke & Höstfält, 2014, p. 67). This can be referred to as an autonomous continuum (Wermke, et al., 2017, p. 157). This continuum is perceived as the degree of autonomy. Likewise, Helgøy & Homme (2007) argued that professional autonomy is a dynamic and relative concept which is subjective to internal and external pressures (p. 233). According to Wermke & Höstfält (2014), teacher autonomy can be described as situating on a “continuum” ranging from restricted at one end, extended at the opposite end and varying depths in between.

Based on the studies above, it is quite apparent that teacher autonomy is a complex construct by its nature. It is to some extent characterized by the relation between teachers’ work as professionals inside the classroom and their reliance on organizational particularities provided by the state governance. This has been referred as a dilemma that frames teachers’ scope of action in reaction to the contextuality of the profession depending on “time and space” (Wermke & Höstfält, 2014).

In sum, the literature review shows that teacher autonomy is a multi-faceted phenomenon that involves several aspects including psychological, philosophical, cultural, political and sociological. That being the case, teacher autonomy should be studied from a wide theoretical framework and different angles.

## **2.4 Summary**

The above chapter included a critical synthesis of the literature regarding the concept of autonomy and teacher autonomy. However, the lacking factor in it all is research conducted on the primary teachers’ perceptions of teacher autonomy in Finnish school settings, particularly elementary level. Therefore, this study will provide the research necessary in order the fill this gap in the literature.

# 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Teacher autonomy has increasingly received a large amount of attention, reasons for which were discussed earlier in the previous section when defining the term. The present study is exploratory in nature. This chapter presents the research design and context of the study. In addition to this, the rationale for choosing specific methods for data collection and data analysis will be discussed. Finally, it describes the procedure of data collection and data analysis.

## 3.1 Research questions

As the main aim of this study is to investigate teachers' perceptions of their professional autonomy, qualitative methodology has to be adopted. With this purpose, as previously mentioned in section 1.3, two main research questions are constructed to guide the present study:

1. How do Finnish class teachers perceive teacher autonomy?
2. What are the perceived factors that foster/ hinder teacher autonomy?

## 3.2 Methodological background

As seen in the literature, teacher autonomy is a very complex and dynamic construct. Hence, the researcher decided to use qualitative methodology to answer the research questions for this study. Qualitative research design has also been used in research on teacher autonomy by other researchers including a study by Erss, Kalmus & Autio (2016) and Paradis et al., (2018). The researcher was also aware of and considered the alternative approach. However, the researcher would argue that how individual teachers understand and experience professional autonomy might vary depending on both personal and organizational factors. As Parker (2015) argued, it is critical to study teachers' perceptions as their views may be affected by contextual and personal factors within the same educational situation. In addition, in a research reviewed by Wilches (2007) emphasized that teacher autonomy needs to be analyzed from both subjective and objective levels. Thus, qualitative paradigm was utilized in order to deeply study the experiences, normative perceptions and beliefs of primary school teachers in Finland in terms of teacher professional autonomy. Additionally, the vast majority of studies on teacher autonomy have been quantitative.

Not to mention that much of the teacher autonomy research has focused on identifying and evaluating autonomy in relation with other constructs or from a comparative standpoint. Therefore, there is a need to conduct a qualitative research studying teachers' perceptions specifically in primary school context in Finland.

The present research is qualitative in nature. Specifically, in the present research study, to gain insights into teachers' understandings, beliefs and experiences of teacher autonomy in primary school settings, individual in-depth interviews of participants were implemented. In this study, semi-structured interview was employed as the primary method to collect data. Interviewing is valuable in gaining meaningful in-depth data which is what the researcher is focused on achieving. Further description of data collection is presented in section 3.4.

Given the fact that the main objective of this research is to investigate the perceptions of teachers about their professional autonomy, the researcher decided to utilize the thematic analysis method for data analysis. By nature, researchers regard thematic analysis as a theoretically flexible method for analyzing data in qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thus, it provides the researcher a chance to interpret and describe the data in rich details.

### **3.3 Participants**

The study consisted of 8 teachers from 3 primary schools in the city of Tampere, Finland. The participants were selected based on convenient sampling method. Out of 8 interviewees, there are 7 females and 1 male. Each of the participant was selected for the interviews based on certain criteria: They are Finnish classroom teachers in primary school level (grade 1 to 6), they are willing to participate in the study and they are willing to be interviewed in English. Participants' teaching experience ranges from 3 to 21 years. Most of the participants have taught in another school before the current school. All participating teachers are Finnish teachers who completed their teacher training in Finland. The teachers are working in 3 different primary schools in Finland. In total, data collection took approximately 3 weeks. All 8 teachers were interviewed once. Each teacher determined the time and place of the interviews.

The reason for choosing Finnish participants teaching in primary school level (from 1 to 6) is because they have completed their teacher training in Finland to become a qualified teacher. All of



the participants are class teachers or used to be class teachers, which means they teach the same number of subjects and share similar amount of responsibilities.

The researcher first started contacting primary school teachers via emails with the title “Invitation to Master’s thesis interview”. The researcher found a website that provides a list of comprehensive schools in Tampere. From there, she visited the websites of all of the schools from that list. Initially, the challenge was that most of the school websites are in Finnish, so the researcher had to use google translate in order to figure out the staff section. Fortunately, the list of teachers’ first and last name, as well as the grade they are in charge of are all available on the school website. Things became easier now because the email format of all teachers in Finland is [firstname.lastname@.fi](#). In each email, the researcher included a brief explanation of the study, an outline of research questions, the criteria of wanted participants. The researcher sent emails to a total of 11 schools. And on average, there are at least 10 teachers in one school, meaning that there are more than 110 teachers were invited to participate in the research. However, the researcher only got replies from 3 teachers agreeing to be interviewed. Furthermore, the researcher asked people from her personal contacts and also her supervisor to get some more participants. In the end, 10 teachers were interviewed, but only 8 fully meet the research requirements. The reason for this was because one interview could not be completely finished even though the teacher meets the criteria; while the other two teachers are either not Finnish teacher or class teacher. The data collected provide perspectives regarding teacher autonomy. Finally, the data were analyzed according to codes and themes relevant to the research questions in the study.

Information was collected on participants’ occupational situation including total years of teaching experience, gender, school they are currently working and grade level taught. The demographic information of teachers participating in the research interviews are presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1

*Demographic information of participants*

<b>Participants</b>	<b>School</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Student grade</b>	<b>Years of teaching</b>
Teacher 1	School A	Male	5	12
Teacher 2	School A	Female	2	10
Teacher 3	School B	Female	5	4
Teacher 4	School B	Female	6	21
Teacher 5	School B	Female	2	3
Teacher 6	School B	Female	1	16
Teacher 7	School B	Female	3	13
Teacher 8	School C	Female	2	5

The collected data present a fairly diverse set of participant demography. Respondents demonstrate a wide range of years of experience and students' grade levels. This diversity of participants' background helps increase the reliability of data and also the validity of the study accordingly.

### **3.4 Procedures**

#### 3.4.1 Preparation

In the beginning, the researcher designed a list of interview questions to answer each research question. The list was then presented to her supervisor for constructive feedback. Prior to the real interviews, the researcher conducted pilot interviews with 5 Finnish students from the faculty of Education at Tampere University, city centre campus. The researcher arranged time according to the pilot interviewees' preferences. Each of these interviews were conducted face-to-face. Since all the pilot participants are students and they go to campus daily, the researcher booked a groupwork room in Linna library for the interviews. Each interview lasted for around 30 minutes. All of the participating students have gained some teaching experience either from working as a substitute teacher in schools or from their training practicum periods. The main purpose of conducting the pilot interviews was that the researcher had the chance to practice carrying out interviews. From

this pilot period, the researcher got feedback from the student interviews about how the interview went, questions that need to be reconstructed and so forth. The pilot interviews were very useful to the researcher. First, it gave her the chance to test out the designed questions to see whether they are clear and easy to understand by the listeners or not. The interview questions were then revised accordingly to improve clarity. Second, the researcher was able to practice asking further for more information based on the participants' responses. Third and the most important point is that the researcher knows how to create a friendly atmosphere from the beginning with the interviewees, which helps them easier to share their viewpoints. This is especially useful in the case of the study because teacher autonomy is a complex concept that even the researcher finds it hard to understand sometimes. After the pilot interviews, the researcher revised and finalized the outline of the interview questions.

For the real teachers, due to school policies, an invitation email to participate in the study explaining the study was sent to a random sample of teachers in various schools in Tampere region, asking for their participation in the face-to-face interviews. Since some of the pilot interviewees volunteered to participate but did not have enough information beforehand, it took them quite sometimes to think about the questions and what to answer. Learning from this experience, for the official participants, the interview description was sent to them through emails at least one week before the interview to make it possible for them to prepare themselves. In which, the researcher included the purpose of the study, research questions, estimated length of time for each interview, possible withdrawal from participation at any time, and contact detail of her supervisor. They were also informed that they were free to contact the researcher should they have any concerns or questions.

The researcher contacted each participant through emails and that way of communication allowed the researcher and the interviewees to arrange for mutually agreeable times and locations to carry out the individual interviews. All 8 teachers were interviewed once. Prior to commencing each interview, the teachers were asked to sign an ethical approval form which the researcher had prepared and were briefed again about the objectives of the study and were reassured that the participants' responses would be kept confidentially. The interview started right after the participant signed the documents.

#### 3.4.2 During the interview

The interviews were carried out during December 2018 and January 2019. For this study, data were collected using semi-structured in-depth interviews in face-to-face manner. The interview was designed to be conducted individually. The data were recorded on a digital audio recorder with the consent of the interviewees. The participants were well-informed that they were free to stop the interview at any point. The interviews were conducted in English since the researcher could not speak Finnish. All of the interviews took place at the school units that the teachers work. They were undertaken face-to-face individually in classroom settings. Each interview lasted approximately from 45 minutes to one hour.

The interviews were based on a set of questions, so firstly the interviewees were asked pre-established questions. However, in most cases, more follow-up questions were asked to elicit more details or for clarification on what was being shared. This depended on participants' responses and their characteristics, which provided the researcher with some flexibility. In addition, the researcher also played the role as an activator to provide clues or initiatives to encourage the interviewees to explain more or give some examples to illustrate their points. During the interview, the researcher was also taking some brief notes during the interview sessions.

At the end of the interviews, participants were thanked for their time and effort. The researcher did not forget to tell the participants to contact her in case they want to provide further points besides what they had been asked. After each interview, the researcher also asked for some feedback and comments to make improvements for the next ones. The interviewees were also reminded to ask their colleagues to take part in the research. The researcher eventually managed to have another interviewee thanks to this technique.

### 3.4.3 After the interview

All the recordings were stored on different devices including USB stick, google drive and the researcher's laptop. The researcher transcribed one interview recording after another following the interview transcription guidelines proposed by King & Horrocks (2010) and Azevedo et al., (2017). After reviewing the suggestions of these authors, the researcher decided to break the transcription process into smaller steps. To ensure that the information provided remain fresh, the researcher started transcribing as soon after each interview as possible. The interview transcriptions were conducted by the researcher. She also noted down the field notes and her reflective notes onto each transcript. Repeated ideas and potential coding themes were also jotted down at this stage.

## 3.5 Data analysis

### 3.5.1 Method for data analysis

The technique used for data analysis is thematic analysis which is one of the widely used qualitative analytic approach (Vaismoradi, Turunen & Bondas, 2013). Braun & Clarke (2006) defines “thematic analysis as a method for identifying, organizing, analyzing, describing and reporting patterns or themes emerged within a set of data” (p. 79).

Thematic analysis method offers numerous advantages which makes it perfectly well-suited for this study. Firstly, one of the benefits is its theoretical freedom. In contrast to other analytic methods, this method is not limited to any specific theoretical frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which makes sense in this case because neither does the researcher wish to purely describe the participants’ experiences, nor does she attempt to develop any theory about the phenomenon under investigation based on the data corpus. Rather, this study aims to investigate the perspectives of individual research participants, produce the similarities and differences, and highlight surprising results. Thematic analysis is a useful method for such purposes. Indeed, thematic analysis can be used across a vast range of theoretical frameworks and be modified to match with the needs of the research purposes. The researcher does not feel constrained in relation to how this approach is used. This provides the researcher with the opportunity to actively make choices throughout the analysis process.

Second, Braun & Clarke (2006) proposed that thematic analysis is a suitable method, especially when participants’ viewpoints on the research phenomenon are not yet known and need to be explored (p. 83). As discussed previously in the introduction chapter, only a few studies have examined teachers’ personal sense about their professional autonomy. Yet, few, if any, have directly dealt with classroom teachers in primary schools (teachers who teach in grades 1 to 6 in 9-year comprehensive school systems).

Although researchers have widely acknowledged the advantages of the thematic analysis method in qualitative research, this method also has some limitations. Along with its freedom, this approach does challenge the researcher into making a number of choices. For instance, the question of what would be considered to be theme requires the researcher to determine with her own judgements across the entire data set. This is because themes can be identified in a number of ways and there is

no right or wrong answer. In this instance, the researcher's decision was driven by the overall research question. Therefore, it is particularly important that the researcher remains consistent within the analysis of the data set. This is actually another difficulty to overcome since coherence and consistency are flexibility's opponents (Nowell et al., 2017). Being a novice researcher herself, this really makes the researcher feel insecure and unsure about how to do properly sometimes throughout the process.

Generally speaking, thematic analysis has been widely regarded as a well-suited tool to analyze data in qualitative research. Keeping in mind the purpose of the current study and its exploratory nature, the researcher believes that this method can produce fruitful insights into the perceptions of the participants interviewed.

### 3.5.2 The analytical process

Data analysis procedure using thematic analysis method is conducted following the step-by-step guide outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006, p. 87). At the same time, the researcher also consulted the guideline by King & Horrocks (2010). These authors provide a detailed description of the whole process that facilitates the researcher in conducting the analysis in a rigorous and methodical manner to create rich and insightful research findings. As a novice researcher, these guidelines are found to be very helpful in the present study.

Regarding the data analysis process, there are many phases involved. It is worth noting that some of the analyzing stages of this approach seem to be very similar to those of other qualitative analytic methods that seek for themes or patterns.

The detailed description of how the practical analysis process was conducted is as the followings:

- Phase 1: Familiarizing yourself with your data

This phase starts with preparing and transcribing data. As discussed in the previous section 3.4.3, all the interview recordings were transcribed by the researcher herself. The data were transcribed verbatim. The transcriptions are in written form and stored online using google docs. Therefore, they can be accessed to anywhere. Although extremely time consuming, the researcher did the transcription on her own to immerse herself in the data. Hence, she got to familiarize herself with the breadth and depth of the data collected.

- Phase 2: Generating initial codes

Having transcribed all the interviews into written texts, the researcher read many times the transcripts from the 8 interviews carefully several times, one by one, and started highlighting interesting words or profound statements, sentences and quotes that appear to represent the key thoughts regarding teacher autonomy. This provides the researcher with an understanding of the participants about the concept. Simultaneously, this initial step also helps the researcher get a general understanding of the main ideas that the participants are expressing. Doing this throughout the entire data set, the researcher then categorized segments of data that demonstrate similar patterns into groups. At this stage, the researcher tried to approach the transcript by making notes of her feelings and thoughts and creating initial codes. The data were then read word by word to identify codes.

Sometimes, the same extracts could be arranged into different code groups. As this process continues, codes were then categorized based on how they are related with one another. Having analyzed each participant's response, the researcher followed a sequential and iterative procedure identify different codes across the entire data set. Initial coding was done manually by coping extracts from individual transcripts and pasting them into a separate file.

- Phase 3: Searching for themes

After initial codes were generated, the researcher started to sort different codes into potential themes. Within each theme, subthemes were also identified.

- Phase 4: Reviewing themes

Phase 4 entailed reviewing and refining a set of themes and sub-themes that have been formed in the earlier stage. The researcher considered carefully the validity and coherence among these themes in relation to the entire data set and the research questions. This stage ended with a collection of coherent themes that accurately reflect the overall content of the entire data set.

- Phase 5: Defining and naming themes

At this stage, the researcher can clearly define and describe what each theme is about. This resulted in giving the working titles for themes.

- Phase 6: Producing the report

Finally, once a set of themes and enough data extracts for each theme have been finalized, the researcher started the writing process.

Although thematic analysis proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006) as a linear process, in practice, they are not always distinct steps but interrelated and can even take place simultaneously throughout the research process. Therefore, it is important at this point to acknowledge that these phases are applied flexibly by the researcher during the analysis process. As a matter of fact, throughout the analytic process, the researcher constantly goes back and forth between phases of thematic analysis procedure. The results of the exploratory and descriptive analyses will be presented in the next chapter.



## 4 FINDINGS

This chapter presents the key findings of the data analysis with regard to the two research questions: (1) How do Finnish class teachers perceive teacher autonomy? and (2) What are the perceived factors that hinder or foster teacher autonomy? In attempt to answer the research questions, different themes derived from the data analysis will be addressed. The researcher presents the results of the research questions in the order in which they are presented above. That said, the researcher first describes findings relating to individual-level perceptions of teacher autonomy concept. Finally, she presents the kinds of factors that enable or resource teachers' professional autonomy development.

### 4.1 Teachers' understanding of teacher autonomy

For the first research question regarding how teachers understand the notion of teacher autonomy, the researcher wanted to know specifically how they understand and define teacher autonomy, how teacher autonomy is realized in Finnish school contexts, what attitudes they hold towards teacher autonomy and what kind of experiences they have concerning teacher autonomy in their work. In this study, this concept was considered under the viewpoint of teachers themselves: What does teacher autonomy mean? What are the opportunistic or constraining factors towards teacher's perceived autonomy in primary school context? According to the results, teachers' responses were very multifaceted but it was common that the teachers understood teacher autonomy to be a complicated phenomenon. The researcher asked teachers to define teacher autonomy means to them in their everyday work. Most of the respondents said at the end of the interview that this concept is very difficult for them to articulate, for some teachers, this is something by default in the system without even necessarily thinking about it much. As one participant put it:

*This was very difficult. It was interesting but difficult because these are that kind of things that I don't even so much think about, they just are and I'm used to do some things and I'm used to so it's very interesting that you made me think. (Teacher 7)*

In seeking out teachers' perceptions of teacher autonomy, 4 broad themes emerged from the analysis. The first theme highlighted what teacher autonomy means to them. The second theme

illustrates the importance of teacher autonomy in teachers' work. The third theme characterizes an autonomous teacher. Finally, the fourth theme presents different domains of work teachers exercised their autonomy.

#### 4.1.1 Teachers' conception of autonomy concept

Initially, the teachers were asked to define teacher autonomy based on their personal understanding of the concept. The questions asked include 'How do you understand teacher autonomy?', 'What does teacher autonomy mean to you?' or 'How do you define teacher autonomy?'. The teachers had their own way of defining teacher autonomy, their definitions share some similarities.

One of the teachers who was asked immediately said that autonomy is an important part of her work as a teacher and also started talking about the benefits that autonomy brings to her.

*I think that's quite a big part of our work here in Finland. It makes the job interesting and you feel like you can develop yourself, you can do things in different ways if you want. When you are autonomous, you can decide so many things. (Teacher 8)*

For this teacher, teacher autonomy is an inherent part of the concept of being a teacher in Finland that she does not think about much. Another teacher started talking about that it is one of the assets of the teaching job that makes it appealing to high school students.

*It is one of the key factors of the appeal of the class teacher work in Finland that is appealing to many talented students after high school. And teacher autonomy is one of the reasons why we have such high-quality teachers in Finland because this kind of draws in the intelligent students who are doing very well in high school. (Teacher 2)*

Analyzing across all of the participant's responses, the researcher can identify three categories for their definitions of teacher autonomy as follows.

- *Teacher autonomy as professional responsibility*

Among 8 respondents' interpretations of teacher autonomy construct, three teachers expressed that this concept involves a sense of responsibility in their definitions. It came as a surprise that in these responses, responsibility was mentioned in the first place instead of freedom which was found in many definitions of the concept of autonomy and teacher autonomy in the literature. For instance, one teacher proudly stated without any hesitance:

*First of all, it's a big responsibility but I think it's one of the most, one of the greatest things about Finnish education system. (Teacher 1).*

Similarly, another interviewed teacher also agreed that responsibility is an essential component entailed in the concept of autonomy. This sense of responsibility is practiced through admitting the mistakes she makes and making efforts to change things for the best of her students' learning. A teacher with more than 20 years of teaching experience especially emphasized in her definition that:

*Responsibility in autonomy is very important for me. If you make mistakes, you take responsibility and you prepare, nobody is perfect, everybody makes mistakes sometimes but you have to be ready to admit that it didn't work but you have to change things. (Teacher 4)*

In one case, the teacher defined teacher autonomy as involving both responsibility and freedom from control by others in her work. As she expressed, autonomy means that as a teacher, she is trusted enough to be given the responsibility and freedom to do her work and she makes use of these elements to help her students' learning. According to this definition, the teacher reflects on her role and finds way to adapt to students' diverse needs to help them learn at their best.

*It's the responsibility and freedom you've been given to affect your work, you're trusted enough to know what you're doing and that gives meaning to the work. You're not working for some high authority who doesn't know anything about your job and you actually try to find how to make the kids learn the best in your own terms. (Teacher 5)*

It can be seen that Finnish primary teachers feel involved in the decision making and freedom, but equally as much hold themselves accountable for the results of their actions. Feeling of personally responsible for students' outcomes was viewed as vital to the notion of teacher autonomy.

*This is the part when I said about the responsibility that you have to remember that you cancel English and PE and music lesson today, you have to do the topics anyway. (Teacher 1)*

Not only that, they are also fully aware of any, if possible, inadequacies or failures of their practices and with autonomy it allows them to fix those mistakes. For instance, one respondent shared:

*I might get an idea of how to make things better in the middle of doing it and then I would just cancel everything and start from the beginning. (Teacher 1)*

It can be seen from above examples that three Finnish teachers in this study really enjoy the amount of autonomy that they have, but they are also very aware of the responsibility they have to take towards different students' learning outcomes and their well-being as well.

To sum up, according to this view, autonomy includes a strong sense of personal responsibility for teaching and learning. This can be exercised through continuous reflection on instructional practices and involvement of changes.

- *Teacher autonomy as professional independence*

Secondly, most interviewees defined teacher autonomy as the professional independence among teachers. This refers to the degree of freedom to which they can make independent choices and decisions regarding the pedagogical aspect inside the classrooms. As one teacher stated:

*I think teacher autonomy is that I can choose how I teach, when I teach those things and what else I choose to teach and what am going to do in the classroom. That's all my autonomy that I think. (Teacher 7)*

From this viewpoint, the teachers claimed to have a lot of pedagogical freedom to make decisions on their own within the curricular frameworks. In particular, they all agreed that they have the freedom to decide on the teaching methods and materials. Several teachers shared the quite similar responses:

*It means to me that you can decide basically the way how you teach not what you teach but how you do that. (Teacher 8)*

*I believe autonomy means that teachers can make choices on their own, we need to follow the manual about what we need to teach, so I can't choose the topics but I can choose how I'm going to teach and I think it depends on the group that you have. As a teacher, you are trained to see what is the best way thinking about the group. So, you can choose the methods that you are gonna use, when you are teaching. (Teacher 3)*

*When I have autonomy, I can choose the materials that I use. We have books but we can choose if we use them or not for example. (Teacher 1)*

*It means freedom to do things the way that I think it's best for me and my class. (Teacher 7)*

The above statements reflect that each of the participants in the study cited what autonomy means to them by pointing to the aspects of their work they have the ability to take charge of. Specifically, some of these include teaching methods and teaching materials they use in order to adapt to different student groups. This can also be seen as a greater sense of flexibility in that they are able to choose the materials according to their students' needs. From this perspective, according to a majority number of respondents, the ability to choose in actions is essential in the concept of teacher autonomy. Teachers indicated that the capacity to make their own instructional choices is essential to the perception of teacher autonomy.

- *Teacher autonomy as professional competence and willingness*

In one case, the teacher referred teacher autonomy to the teacher's willingness to follow her own values and rationales in her teaching no matter the orders or rules that are given to her. In this concept of teacher autonomy, the teacher's actions and behaviors are in line with their inner values and interests. This definition includes the dimension of the capacity for self-directed actions. This requires the teacher to be aware of her own internal wants and wishes. On the other hand, it relates to the freedom over professional actions. For instance, a teacher who has been teaching for 10 years shared when discussing how she defined teacher autonomy:

*I guess the ambition and the will to lead your own path and to succeed in things you want to do, that you have the will also to find out about things. You don't just take orders and rules for granted as they are given to you, you're not following someone else's plans which make no sense to you, but more like you want to know why you are doing things and you have more sight of what you think is important. You want to work following the values that you consider valuable. (Teacher 2)*

The above statement shows that the central element of teacher' professional autonomy is her freedom to exercise her professional judgements in her teaching to students. Exceptionally, when asked about how she understood teacher autonomy, this teacher could not initially give any specific statement of definition straight away but actually started to describe it in terms of what teachers with autonomy can do.

*You can affect a lot how you do it and you are kinda like your own boss even though you have also people working on you. But you can decide your work really independently and you are yourself responsible for getting to know the curriculum. After the guidelines of curriculum and*

*the high-quality education at university has been given to you, you get to use that knowledge and your personality to really think how you want to carry out that education. Because it is not teaching this or that exact thing but also the overall education of the children, so you can in a way feel powerful in that, that you have the responsibility and you can affect a lot on how you do your work and how you plan it. (Teacher 2)*

As can be seen from the above extract, the respondent also emphasized that in order to decide independently at work, teachers need to acquire necessary knowledge including the curriculum's guidelines and teaching education at university.

According to this teacher's response, teacher autonomy entails being able to make decisions independently, responsible; having the knowledge about what and competence about how to retain quality education for their learners.

To sum up, in this section, several definitions of teacher autonomy have been proposed. It is important, however, to notice that there is a substantial variation in how teachers define teacher autonomy. Despite the wide diversity in teachers' definitions of teacher autonomy, they all have one thing in common; all in all, Finnish primary teachers perceive that there are several components in the concept of teacher autonomy. And there are many ways to understand it. In conclusion, it can be stated that teacher autonomy from individual teachers' perspective is a very complex and multifaceted phenomenon. Of all the definitions and ideas of teacher autonomy offered by Finnish primary teachers, teacher autonomy was perceived as professional responsibility, independence and ability and willingness. Teachers emphasized on the need to develop their individual's freedom which enables them to act more responsibly in their teaching in schools.

#### 4.1.2 The significance of professional autonomy

One theme emerged from data analysis was the salience of professional autonomy. In this study, teachers seemed to be very much aware of the importance of autonomy in their teaching profession. Overall, the findings from the interview analysis indicated that the respondents agree that teacher autonomy is very important for different reasons. All 8 participants considered teacher autonomy to be a key value and an essential part of their job. It appears that the teachers in this study highly value teacher autonomy.

*I think it's very important', commented one participant (Teacher 3). 'I think it's one of the most important things in my job', asserted by another, (Teacher 1). From another teacher 'It is an asset, it's one of the aspects of the profession and another it is part of the making of the profession a respected one as well. (Teacher 2)*

- *Teachers' motivation*

Based on their responses, the teachers indicated that they generally considered teacher autonomy to have contributed positively to their motivation at work. Two teachers in the study believed that autonomy gives them a lot of freedom and strength to keep them doing their job better every day without feeling exhausted. It also encourages them to try harder and set higher goals for themselves at work to become better every time.

*This gives me a lot of freedom and for me personally, it kind of kicks me to do my job even better. Yeah! it's a big motivation. It's a big, big motivation. (Teacher 1)*

Another teacher totally agreed:

*And it feels like a strength that keeps you aiming higher or make you aim higher and do your best all the time, and motivates you to work that you don't get tired of your work when you can affect it a lot on your own. (Teacher 2)*

Two teachers explained that autonomy motivates them in their job because it gives them the opportunities to enhance their creativity which is regarded as 'one of the best parts of this job'. That said, furthermore, they really enjoyed putting forward new ideas and implementing them with their students. This way, they can reinforce their strengths, learn the students better and this gives her a source of motivation in return.

*For me it motivates because it allows me to be creative and being creative I think it's one of the best parts of this job, that you can come up with your own ideas and see how they work in practice, see how the students react and you can kind of come up with something new every day instead of just like repeating something that's always been there. That may be my strength in this and that's what motivates me as well. (Teacher 5)*

Further, teacher autonomy contributes to teachers' increased level of motivation to be creative as well as enhanced their academic performance.

*I think being able to adjust to the needs of the kids comes with the autonomy as well. I see my job as an autonomous teacher to enhance this creativity and really make the children to question everything to learn. When I'm autonomous, I can find the right way for every child or I can try to find the best way. If I have to do things in certain ways, I feel that we just have one way and 50% of the class is not getting it or not enjoying it. (Teacher 1)*

Based on the above excerpts it can be said that some teachers in the study thought that owning a sense of autonomy at work does nurture their inner motivational resources. The above interview extracts also represent teachers' effort to find ways to integrate instructional activities that fit each of their students' interests, needs, preferences and competencies.

- *Teachers' professional development*

Despite the big amount of responsibility inherent in autonomy, teacher participants perceived their work as fulfilling and motivating. In addition to motivation enhancement, teacher autonomy was believed to be beneficial and vital for teachers' professional development.

Firstly, teacher autonomy was regarded as an important means for teachers to make use of their personal competencies and talents as resources. This is largely because of the opportunities for teachers to tailor their teaching in classes to their personal perceptions of their skills, competences and interests. As a result, autonomy enables teachers to learn more about her strengths and weaknesses.

One teacher expressed a strong viewpoint that in her school system, different teachers have different special strengths that they want to apply into their class teaching. Therefore, they approach the curriculum in various ways depending on their personal preferences, for example, whether they want to do more of music projects or technology.

*Because everybody has different kinds of personalities so some teachers are musically talented and then they have a lot of music in their classes and they do different projects and some teachers are technology gurus, then they do a lot of technology. I think it allows you to use your own strengths in teaching meanwhile you still have to stick to the curriculum but still you can approach it in many ways but you still cover the same basic things. (Teacher 5)*

In addition, some teachers also indicated that autonomy allows them to engage in increasing their knowledge and skills. Through the process of errors and trials, learning what works and what does not, teachers sought to discover the effectiveness of their instructional styles. Therefore, this allows



them to acquire personal and professional knowledge as well as skills to upgrade the quality of every aspect of their teaching practices. In return, it is a 'rewarding' experience that they can get their students excited about learning.

*I think it (autonomy) is the core of being happy in what you do because I think we're in a creative work field and also kind of like researching, you have to have researcher mindset of how the children learn or what works for certain group and how you get them excited about teaching, that's so rewarding. (Teacher 2)*

In one case, a teacher with 13 years of teaching experience in response to my question about the significance of teacher autonomy believed that autonomy helps lead to a better understanding of herself as a learner and professional. She emphasized that autonomy is very important to her teaching many times in her answer. According to this interviewee, autonomy provides her with the chance to be the best version of teacher she wants to be because she can decide how to teach and what to teach independently based on the curriculum, rather than having someone from outside tell her what to do.

*I think it's very important because when I have autonomy to decide how I'm teaching or even what I'm teaching inside the curriculum, then I think I can be the best teacher I can be. If someone always tells me how to do and what to do, I can't be the best teacher and I show in my teaching, then it's not the best thing for my students either. Autonomy, I think it's very important and it gives us teachers possibility to study more and try to find ourselves, like teacher inside of me. (Teacher 7)*

A less experienced teacher with 5 years of teaching experience also shared the same line of thought. She stated that it is a very important part of her job to be autonomous. Also, being able to decide and do things in many ways help her develop herself as a teacher.

*I think that it's (autonomy) quite a big part of our work here in Finland. It makes the job interesting and you feel like you can develop yourself. You can do things in different ways if you want. When you are autonomous, you can decide so many things. Of course, there are many things that have been set for us but I feel like that's very important part of our job that we can decide how we teach. (Teacher 8)*

- *Teachers' job commitment*

Moreover, as expected, the research findings also reveal the class teachers' perspectives on the vital role of teacher autonomy in the commitment to their job. One popular line of thought in all interviews is that if teacher autonomy is under threat, teacher commitment in the teaching profession will be questioned accordingly. This is partly because if external influencers might interfere with teachers' abilities to exercise their autonomy in several aspects of their work. More control from the outside is also related to teachers feeling that they are not trusted enough. Some teachers characteristically indicated:

*If there would be an outside source that would tell you this is how you have to do it and you can see it's not working and I have better ideas than that, that kills your joy of teaching and motivation. So, I think, as teachers, we need a little bit of flexibility and little bit of creativity for the job to be meaningful. (Teacher 5)*

*The problem is that if the autonomy is missing, then I feel that I am not trusted enough. (Teacher 1)*

Likewise, the participants understood that teacher autonomy is the reason they remain in teaching. Indeed, for one participant, she would not stay in the profession for more than 20 years without feeling a sense of autonomy even though she also has a lot of responsibilities associated with that.

*I wouldn't have been for 21 years in this work if I wouldn't enjoy my autonomy. I know that I have a lot of responsibility with that but I also enjoy that. I know that I'm quite important for children's life and I also get very unforgettable experiences, so that's the reason that I'm quite happy with this autonomy. (Teacher 4)*

Besides, not having a sense of autonomy appears to be a decisive factor as to why the teachers might leave the profession. This idea was wildly shared among the participants. Several teachers felt that if they would not have this much autonomy that they have now, they would describe themselves using words such as 'teaching machine', 'puppet of the system'. Through those expressions, the teachers considered that the absence of autonomy would make them follow what they are told to do and ignore their personal values, limiting their possibilities to enhance creativity and innovation. As a consequence, it will diminish their feelings of commitment to the profession.

*If this (autonomy) would be taken away from me, I would have to follow a plan constantly. I know that I would turn into some kind of teaching machine instead of being very innovative and creative and very spontaneous in many ways. (Teacher 1)*

*I guess what would be the opposite of that is you would be like the puppet of some system, that maybe you wouldn't believe in all of the values and you wouldn't believe that those are the important things that we should be studying. (Teacher 2)*

For some other teachers, losing more or less some level of autonomy would make them lose interest in the teaching job. This is partly because they would have to do the same thing repeatedly in some certain ways over the years. Specifically, some representative teachers' quotes are as follows:

*I think it's very important in a way that if I felt I'm not autonomous at all I think that the work as a teacher would not be that interesting to me. Because if you feel like everything is set ready and you do things all the time same way and how you are told to do with them. So, maybe I couldn't work all my life, 5 years 10 years should be fine but when I think about my whole life and career in front of me like 30 years coming up. So, it is very important that you feel autonomous. (Teacher 8)*

*I think that if there were more things that come outside and other people decide what I'm doing, this wouldn't be my favorite job, this wouldn't be my dream job. Because if someone just tells me that you have to do this like this, this way and this way then I can't use my whole competence. (Teacher 7)*

*I think I would more or less lose the interest to teaching job, then I would be just repeating orders or instructions that I would get the lesson plans from someone else if you work as a substitute teacher and the teacher gives you do this, this, this, this and then I just look and do. I would very probably lose the interest. (Teacher 1)*

*I mean then anyone can do it, who can read, then I believe that anyone could teach. But to do the same with the freedom that we have I think it's more challenging, that's why I like it and every day is a challenge. I think if my autonomy would be taken away I would find another job. (Teacher 1)*

All of the above responses by the teachers reflect the internal reasons for the teachers' decisions to remain in the field as their career. Being restricted by external rules, regulations and instructions was frequently presented opponent of autonomy in teachers' answers. Many teachers reported that the presence of external demands in their job would make teaching less appealing to them and they would even think about finding another job.

In one case, the teacher strongly expressed her concern about the loss of autonomy leading to the possibility that teaching profession will not be able to remain its appeal and respect compared to other professions. For this teacher, autonomy was regarded as an asset which makes teaching profession a highly respected one as a doctor or lawyer.

*I worry that the profession of a teacher is losing its appeal to very talented students and that it would become like more of a second, third or fourth choice of the high school students and more like a job that you have to kind of settle with. (Teacher 2)*

At the same time, in this case, the teacher was also aware that if there happens to be some teachers in the field who are not aiming at or being proud when they enter into teaching job, autonomy will have to be reconsidered.

*If we lose the appeal of the field and if it starts to become the thing that you do if you can't get to do anything else, then we would have kind of the wrong kind of people in the field. I don't even know whether autonomy would be any more so beneficial if people are not really motivated to do their best. I guess you have to think about autonomy, how much you can give that to people who would be doing the job with a little bit of ambition. (Teacher 2)*

- *Student learning and student autonomy*

Furthermore, in describing the importance of teacher autonomy, some teachers connected their own autonomy with their students' autonomy and learning. The participants drew a direct link between their autonomy and their student's autonomy. Particularly, the teachers stated that they believed teacher autonomy is beneficial for student autonomy.

As one teacher commented, it is very important for students to feel a sense of autonomy as well. According to this participant, when he has autonomy, he can facilitate his students' autonomous behaviors easily on a cooperative basis.

*With autonomy we get a lot of respect and lot of trust from our leaders, headmasters and so on so it's very easy for me to pass it on to the children. I think the big part of teacher autonomy is that children can feel autonomy as well. So, it's not like dictatorship but it's more like a cooperation with children. (Teacher 1)*

*I always try to create a secure social atmosphere in class and I think that's very important part of the autonomy as well. That's when the children feel safe in the class. When the atmosphere*

*is safe, they feel safe to try and fail without having to fear the others. They are also more willing to use the autonomy and try things and be more what they are instead of being a great mass of students. With this autonomy, creativity has a better chance as well so everything for me more or less is based on the security, that the children feel that they can trust me and they can feel that they can trust each other. (Teacher 1)*

As teacher 1 explained further:

*If I get trust and freedom it's very easy for me to pass it on to the children. If I'm not trusted as a teacher, if I don't have freedom then it's very hard for me to imagine that I would give this to the children. (Teacher 1)*

With this momentum, teacher 1 began to share more. During his 12 years of teaching experience, he witnessed that before entering schools, students ask questions and they are interested and very active but after 2 years they become not interested in anything anymore. He felt that sometimes schools really kill the creativity. But with autonomy, he said that he is able to seek ways to promote his students' learning by adopting instructional practices that suit every single student best. Also, he is able to respond to his students' personal needs in his teaching, for instance, by choosing the materials that he thinks appropriate for his student groups.

*I see my job as an autonomous teacher to enhance this creativity and really make the children to question everything to learn. And when I'm autonomous, I can find the right way for every child or I can try to find the best way. If I have to do things in certain ways I feel that then we just have one way and 50% of the class is not getting it or not enjoying it. (Teacher 1)*

*When I have autonomy, I can choose the materials that I use. We have books but we can choose if we use them or not for example. And that helps me a lot in my work because then I can adjust my teaching according to the children's needs. Without this kind of autonomy, I don't think it would be possible so much. (Teacher 1)*

Additionally, another teacher pointed out that teacher with autonomy can develop intrinsic instructional goals, rather than extrinsic ones for their students. In the words of one teacher:

*I think it makes teachers concentrate more on the process and not so much on the products. If you have a lot of autonomy, it makes the teachers less stressed about someone controlling and checking on them. They will focus more on the moment itself and helping the child when they need help and focusing on what they think it's best for that child and class in that moment and*

*not training them only for certain tests or certain inspectors that come to check that things are done in a certain way but it frees your hands to listen to the students more. (Teacher 2)*

This interviewee remarked on an interesting observation, speaking that often the teacher creates and guides the learning activities by keeping in mind of what the students find exciting and meaningful in their everyday lives, but also understanding the subject-matters and the skills they want their students to acquire.

This was echoed in another interview as well. Autonomy is a means through which teachers can spend time focusing on what matters for each student rather than simply teaching according to what they are told to. These teachers stated that autonomy allows them to design their class teaching to match the students' needs, putting the students first.

*It makes studying also more interesting for children when the teacher uses more time on planning and thinking what is important and where we want to go. Then we all put out common efforts to reach it and it is more fruitful rather than we just have something that I haven't really thought about myself but I'm teaching them like I'm just a middle hand who is handing it out to them without thinking about it myself. (Teacher 2)*

*I think that good teachers are always thinking about the group and about the students. It's not like I'm doing the things that I like or I want to do. It's more like I know them, I know that they would learn best way using this method so I'm gonna use this one. So, I think that it's very good that you have autonomy, because if we have only one way, then it's gonna affect so many students by making the learning harder. I think so then you have a good eye on what is good, what is not good for the group, what is working, what is not working. So, you can make some decisions by then. (Teacher 3)*

Furthermore, one teacher shared that autonomy helps her read and sense her students' state of being and adjust her teaching accordingly. This teacher showed that she is really attuned to her students' thinking and feelings. Being aware of these emotions, this sensitivity allows her to be responsive what her students want and like.

*I can maybe have a look at my own feeling and what I want to do but of course also the kids. If I feel that today they might be a bit tired or something, I can take some sports activities and I don't need to plan that strictly before. I can always change a little bit when I see how things work. Or if I feel that in this project the kids love it, they want to do it now a bit longer than I*

*expected, then I can also change and we can work on that project and change things on the way.* (Teacher 8)

The common feature of all these discussions is teachers' desire to take into consideration the specific nature of each student. Teacher autonomy indeed inspires teachers' effort in encouraging the individualization in their teaching methods. They tend to listen attentively to the learners' needs, their favorite methods of learning and so on.

Qualitative analysis suggested that not only was teacher autonomy beneficial to teachers themselves, but also to their students. These findings suggest that the benefits of having autonomy includes the increase in teachers' motivation, student autonomy and learning, job commitment and professional development. Overall, participants regarded autonomy as positive and considered it to be especially important to feel a sense of professional autonomy in their work.

#### 4.1.3 Characterizing autonomous teacher

All of the teachers in the study considered themselves as autonomous professionals, able to make decisions and choices on their own and free from control exerted by principals, colleagues. They also made efforts to characterize an autonomous teacher. The characteristics of autonomous teachers emerging from the empirical material were frequently connected with student learning. I will present and discuss the list of characteristics of autonomous teachers in detail in what follows.

- *Self-reflective*

Firstly, the participants of this study described an autonomous teacher as self-critical and self-reflective practitioners. All of the teachers shared that an autonomous teacher is someone who is willing to experiment different ways and learn which way is the best way for the students. Thus, he or she can develop different teaching strategies to meet students' diverse learning needs. This is a really important finding of the research. It can be said that Finnish teachers put a lot of emphasis on the student-centered approach. They always try to improve their practice to create the best result for students.

*Sometimes things go fine, sometimes not so fine so I have to think how to change the style because it depends on personality and student groups. I think nobody including me can be*

*perfect. So, I try my best, I plan very much my lessons. I reflect very much the situation, even the small situations. Sometimes everything I can say to myself is 'hey maybe I was very good at that in classroom with the colleagues.' Sometimes I have to say to myself 'okay it wasn't so good, next time I have to do it another way'. It's all the time, it continues all the time. (Teacher 4)*

*I can react to the situations in the classrooms because I don't have to do the lesson that I wrote down. (Teacher 1)*

As these two teachers shared, it is important to acknowledge that there are moments that things do not go as they planned no matter how well they did the lesson planning. And as they reflected on their practice continuously, they are able to see that some of strategies or styles that they employ do not seem to work as expected. But they do not stop trying different ways to find the right ways. And for them, it is a continuous learning process. As one teacher commented, autonomous teacher simply is someone who has insights into their student's learning styles and strategies.

*I think that autonomous teachers are always thinking about the students. It's not like I'm doing the things that I like or want to do. It's more like okay, I know my students, I know that they would learn best using this method so I'm gonna use this one. I think it's very good that you have autonomy, because if we have only one way, it's gonna affect so many students by making the learning harder. I think then you have a good eye on what is good for the group, what is not good for the group, what is working, what is not working. (Teacher 3)*

According to some of the participants, critical reflection is one important trait of an autonomous teacher. They get to look deeply and critically analyze their practices, they also feel encouraged to internally reflect on their own practices in the classroom and the external conditions of their practice (namely students' emotions, well-beings and so on). In addition, they make efforts of change to improve their individual practices and the situations.

- *Open to professional development*

Secondly, openness to personal and professional development was identified as one of the characteristics of autonomous teachers from the teachers' responses. In order to illustrate this point, some interviewees described that nonautonomous teachers are those who do not strictly follow the teachers' books or the curriculum as shared in some interviews, they also tend to teach things in the same way for many years, even throughout their career, without developing new teaching practices.



*I think they must be the teachers who follow teachers' books. We have very nice and quality materials actually but if you follow them very strictly, I think it will lose your autonomy. You can follow the ready-made lesson plans and teach in that way. But that's not too autonomous I think. Also, I think the teachers who do things in the same way they have done for the past 30 years. Our basic core curriculums have changed all the time in the past years but some teachers still do the things that they did so many years ago. So, they have not developed in a way. So that makes them not that autonomous. (Teacher 8)*

As described in the extract, nonautonomous teachers are quite resistant to change, namely changes in the curriculum. Instead, they exhibit a tendency to maintain the old habit of doing things for many years and rather do things within their comfort zone. As one teacher commented:

*I've noticed that some teachers, if they are not comfortable with the subject that they are teaching they are a little bit afraid to take the responsibilities, then they stuck with books, it's easy. Let's go through a chapter, let's do the exercises and then move on, then I don't see much autonomy in this. (Teacher 1)*

Moreover, openness to personal and professional development was also manifested in teachers' reflection on their roles. The participating teachers viewed autonomous teachers as those who always reflect their work and they try to develop the ways that they do things. And they are also critical of their own teaching. They think if they succeed or not then they try to change the things that they can. They also believe that autonomous teachers should be active to study more in the areas that they don't know that much yet so they can develop that way as well. As one teacher gave an example:

*I like the idea if I teach something for example in mathematics or in Finnish and then I realized that oh this didn't work I can do this again next week in a different way then, I can develop all the time to the way I want. (Teacher 8)*

Teachers emphasized that it is important for a teacher with autonomy to feel the courage for the openness towards change or new situations. Lifelong learning and professional development were identified from the teachers' responses as two essential characteristics in autonomous teachers as well. Autonomous teachers are open to change. They feel encouraged to pursue different course of actions, and that, in return, facilitates their personal and professional development.

- *Professionally competent*

Thirdly, a number of participants see an autonomous teacher as being professionally competent. This refers to teachers' beliefs that they have sufficient knowledge and skills to help student learning. First and foremost, according to some participants, autonomous teachers should have adequate instructional knowledge in order to find out and effectively address different students' learning needs by using various strategies of instructions.

This can be shown in the ways that they are able to adapt responsively to the classrooms and the needs of their students. In particular, they tend to take consideration of the needs of individual students in their teaching. Two participants, for example, described an autonomous teacher as follows:

*I think she or he usually has to know the pupils in the class. And she also tries to do things the best way that she can that is the best way for the class and for herself because I think that if everything comes from deciders or from the principals or the curriculum or everything like that, I can't decide my work myself. I can't choose my ways to learn or something like that, then it's not the best way I can teach. So, I think teachers who are autonomous can choose the best ways and use them. (Teacher 7)*

*He or she knows how to teach things, and there are so many children that, for example I have 23 children now, one learns with this method, the other one learns with this method, and also that is something that you have to know the children. (Teacher 6)*

Additionally, other teachers described autonomous teachers as having adequate knowledge about different areas besides teaching inside the classroom. Some teachers expressed that autonomous teacher would mean that someone who is well-informed and so much aware of all the different aspects of education and working environment. Thus, he is able to choose the most important things or the main things what wants to concentrate on and can all the time leave out the not so important things. He or she is able to lead his work and his class and his children in a sensible way. On discussing this question, one of the teachers even regarded the school on a normal day as a hectic jungle that autonomous teachers are the ones who have knowledge of things and are aware of things to become a strong person. This sense of awareness includes the curriculum, the philosophy of education, teaching methods and the goals of teaching.

*But autonomous I would see it as a teacher who is well-aware of, first of all, obviously the curriculum and the things that the curriculum involves that you are supposed to teach but also*

*aware of the philosophy of education and the methods and as an overall strong picture in his or her mind where he or she's aiming at. Sometimes I feel that teachers might be aware also of legal rights and what they have to do and the demands that there are for the work. (Teacher 2)*

*She knows well what she has to do in every area in education, in physical, social and cognitive. She knows that well, she knows the rules in the curriculum, she knows when to cooperate with other persons I think. (Teacher 4)*

These extracts are indicative of the teachers' mastery of pedagogical and educational knowledge as an essential capacity of autonomous teachers. And this requires them to develop themselves personally and professionally to keep updated with the rapid changes around them.

- *Independent*

Thirdly, one teacher responded that autonomous teachers are those who are self-reliant professionals. They have trust in themselves and they are able to act on different situations and make decisions on their own in their work. As one teacher noted:

*You know that you can trust yourself in your work and you can trust yourself to make the right decisions and in that way you don't get varied on huge workload but you are able to navigate yourself with the tools that you have, then you can independently you can lead your work and work for the best of the students, that you can trust that your decisions are for the best of the children. (Teacher 2)*

The above extract illustrates the teachers' point that teaching and learning on a daily basis involves a variety of tasks and 'workload' that teachers have to 'navigate' and guide themselves through. And the teacher understood that an autonomous teacher is someone who demonstrates a sense of willingness to exercise independent choices. In order to do that, they also acquire the trust or confidence in their competence.

One teacher claimed that teachers who are not very autonomous might be someone who just enter their teaching career. Therefore, they tend to doubt or question themselves in terms of their own capabilities.

*I believe that it's kind of teacher who has less autonomy is a person who is probably unsure about what they're doing so maybe it can be a person who just started to work. But I guess, that's kind of person who is still thinking of or looking their ways how to do it. (Teacher 3)*

Teacher 2 also pointed out a reality that most teachers' work under the influence of such factors as rules and demands from different parties. Such a reality requires the teachers to be able to act independently, otherwise they would end up exhausting themselves out because of different conditions their practice is subject to.

*There are so many little details in this work, all kinds of little instructions from here and there or demands from parents and even from the school side that if you want to follow everyone's instructions or ideas when it comes to colleagues, principals and parents, especially the parents, you kind of get exhausted. You become a person who is trying to fill everyone's wishes and going this and that way. (Teacher 2)*

Similarly, another teacher also shared a similar idea about an autonomous teacher. However, for him, being autonomous also means being independent from other colleagues in the sense that he is really dedicated to his student learning and decides the pace of his teaching according to his students' abilities, instead of basing his teaching on other teachers who are teaching the same grade. He demonstrated his point by giving a concrete example as follows:

*Another fifth grade is on the other side of the door. We started Math same time, now we are 6 topics behind them because they're going much faster. Because their children are very good in Math, it seems, and they like it so they can go faster. With me, I have some very good students and some very weak students. So, when he takes one hour for one topic, I take at least 2 or maybe 3. And that's autonomy. If I would go with the same speed as he's going, half of my class would not understand anything about Math. (Teacher 1)*

The example demonstrates that this teacher perceived an autonomous teacher as someone who is able to execute professional actions freely from external influences which in this case is his colleague who is teaching next door. However, being independent does not mean being separated or isolated from their colleagues. One participant confirmed in her viewpoint that as an autonomous teacher, she can ask help from her colleagues and learn from them.

*Autonomous teacher can ask help. It's not like I do it all by myself. I can do everything but it is certain that I can ask help if I can't do something. I can learn from others and it's not a minus, it's plus. (Teacher 7)*

The Finnish teachers in the study highlighted the fact that they are also facing various contextual conditions at work. But they adopted a proactive attitude towards external conventions and autonomously to exercise self-directed decision making.

- *Responsible*

Finally, an autonomous teacher was also depicted as a responsible person. The Finnish teachers in the study perceived that they can affect their work in various ways. No one is actually checking how they are doing their job. Therefore, this requires genuine sense of responsibility on the part of the teachers. As one participant put it this way:

*I'll describe like motivated because you can affect your own work so much, ah maybe responsible and honest because nobody's watching and that's what you have to be otherwise it's not working. (Teacher 5)*

A point that emerges clearly from this line of thinking is that an autonomous teacher needs to honestly looking at her teaching practices and constantly make choices concerning their own teaching. Indeed, a substantial number of participants reported that students become their focal point in their teaching when describing an autonomous teacher. For example, one teacher stated:

*Independent and responsible, knows how to teach things. There are so many children that, for example, I have 23 children now, one learns with this method, the other one learns with that method. So that is something that you have to know the children. (Teacher 6)*

*You are kind of a person who wants to take responsibility and make a difference in people's life. You are not like just a machine trying to train a group of people to do well in a certain test which might not even so important in their lives. (Teacher 2)*

The interviewed teachers appear to recognize that they play an important role in their students' learning. As can be understood from the above expressions, the participants viewed that autonomous teachers do care about their students' learning and what matters in the students' life instead of just the test outcomes. They show that they want to make a difference in their students' life, rather than just teach without considering what makes sense to them. Similarly, another teacher held a strong belief that autonomous teachers are professionals who know exactly what they are doing and why they are doing it. She went on to explain her point:

*For example, if I know I have to teach multiplication calculations in Maths, I know that's the topic. So, the autonomy is gonna come the way that I'm gonna choose how I'm gonna teach it. So, I'm thinking about the group, I know that this group is active, so it's my way to choose whether I'm gonna want them to work on their own. But if I think for the best of the group, I'm gonna choose something active. So, I could take them outside, do some activities that support the topic. (Teacher 3)*

Another teacher who shared the same experience noted:

*I think she or he usually knows their class and the pupils in the class. And she also tries to do things the best way that she can that is the best way for the class and for herself. If everything comes from deciders or principals or the curriculum or things like that, I can't decide my work, I can't choose my ways to learn or something like that. Then it's not the best way I can teach. So, I think teachers who are autonomous can choose the best ways and use them. (Teacher 7)*

As can be seen from the presented extracts, the teachers in this study were all very aware of their own part in their students' learning process. The examples also showed that the teachers willingly accept the responsibility of students' learning into their hands. That said, they are very determined to try their hardest in what they are doing and pay attention to every individual student.

Further understanding of an autonomous teacher was discovered when the participants were also asked to describe a teacher who is not autonomous. According to some teachers, teachers who do not have trust in themselves or their decisions are those who are not very autonomous. The participants commented that not autonomous teachers appear to have insufficient knowledge and have challenges in figuring out the ways to teach on their own. Therefore, these teachers were ultimately dependent on external influencers' expectations to guide their work. For example, one teacher stated:

*When I started as a teacher, I wasn't so autonomous. Because I was always thinking that am I doing the right thing? Am I teaching right? What are the principal or coworkers or families, parents or the children thinking of me? I think that's not autonomous because I have so many expectations from other people or I think I have and everybody just looks me like what is she doing and I have to do the curriculum like it's my bible. I have to do everything like it says and I think it's not autonomous. Teachers who are not autonomous, they have that kind of difficulty*

*that they can't always teach the way they want to do, they have no that much trust in themselves. I think the main thing is that trust on her or his own work. (Teacher 7)*

Or as another interviewee remarked:

*In some ways it's lack of knowledge. But in some ways, it's just trying to divide yourself into too many directions to carry out things, you're trying to be everything and then you end up doing little tricks here and there to make the parents happy. That's kind of a person who doesn't trust her own way of doing but just try to please everyone so much that you are not making your own decision. (Teacher 2)*

From the above quotes, autonomous teachers can be described as those making decisions and taking actions according to their inner values. Most importantly, they are not just conducting tasks as demanded by external influencers including policy mandates.

To sum up, the above characteristics, taken together, construct autonomous teachers. In conclusion, in the analysis, autonomous teachers were depicted as self-reflective, open to personal and professional development, competent, independent, and responsible professional.

#### 4.1.4 Domains of work teachers exercise their autonomy

When participating teachers were asked about the areas of their work they think they have autonomy over, many of them said that it is easier for them to think about what areas they do not have control over.

*So many, too many. It would be easier to say what I don't have. (Teacher 4).*

Another teacher agreed: *I'm trying to think where do I not have autonomy. (Teacher 1)*

The latter respondent also added:

*I think we all talk about the same topics one way or another but it's really hard to think about anything that we are not autonomous with. (Teacher 1)*

The above extracts illustrate that the teachers in the study perceived possessing a very high degree of professional autonomy at work. Moreover, this perception of high level of autonomy appears to be present across all grade levels. In the case of teachers in the present study, autonomy can be exercised both within classroom and school contexts.

According to Friedman (1999), teacher autonomy can be categorized into four different domains, namely, “curriculum development, teaching and assessment, professional development, and school functioning”. This was also supported by Usma Wilches (2007) in his literature review of the concept of teacher autonomy. In the analysis of this study, the researcher analyzed different areas where teachers exercise their autonomy according to this 4-domain model suggested in the literature. It can be argued that this structure not only covers a variety of responsibilities teachers are in charge of in a school, but it also indicates that teachers can participate in critical decision making that might directly affect their work, involving matters both inside the classroom and in a school as a whole.

Regardless of years of experience and grade levels, teachers perceived their classrooms as an area with the highest level of autonomy. Teacher 5, a novice teacher with two years teaching experience as a class teacher and one-year experience as an English teacher generally shared in her interview:

*It's my own teaching in classroom that I have the most autonomy over because then I don't have to do team teamwork inside the classroom. (Teacher 5)*

Regarding areas related to the classroom, the teachers appeared to have comprehensive freedom behind the classroom walls. Areas inside the classroom range very broadly. As expected, all of the teachers in the study reported to have complete freedom in teaching and assessment. One teacher talked about lesson planning in her response when asked about areas she felt that she has control over in her job. For her and some other interviewees, lesson planning is the most fundamental area that teachers need to have autonomy.

*I think it's the lesson planning, the basic the classroom work that we do. That's like all the subjects. (Teacher 8)*

Across many interviews, however, it is quite surprising that Finnish teachers shared that they rarely write the lesson plans. Some teachers reported that they only take notes in their phones what activities they plan to do during class that day as their own reminder. Surprisingly, Finnish teachers are very aware of the content of the authorized curriculum and then they develop their teaching of those topics in the way they consider appropriate. Some teachers share that they are in total control of teaching inside the classroom.

*Yeah, in teaching because I don't have partner so most of the time I have so much autonomy. (Teacher 4)*



*The classes themselves like what happened during the class, I don't have to write lesson plans and nobody's checking them. I can figure it out myself also what to do when I know the curriculum talks about these things have to be done during the 5th grades for example.* (Teacher 5)

Additionally, the teachers said that they are able to choose and apply a variety of pedagogical methods so it is easy for them to accommodate different learning needs of their students. For instance, as one teacher put it:

*It helps me a lot because all the time the groups are different, the children are different. Every teaching group changes, the chemistry of the class and the skill level, sometimes you have a very active class, not so good academically or then you have a quiet class who are academically very good or then something in the middle.'* (Teacher 1)

As regards teaching methods, teachers are free to choose and adopt the teaching techniques they wish to use. Accordingly, they can choose the site as well. The following extracts from two interviewees clearly illustrate this point:

*I can choose how we do the sport lessons, there are so many ways. I can choose whether we are inside the school or we're going outside. For example, today I take my class to play some floorball. We need to walk there, but I don't need to inform anybody. So, that's my autonomy that I can choose whether we are here or we are gonna go. So, as a teacher, I can make the choices about the place as well.* (Teacher 3)

*I can also choose how I'm gonna teach the subjects. Like we have the topic already, so because I have the year 5, everybody in year 5 in Finland has the same goals or what they need to learn so I keep my eye on that but I can choose in what way I'm gonna teach that object or how I'm gonna reach the goal with them thinking about the group.* (Teacher 3)

*I think in all the fields really. I feel that I am very free in how I carry out my work.* (Teacher 2)

Several teachers also reported that they could have some say in the time for the subjects. Specifically, the teachers in the study could, very often, decide on the scheduling of classes and timetabling of subjects. For instance, they can make changes to the order to subjects to some extent if they want to even though these are arranged by the principal. As one teacher shared that he might change the whole timetable or cancel all the subjects if there is a social problem in the classroom.

*I would find it extremely difficult because I don't know what's going to happen today. I have an idea that we have music, we have English, sports but that's all I know. I mean of course I have a basic idea for the lesson but it depends very much on what we did yesterday so I might change the whole timetable, cancel all the subjects if there's a social problem in the class for example. (Teacher 1)*

*I can decide when and what happens, of course as I said, we have the team and we talk about it and we plan it together and we have the certain books and curriculum that we are all following but we decide if this isn't necessary or this we want to focus on or so on. (Teacher 5)*

*We get the timetable from the school. But if I want I can change. So, I believe I can choose the timetable of the day. For example, if we go on a trip, the day can be longer, it can start in different time, I can choose that. We get the subjects from the school, I have the timetable, I have the subjects that I'm gonna teach but I can change the places. (Teacher 3)*

Autonomy can also be manifested in how flexible teachers decide things at the moment of the situation inside the classroom. Two teachers shared as follows:

*Quite many lessons we can switch places. That's also nice because if they are excited about some project that we are doing, I don't have to cancel the project and say now we have Mathematics, you cannot continue with the project anymore, but I can say let's continue the whole day tomorrow and then we do the Math and whatever we miss then we do them later. (Teacher 1)*

*I can always change a little bit when I see how things work. Or if I feel like in this project kids they love it, they want to do it now a bit longer than I expected, then I can also change and we can work on that project and change things on the way. (Teacher 8)*

However, due to the fact that some subjects have strict schedule, this can be viewed as an obstacle to teacher autonomy in scheduling of the classes. As one teacher explained:

*If you look at our timetable, Monday morning we start at 8 and we have woodwork and textiles. Those lessons I cannot but from ten to one o'clock, I decided to have art and Math on Monday but then I can change it, but then again from one to two there's Finnish and I cannot touch that because we mix them, we have children who go to S2 teachers like second language, Finnish as a second language teacher and I get students from other classes. There are certain lessons that have to be in place but then the rest of them I can decide where to put them. (Teacher 1)*

In spite of that, these teachers reported that they can change things quite easily without strictly following the plans they have prepared beforehand to adapt to the situations of the class. This allows them to consider the students' interests, emotions and needs.

*The pedagogic methods, on what day I teach what subject, I can choose mathematics today or maybe tomorrow, so it's you know, we have limits, you have to teach 4 hours mathematics but I choose whether it's Monday or Thursday and Friday and I choose when I go to the trip with children, I can choose really much how much I do cooperation with the colleagues and the staff.* (Teacher 6)

*I can decide if we have mathematics at 9 o'clock, what we do there, in which way we do that, how long it takes.* (Teacher 4).

In terms of teaching materials, some teachers reported that they could practice autonomy in their choice of teaching materials. This is especially clear in one interview when the teacher considered himself as an autonomous teacher described that he enjoyed the opportunities to design new teaching and learning materials by himself rather than using the textbooks.

*I would describe an autonomous teacher that it's someone who has a chance to really focus on learning and also autonomous teacher is someone who has the possibility to make his or her own materials like I do most of my materials myself.* (Teacher 1)

Taken together, one interviewee summed it up in her response:

*When I know what to do in that curriculum, so I can find when I do, what I do, in which way I do, but I'm 100 percent responsibility of results and are they in the safe, in physical and in mental I'm 100 percent responsibility for that.* (Teacher 4)

Regarding student assessment, teacher autonomy is manifested in different ways. For example, almost all the interviewed teachers (7/8) shared that they have autonomy in designing the test themselves or as a group with other teachers. But it is totally up to them whether they will use them or not. The interviewees stated that depending on the student groups that they can decide when and how they assess their students autonomously. Also, it was agreed among the interviewees that they are fully in charge of the assessment methods and procedures for students' performance.

*In our language team we have been doing little bit differently. It depends on the group then I can see that this spoken test will work with this group but it won't work with the other one*

*because of maybe behavioral issues or something. So, it's like we don't all have to do the exact same thing so there's autonomy in that too assessment. (Teacher 5)*

- *Curriculum*

As regards the curriculum, teachers seem to have some say in developing the curriculum. To be more specific, the teachers in the study are involved in determining the national curriculum as well as local curriculum guidelines through consultation process. All of the teachers (8/8) are consulted during the discussion stages. Teachers can choose to be part of different groups that they are willing to participate and contribute. As one teacher the teachers commented:

*We have a good chance in designing the curriculum as well. Teachers were asked a lot with the new one for the last 2 or 3 years. Teachers were in different groups according to what were your interests, you could go in one group or all the groups and give your opinion. (Teacher 1)*

During the interviews, all the participants (8/8) mentioned 'curriculum' in their answers, highlighting the fact that the ideas and theories in the curriculum inform their practice. As indicated in the interviews, curriculum content is centrally determined. However, in spite of this, Finnish teachers in the study still feel the freedom to stray from the mandatory curriculums. This allows them to adapt to the particular needs and circumstances of individual students. This feeling is shared by several teachers in the study.

*Of course, I don't mean that you can decide everything on your own coz there's a guideline that you have to follow and the national curriculum. (Teacher 2)*

*We are of course following the curriculum so we have the topic there. (Teacher 8)*

This representative statement shows that the view of curriculum being a 'course to run' is shared among the participants (Wallen & Tormey, 2019). It also shows that they have freedom in the way they approach it while sticking to the basic content or topics in the curriculum. Other respondents also shared the same views.

*We follow the curriculum and everything that it said there we have to do, but with autonomy we can decide how and when. (Teacher 1)*

*Those big lines, those in curriculum I can't decide that. For example, I would like to have more music and more arts but I can't decide that I have more because curriculum decides that or*

*teachers can't decide if he or she talks about religion it has been designed there in the law.*  
(Teacher 4)

Not only is this statement said by different interviewees, it was also repeated several times by one teacher during the interview.

*Of course, there's less autonomy, we have the curriculum that we have to follow.* (Teacher 1)

*I can choose how I do it in my class but I have to go through the topics that are there (the curriculum.* (Teacher 1)

Even though curriculum serves as the guidelines for what must be taught for Finnish primary teachers, it still leaves quite some room for teachers' interpretations and choice. The interviewees do not view themselves solely as the imparters of the prescriptive curriculum. Rather, they tend to perceive themselves as reflective interpreter of curriculum. This was illustrated clearly when one of the teachers also expressed his growing concern about the tendency of increasing curricular content after every reform:

*But the thing where I might not be so autonomous, I believe that the problem with the curriculum is that it's been building up, I don't know, ten years they change it a little bit, but they keep adding stuff in there, more content and never taking anything really away. So, if I would do absolutely everything in the curriculum, I would not have a chance to slow down and focus.* (Teacher 1)

The above once again suggests that curriculum documents provide overall structure but also allows significant flexibility and creativity within this given structure. The teachers still have the right to choose what topics to be covered in greater depth and what can be considered on an optional basis in their teaching. In other words, they can make modifications to the formal curriculum to some extent when implementing it.

Also, it was indicated by some teachers that despite following what curriculum mandates to teach, Finnish teachers still enjoy the freedom to be creative, engaged and challenged in their work. For instance, two teachers shared in their interviews:

*What I do is I choose, I look at the core topics and then I choose how to approach them, how much time to spend on each topic. Some topics we go through really quickly, some of them we go deep maybe other teachers do it differently but that's part of the autonomy.* (Teacher 1)

*Well they come from the curriculum but when we kind of build the whole, that we have a lot of autonomy in planning, how we carry out, in what ways things are studied and what things we want to put emphasis on. (Teacher 2)*

It would appear from the interview data analysis that Finnish national curriculum provides many opportunities for teachers to take the initiatives to adjust the curriculum according to their student's needs as well as their own teaching styles.

There are some areas that teachers feel they do not have room to exercise their autonomy. To be more specific, evaluation is an example.

*We think that the form we're giving the children that's awful but we can't do anything about it so that's the biggest thing I think. (Teacher 7)*

It is evident that teachers feel more of autonomy in some of the areas of teaching inside of the classrooms and less in others. For instance, one teacher inserted:

*All the preparations of the classes and planning is quite autonomous. But evaluation is not so autonomously because we have forms that we have to like what are we evaluating from pupils, what are we watching how she or he is doing and so on that's not so autonomously but preparing classes, planning a project. (Teacher 7)*

Another thing that was mentioned during the interviews is paper work in terms of bureaucratic procedure. One interviewee expressed her frustration with the system to which she has to put information of the students concerning their personal needs. This is because this task takes a lot of her time for other things.

*There's this computer system where we have to input all the information of the students who need help to get resources such as extra assistance or resources to support these students but the program itself is so heavy and is so badly designed that it takes a lot of our time to fill out those forms on the computer. Then you end up filling forms and you don't actually have time to plan what you are gonna do with the child the next day. So, that's kind of bureaucracy in that way. (Teacher 2)*

Another teacher who also spoke about the same thing expressed her doubt about the necessity of the task.

*But of course, there are certain things for example those forms, the paperwork that we do for the kids, especially for the ones with special needs. I'm not sure if all that papers are necessary. Sometimes I just feel like okay I just have to deal with this, I write this down and I set up a meeting with the psychologist or the parents. I'm not sure if that's the only way to do it but they have also developed those things in the past years...It's not like that I would be very frustrated with that part of the work but that might be because that's something that is given to you that you have to do this. (Minna Lempäälä)*

- *Professional development*

The third domain of work that the interviewed teachers strongly feel they can get their voice heard is professional development. This refers to teachers' perceptions that the schools they are working in offers opportunities to learn and develop professionally in their work (Short, 1994). Firstly, data analysis highlighted that the teachers in the study have the capacity for self-reflection on their teaching. This enables them to engage in lifelong learning process to develop their own teaching throughout their teaching careers. Secondly, the teachers can decide on many aspects of their teaching. For instance, as discussed in section 4.1.2 the interviewed participants shared that they have extensive freedom in determining how they teach, when and where teaching takes place and assessment methods they want to use. This reinforces the teachers' professional competence required of the profession.

Thirdly, by it seems that the participants are very active in studying more areas they think they are not good enough at and that they have a lot of opportunities to make proposals about professional development activities. For example, some interviewees shared that they could openly share with the school leaders their wishes in relation to training courses they would like to participate.

*If I want to study something more, then I have an opportunity to tell it to principal or if it's okay for her that or if we have money in the school I can go and study more something that's important to me or something that I can't do that I wanted to do. (Teacher 7)*

*Yeah if we want to go to the courses, we will talk with the principals if we have enough money. (Teacher 6)*

Thereby, the teachers indicated that their lifelong learning is supported. However, data analysis offered some insights into the constraints on teachers' practice of participating in developmental programs. One teacher described the situation as follows:

*But now we don't have money so we don't go to course. We teach each other in here because one is good in music, one is good in mathematics. We have double teachers who are elementary school teachers and mathematic teachers. Elementary school teachers and gymnastic teachers so we also educate each other here inside the school. (Teacher 6)*

- *School functioning*

When asked what areas they would like to have more autonomy over, all the participants answered that they are satisfied with the level of autonomy they have. The last aspect of work that teachers exercise their autonomy is school functioning which refers to decision making of their school as a community. Teachers share responsibility for school activities such as recreation and leisure.

*There are certain things that we decide as a school. For example, how we organize some events or celebrate, for example, Christmas time or things like that but what you really do in your own class. That's the area that you can choose and decide yourself. (Teacher 8)*

The teachers also reported that they actively participate in activities for school development as well.

*When this school's renovated, teachers have many meetings where we were designing the classrooms, what kind of desks, chairs we wanted to. I was very much involved in the technology for example, what kind of things we should have in the class, and what kind of programs and computers. Our headmaster usually asks me 'we have money so we can order something, what should we order?' I think as a teacher if you want, you can influence many things, or at least you can have your opinion heard. (Teacher 1)*

Another teacher reflected on the same matter but in a quite different way. This teacher felt that she could influence matters in her school with other colleagues, but for her, this is another form of autonomy because it was not just her decision to make but it involved other people:

*The principle is not telling us what to do but the different teams are discussing what would work in this situation like organizing the celebrations for example we discussed what would be the best idea and then it not that somebody is telling us that is how it's supposed to do, well I guess that's autonomy to some level but it's still different because it's, coz I see autonomy as me making my own decisions but when it works or like affects many people and we have to work together then it's more like a group teamwork. (Teacher 5)*



However, the last two domains, professional development and school functioning, were only quickly mentioned by a few interviewees (3/8).

In sum, teachers in the study were able to exert decision making over different school domains: teaching and assessing, curriculum implementation and development, school functioning and professional development.

## **4.2 Teachers' perceptions of factors that influence their autonomy**

As shown in the previous section, four significant themes emerged during analysis of data regarding the researcher question 1. This section provides a description of the findings regarding the second research question. The second research question concerns what kind of resources or obstacles were perceived as important for individual teachers' professional autonomy? Specifically, the research question is: What are the perceived factors that foster/ hinder teacher autonomy?

In the analysis, the following most common themes were identified by the participants: years of teaching experience, principal support, peers and parents; school culture; work status. In the next section, these themes will be reported in more detail and illustrated with examples.

### **4.2.1 Years of experience**

An interesting theme that emerged from the data is the change in the degree of teacher autonomy over the course of their teaching career. When teachers were asked whether they have experienced any changes in their autonomy, participants reported experiencing a positive change in their professional autonomy over their teaching career. Indeed, all of the teachers who participated in this study expressed that there has been an increase in their autonomy over the years. As one teacher stated:

*I think my autonomy is increasing, and the way I want to use it. (Teacher 7)*

When asked about the factors that help foster the development of teacher autonomy as a teacher, all of the teachers mentioned years of teaching experience in their career as influential in their autonomy development. According to the interviewees, teaching experience appears to have some impacts on their perceived level of autonomy. Most of the participants position the concept of teacher autonomy as an 'evolving capacity' in practice.

Generally, teachers believed that the more years of teaching experience, the more autonomous teachers feel they become. They also realize very clearly the difference in their teaching comparing now with the beginning of their career. According to all of the participants, autonomy comes with time, experience and age.

*Time, time, time and experience with the kids, but especially experience in my life, the whole life. I think every teacher in primary school or in kindergartens do with his or her personality so the experience in his or her life affects quite a lot I think. But as I said the experience also in the work. That's two things. (Teacher 4)*

*During these years I have become more autonomous over the years when I got more experience of teaching. (Teacher 2)*

*The older you are and the more you teach, you know you kind of earned it. (Teacher 6)*

*I didn't have that much autonomy as I have now because I'm older and I have more years behind me as a teacher so both have increased. (Teacher 7)*

These comments suggest that experience plays an important role in the continuing growth in teachers' perceived level of autonomy.

Interestingly, 8 out of 8 interviewees admitted that they were not as autonomous in the first few years of their teaching career as they are now. They even described themselves as being not so autonomous in the beginning of their career. One teacher elaborated on the tension she was going through when she was a young teacher:

*I have been so long as a teacher, it has educated me to, this work has educated me to. Of course, when I was younger teacher, I think I was not so autonomous, I wanted to be but I was quite unsure so I felt I wasn't so autonomous, I was more depended on for example what principals said rules or something like that. (Teacher 4)*

The interviewees also honestly expressed the lack of certainty in the decisions they were making when they just started and even a few years later. Lack of previous experience was believed to make it harder for the participants to use their autonomy. They claimed that they gain more confidence and efficacy belief in their teaching abilities when they have more years of experience. As one teacher put it:

*[...] I think every teacher has their own strengths and part of it I think comes from experience that you have the confidence that you know what you're doing. Compared to when I just started and even after 3 years, there's a different level of feeling competent and feeling competent for the job to do these decisions and create lessons that I don't need outside input for, or supervision for necessarily. (Teacher 5)*

There was a recognition among many teachers that when they just started teaching, they preferred following the outer source of input including teacher's guidebook or observing their colleagues as models. They shared that as a novice teacher, it was easier for them to have someone else to tell them what to do to get to know the job first and then when they learn the job a little bit more, grasping the basics then they can become more autonomous to make decisions and choices on their own.

*When I started, I wanted to do things maybe through the teacher books or with the ideas of other teachers. But now after these years I feel more autonomous I feel like brave enough kind of to make decisions myself. (Teacher 8)*

*Well when you come as a young teacher to some schools, maybe you have to kind of earned it (autonomy). When you are younger, maybe you watch the older colleagues more, ask from the colleagues and read your teachers' guide. (Teacher 6)*

Another teacher explained this point by narrating how difficult things were in the beginning of her career and how things get better after she has got more working experience in different schools.

*15, 16 years ago when I was a young student, I really had to ask from all the colleagues and special educating teachers and I needed really much support, I had a difficult class and difficult parents from the principal, but the more you experience and also different schools I've been working for different schools, so it has given me kind of ways to see the things. Also, in Finland every school is different, some principals are stricter with the teachers and some of them let them be more in their own way so years as a teacher, experiences with different levels children, special educating children, seeing different schools. (Teacher 6)*

In addition, several teachers shared that they had the tendency to seek for and rely on external validation from others such as their colleagues or principal, rather than basing their decisions on their own knowledge in the beginning of their career.

*Because I feel that at the beginning of my career, I was depending a lot on other teachers and making the decisions and plan together. (Teacher 2)*

*Maybe not as much as I am now because I think of course you're making your own decisions but when you don't have a lot of experience, you are just kind of observing the other teachers and trying to take or use the same, kind of safe choices just to get it started coz it's less tricky because there are a lot of choices that you can make or a lot of ways that you can do the teaching so that's why it's easier to do it together. (Teacher 3)*

*I considered more to be like a novice teacher at the beginning and looking at others for models on how to deal with different situations and after seeing a lot maybe understanding what direction not to go and what ways it feels good to me then choosing from those then you'll start to be strong-minded with your own path that you see as the best, that works, not the best like what be compared to others but like then you become kind of a strong teacher in that way.(Teacher 2)*

While lack of experience and teaching years may make teachers less confident about their capacities, the interviewees reported a rise in their willingness to use their autonomy and trust in themselves when they gain more experience across time. One of the interviewees stated:

*I think that during the time you're always getting new ideas, and then you are braver to use them. So, it can be that the autonomy is the same but then I'm just using more autonomy when I'm getting more experience more use so I'm willing to use it more, I'm trusting me more. (Teacher 3)*

This view echoed in another interview:

*Let's put it this way that the more experience I get, the more I'm willing to take autonomy and use the autonomy that I have. (Teacher 1)*

Teacher 1 continued to describe this change in his autonomy by stating that he has managed to build a sense of competence over time which supports him to take a more active stance in exercising his autonomy.

*I'm more willing, I have more competence to use the autonomy as much as I get. In the beginning it was harder, I like to stick because everything was new, I didn't know how to do things. Now I've done fifth grade for example so many times that I know the topics and I have a*

*lot of materials and I have everything in here so I feel comfortable even though if we go off the track with the students, and then I can use the autonomy and decide that I can even do things completely different this year. I think this is how it has changed compared to the beginning. I was already quite free and spontaneous from the beginning but not as much as I am now.* (Teacher 1)

*Work experience and the model of other teachers around you affect a lot how perceive autonomy and how you use it. I feel that at the beginning of my career, I was depending a lot on other teachers and making the decisions and plan together. Also, here of course we rely on teamwork a lot and we work together. But here it's a big school and our team is very big so it just sometimes makes more sense to also make decisions of your own and kind of find your own way. I would say that the more children you've met, the more different kinds of problems you deal with. The more you've seen then it gives you more trust in yourself, and that trust is also a source of you then can do your work more autonomously.* (Teacher 2)

Upon describing the increase in their autonomy, teachers mentioned several factors that contribute to the change. The findings revealed that the number of teaching years had a profound impact on teachers' sense of autonomy.

#### 4.2.2 Support from principal

Principal leadership is often seen to exert a powerful influence on teacher autonomy. In this study, the increasing pattern of change in perceived autonomy was believed to relate to the level of support from school principal. Most importantly to the group of participants, there must be support from the school administrators like principals or headmasters. Most of the participants (6/8) in the study agreed that the most significant element for supporting them to be autonomous is the principal support.

Teachers in the study felt that they are supported and encouraged to make their own decisions by the principal. Support from the principal was recognized as critical to the teachers' ability to be autonomous.

First of all, principal understanding was deemed a crucial condition for their sense of autonomy. It was pointed out in the interviews that the principals create a safe environment for the teachers to share the challenges they are dealing with. Moreover, the principal is able to articulate an

understanding and genuine concern towards the teachers' working conditions and their emotions. Thus, the teacher feels comfortable discussing their instructional issues with. One participant who has worked under the leadership of different principals recalled her experience with a previous principal. It was shown in her interview that no matter what happens, the principal still stays beside the participant to improve the situations together with her.

*My ex principal who died once said that you are really human, that you understand that you make mistakes that you forgive them and you are beside with you so you don't yell at him or her but you say like okay, hey let's change the things. You make mistakes, everybody does okay let's go on together so he understood that well as Satu Lena (the school's current principal) of course. He wanted people to show that they are not perfect, that they sometimes make mistakes and we cooperate together, that we are only humans, we are not perfect so let's change the situation better together, let's not anybody leave alone when she or he feels sad or had a bad situation. (Teacher 4)*

*Last year we had the principal we had last year the principle that knew that she is only one year so it was quite a different year but now with Satu Leena I think there is more discussions about everything and I think she knows and she wants to know how we're doing so I think that's the school culture. (Teacher 7)*

As noted from the above extract, the principal not only provides individual support for the teacher with her mistakes, demonstrated care and empathy for the teacher, but also builds a cooperative working culture among teachers in the school.

According to other interviewees, their principals acted like an instructional leader and also as a mentor whom they go for to ask for guidance and advice when they face some challenges. One teacher who has been teaching at the same school for 13 years noted that when she first came to the school, she was quite shy and did not know exactly what to do. But thanks to the help from her principal that she has reached the current level of autonomy years after years. Over her teaching career, she has also experienced different principals, she commented:

*I think it's been great that I have had so many principals during my career but they have all been very discussing. They want to know how I'm doing. In Finland or at least in this school, principals are not watching what I'm doing, they are not breathing in my back 'am I doing okay'. So, I think it's very important in that case that I know that if I have any kinds of problem,*

*I can lead to the principles, I can like 'I have this kind of situation, can you help me?' and I always have had help. (Teacher 7)*

Similarly, one respondent agreed that she knows her principal is always there for her to ask for help. But she mostly felt autonomous because her school's principal gives her the opportunities to make decisions on her own in daily situations.

*Well in a way of course is the principal gives us the autonomy because she's busy with her thing so she's not here so we are autonomous. Of course, we can go for her and ask things or ask for help as well so she is there for us. But in everyday situations, she lets us decide and do our things. (Teacher 8)*

Principal support not only comes from letting teachers make their own decisions but also from listening to teachers' wishes, intentions and needs. The teachers in the study felt that they are able to openly express what they would like to do with the principal of their school. For example, they have the chance to say what they would like to teach. Even though those wishes are not always satisfied, being able to honestly speak about their personal feelings helps the teachers sense their autonomy.

*I have always been able to say what I would like to do, what I would like to teach or is there something that I think that I am not so good at or what grades I want to teach. Of course, it's not always possible to plan teaching in the whole school like everybody says that I want to be a first-grade teacher, everybody can't be but I have always had opportunities to say what I want and usually I have had the situations that I have something I want, not everything and I think it's OK. (Teacher 7)*

As indicated from the above extract, the respondent's school principal treats her as individual and attend to her personal needs and preferences. Additionally, two other interviewees also reported that the school leaders also make them feel that their opinions, ideas and expertise mattered within the school. For instance, one teacher specifically indicated that his school's principal supported his initiatives and harnessed his potentials. Thus, he really feels that he can get his voice and opinions heard by the principal

*I think as a teacher if you want, you can influence many things, or at least you can have your opinion heard. Let's put it this way, of course if there are 40 teachers, everyone's wishes cannot always be heard but I think the basic idea is that I feel like I'm very much listened to by*

*the headmaster. And our headmaster is very excited when I go and ask, usually when I go and say we would like to do this and this kind of project, he said it's okay and then I feel like I get a lot of support. (Teacher 1)*

Likewise, another respondent experienced the same thing exclaimed:

*I feel like we have very good principal. So, in this school I can have my voice heard. (Teacher 3)*

The above statements illustrate that the participants felt that the principal respect and have trust in their knowledge and expertise.

Last but not least, teacher 1 also shared how the support and trust from the principal can strengthen his sense of autonomy. He felt a source of on-going support in terms of perceived possibilities given by the principal to apply new ideas in teaching. Not only that, his school's principal also expressed a positive attitude like excitement towards them. These things combined help him feel trusted enough to try harder autonomously and make innovative endeavors.

*I feel that I get a lot of support. I've always got a lot of support from my headmaster, for example, and they let me try things and do things because they get excited as well. So that's why I probably feel that I have so much autonomy because I feel so trusted. And because I feel so trusted, I want to do my best. And that's why I feel very autonomous. (Teacher 1)*

The principal indeed creates an environment that embraces experimentation by the teacher helps build his sense of autonomy.

In addition, teacher 1 contended that if the headmaster would not be very supportive, that would affect a lot his autonomy. He spoke about how he would find it very difficult to work if he did not feel the support, trust and respect from the headmasters in school. Consequently, he would end up feeling that his autonomy was taken away from him more or less. It was found that teachers' sense of autonomy was greatly shaped by the trust and respect from school leaders for teachers as professionals.

The results of data analysis also indicated that most of the teachers in this study viewed their school principal as a sustaining factor towards their sense of autonomy. The teachers in the study offered a rich description of their highly effective school leaders. In discussing the role of the principal, the



teachers described him or her as supportive, trusting, respecting, straightforward, good at leading people, taking the responsibility.

Since almost all (7/8) of the teachers interviewed have experience of working in more than one school, they reported that principals differ in their willingness to give autonomy to the teachers, which have certain impacts on teachers' perceived autonomy in a positive or negative way. In one case, the interviewee shared that one of her previous principals was more controlling and not very supportive of her personal practices.

*I have had principals like I said very great principals that are very different principles from each other and some of the principals gives more autonomy for teachers than others. And we have had here the principal who was always checking have you done this or she gave me a task and I did it the way I thought it should be done or it's best to do and then she just came and said 'oh you did this way, I thought it would be better this way and she changed everything upside down so I think that's the main thing here how the principal treats us and also how I think the principal treats. It's not always the same thing. But now I have (autonomy) I think the situation is great. (Teacher 7)*

The interviewee also suggested that it is as important the level of principal support for her as her perception of principal support.

In sum, the findings revealed that school principals' support does matter to teachers' sense of professional autonomy. School principals' support was reported to positively influence teachers' perceptions regarding their perceived level of autonomy. Specifically, this study illustrates that when teachers perceive that principals understand their issues, create a safe and comfortable environment for teachers to discuss and share problems, offer help for challenges, empower teachers' decision making, teachers are very likely to feel autonomous at work.

#### 4.2.3 Collaborative work environment

Data analysis also shows that collaborative work culture in schools is another influential factor on the teachers' perceived autonomy. Several participants also referred to collegial community as a central component of school culture supporting teachers' sense of autonomy. The majority of the teachers interviewed indicated that they were part of a team that works together.

All of the teachers in the study are advocates of collaboration with their colleagues. The findings showed that the teachers were very willing to engage in professional collaboration in schools. As noted from the data analysis, the teachers in the study reported that they collaborate with their colleagues both formally and informally. It can be regular team meetings or just spontaneous casual conversations. As one of the interviewees said:

*Well we have a meeting, and on Tuesdays we have all teachers together, and then we have teams which are doing different kinds of stuff but everyday it's normal conversation like 'how do you do this and how do your children are doing that well'. We are really doing this together. You are not alone with your children, you can always ask help and you will always get help and discuss about the children's behaviors and stuff and also with the assistant, school assistant persons they are really important. (Teacher 6)*

The data also showed that the Finnish primary teachers interviewed collaborate with one another under different forms. This include asking for help and offering help whenever they can. All of the teachers reported that they felt open and comfortable to talk about their difficulties with their colleagues at work. As one teacher shared that he does not mind asking another teacher to teach the topic to his students because they all share student learning as their final common goal.

*It's like giving children the best possible teaching by asking help from someone who is more motivated or more talented and this is also one big part of autonomy. I feel that I can ask someone who is better than me to teach the topic to the children and I don't think our headmaster knows half of what's going on and they don't mind. (Teacher 1)*

The respondents also perceived their work environment as a safe place to say that they do not know how to do something and that they need help with their colleagues. All of the participants mentioned that they are able to have open discussions about difficulties with their colleagues.

*Here's very much trusting from the principal and I think the main thing despite principal is the coworkers that I know that I'm not alone although I'm doing this job by myself and very much like the way I want to do. But there is always someone to talk if there are difficulties or someone to ask if I don't know how I should do something or if I just want to learn something there are so many teachers here that are amazing in some areas so I can call or go to them and ask 'could you please tell me how could I do this because you're so good in this'. I think that's the heart of the school. (Teacher 7)*

The teachers shared that the collaborative work environment where all of the staff work together and help each other not only enables them to be autonomous, but it also makes them feel that they are not always working alone. Finnish teachers in the study really enjoy their autonomy but none of them feels that they are working alone since they can always ask for help.

*I always have had help and I think that's the whole teacher group or principals or school assistants, we all have that kind of ideal thinking that we try to help each other here and that helps to be an autonomous because you know that although you do it by yourself, you are not alone. (Teacher 7)*

The teachers also reported that they collaborate by discussing with other teachers about how to teach a topic as one teacher put it:

*I think most teachers are really into the jobs and we talk about our teaching methods and ideas and lots of those things in teachers' plans. I think we have all people in this building, have more time to be in there and chat about what worked and what didn't work. I think it's the equal community that's the key to that. (Teacher 5)*

Some of the teachers I interviewed found peer support in the form of designing and planning the lessons jointly with their coworkers, often of the same grade group or subjects, to take decisions on topics to teach on each day or week. This appears to be the most common form of collaboration in their schools. They can make final decisions on their own about what they want to do, cooperation with others does not limit their abilities to choose whatever ways they would like to do.

*I have quite a lot of freedom what I'm gonna do during the days. But also, I'm working together with my colleagues. I don't see the teachers are working alone and making their own decisions here. I believe we always make a lot of planning together. We use quite a lot of hours to work together just to make planning. And yes, I believe that I have quite a lot of freedom to make the decisions. (Teacher 3)*

*I have great nearest coworkers and we do have planning times and we do cooperate but then we have the possibilities to say to others that I don't wanna do that kind of thing, I do it that way because I wanna try this or that. (Teacher 7)*

From the participants' responses, these conversations and discussions with their colleagues offered a number of professional development experience for them. In one case, even though the school

facility limits her to stay behind the classroom doors, she still feels welcomed and free to knock the door and ask for help whenever she needs.

*I think in this school if we want to, we can go to our classroom with the children and close the door and we can be there. But we all usually close the door because it's so crowded, the noise makes us close the door. But I think in this school, we are always welcome to each other's classes. If I have something, I can go to whoever's class, knock the door and ask: 'Sorry! can I ask this one?' and the environment of here is very open so we discuss about things quite a lot and especially with the new teachers. (Teacher 7)*

The teachers admitted the importance of autonomy, but they also expressed their wish to cooperate more with their colleagues. For some teachers, it is very important for them to work with their colleagues, especially the ones in their grade group. One teacher who has been teaching for more than 20 years shared that it is just as simple as talking with other colleagues that makes her feel less lonely at work.

*It's quite important but sometimes it's not. I would like to do more cooperation because sometimes it feels lonely. But yes, I would say 60 percent of this work I can decide so much. But sometimes I need to talk with other colleagues. (Teacher 4)*

For some teachers, cooperation is also a part of autonomy. One teacher stated that working with others is a part of autonomy. Autonomy entails both cooperating with others and working independently as well.

*I don't know everybody but I need this cooperating and individualism and like autonomic is both of them. (Teacher 7)*

This teacher also claimed that autonomy helps satisfy her need to develop as a teacher through discussing and learning from other teachers. For her, developing as a teacher is very important aspect of autonomy. And in order for her to develop herself, she needs to work with others.

*Because that's (being autonomous) when I can choose to do the cooperating, I can choose what I want to learn or ask other teachers. I think developing as a teacher is very important in the autonomy as well. I want to develop and if I want to develop as a teacher, I need to do some kind of discussion with others. I do have right now the nearest coworkers that want to do the same thing, I think they increase my autonomy. But if I have someone just saying that I*

*'don't wanna work with you, I wanna do everything by myself', then something about my teacherness is missing. (Teacher 7)*

The analysis also shows that mutual trust and respect among teachers in the school helps teachers to work autonomously. Some teachers feel that their colleagues can have a certain impact on their autonomy.

*But now I have very nice colleagues. We are very open and everybody respects each other's work and we respect the fact that we are doing things differently because we have very different personalities. But if this would be taken away, I think it would also kill the autonomy more or less. (Teacher 1)*

Teachers also identified collaboration as a resource for the promotion of autonomy. Autonomy and cooperation can reinforce each other.

*There were 2 fourth grades and 2 fifth grades, so basically what we did was that we combined our classes because we work so much together that we can switch lessons and I had 30 students and she had 30 students so basically we had 60 students and this was extremely productive because she also cares about the children very much and she's really into her job so we share the autonomy and we were kind of strengthening each other's autonomy by support and being interested in the same topics. The positive thing is good cooperation. (Teacher 1)*

The collaborative structure of the school was also evident in some teachers' responses when they stated that there is sense of mutual trust and respect for one another which creates a 'real sense of community' in schools.

*I think the mutual trust definitely is that everybody treats colleagues as equal and the principal is treating us as equal and it's not like nobody's telling someone else what to do. I think in this school we have real sense of community and working like and the focus is on the kids. (Teacher 5)*

Trust and respect also come from the fact that the teachers viewed themselves and their colleagues as professionals. The teachers emphasized on the trusting culture within the school community, where mistakes could be aired and learned from. School cultural characteristics and organizational structure mediate the way teachers perceive about their personal autonomy.

*We have here a common trust to very highly professional teachers and we give that trust to each other so that the administration or the superiors are not checking on us so much but they'd rather know that these are professionals who are doing their work as well as possible.* (Teacher 2)

The teachers reported that they engage in collaborative practices frequently with their coworkers.

*I do a lot of cooperating with my teacher friends and other teachers in here and I think that's the salt of this job and that I can have discussions and we can decide together what's important and what's not. So, I think that's also a part of autonomy. I don't see that I have to do the cooperating or go work with others. Those are the best discussions that I also learn and can use in my own work.* (Teacher 7)

Even though some teachers in the study have been teaching very long time and they have a lot of experience, they still show very much willingness to collaborate with the other colleagues. For instance, one teacher who has been teaching for more than 20 years shared:

*I'm very autonomous, my personality is like that and I have been so long as a primary school teacher so I know well what I have to do, what I'm not allowed to do, so I'm very autonomous I think. But I try to cooperate, I don't want to behave like I wouldn't like to do but I could manage very well by myself, I'm very sure about myself in this work.* (Teacher 4)

However, a few participants shared that they feel they do not have enough collaboration with their colleagues as a group or team.

*Yeah, I'm very happy. Actually, I would like to work more with my colleagues in my year group. We have three teachers in year five, but one teacher is more like that he's not working so much together with us so it's only me and the other teacher. But if I could choose, I'd like to do more work with other teachers, more planning.* (Teacher 3)

Similarly, another teacher commented that even though she and her peer teachers are very willing to share ideas and advice for each other as a team, she still feels that it is not enough working together and doing things together.

*In this school we have teamwork as well but not that much. For example, in this building we have four second classes and we are quite autonomous. we do things in our own ways. Of course, we share some good ideas, some good tips and advices for each other but especially*

*for this team, we don't work that much together. Actually, I think we should work more together.* (Teacher 8)

In sum, the teachers in the study indicated that they are engaged in a variety of collaboration activities. Interview data highlight that the collaborative structure of the school supports teacher autonomy.

#### 4.2.4 Other factors

- *Trust from parents*

Some of the interviewed teachers (3/8) also stated that parents' trust was an enabling factor for them to feel a sense of autonomy. All 3 respondents who regarded trust from parents as an important factor in their autonomy had positive experience with their students' parents at work. As the following quotation shows:

*I feel like part of the autonomy is definitely that parents and our principal trust us, they don't question these things too much. Well, of course it depends on parents. There must be some parents who come to the school interested to see what or how we do things but in general the parents trust us and they think we do our job in a good way and they let us do things.* (Teacher 8)

Also, the respondents were well aware that trust is not a stable asset therefore they always tried to be responsible in their work.

*I feel that if the parents trust me, it gives me the feeling that I have to do my best. If they would question me constantly or complain, I would find it really difficult and stressful. But I don't usually have that because I make things clear in the beginning how I feel. And I think it's a little bit the same way as it is with the headmaster, that if I get trust, I get responsibilities, it goes the same way with the parents.* (Teacher 1)

*Parents are giving me pressure that I need. I have to think what I'm doing and why I'm doing that so if someone asks me, I have thought about that earlier. But that kind of pressure isn't negative pressure.* (Teacher 7)

One teacher pointed out that teachers' high-level education was a contributing factor towards the fact that they were recognized as professionals and were trusted that they are morally responsible for their work. Thus, despite the fact that parents sometimes get involved in their children's learning and teachers' teaching and do question about what the teachers are doing, the teachers still feel a sense of freedom in their work.

*I think that they trust me that I'm usually doing the right things and they can ask me if they think that something is not OK or why I do this kind of thing or evaluation why this child is getting this or that or that. I think I have the trust and that's very good thing because I don't always have to think about what are the parents saying. I also think that when we have a master degree, the education that brings us the trust. (Teacher 7)*

*Well, it must be also parents. I feel like the parents also respect our work. They do ask questions and they are interested in how the kids do in the classrooms but it still gives us the freedom of autonomy. It must be how we see our work as a teacher. I feel like I'm free to make plans as I want or what is good for the kids of course, not always as I want. But I feel freedom of making the plans. (Teacher 8)*

- *The structural system of the school*

All of the teachers viewed their schools as a very pleasant place to work and to try their best. Among 8 interviewed teachers, 3 teachers believed that their ability to be autonomous as a teacher was attributed to the Finnish school system. Specifically, one interviewee asserted that autonomy was something she felt internally but was given externally by the educational system.

*I think about the concept more that it is something that the system already involves so it is an external thing that this system allows us to have. Like the educational system in Finland, it is something written into the system. I think you can feel it from inside, that can be something that motivates or guides your work, but it is something given from outside actually. (Teacher 2)*

Another teacher agreed that it was the system that allowed her to be autonomous. She explained further that in Finnish schools, teachers were respected as high-quality professionals. Thus, there was no external inspection system existing, rather evaluation and feedback system, which allowed her to feel autonomous in her work.

*The system allows you to be autonomous because it's the big responsibility on the principal because she is responsible for all of our work in the end. But it's because nobody's coming to*



*check our classes that we teach. It's just the feedback we get from students and the parents that guide our work instead of an outside authority. So, it's a structural thing that allows us to be autonomous.* (Teacher 5)

This idea was echoed in other interviews:

*It's in our system, it's in our bureaucracy, it's in our school system that you really don't you know involve in teachers' way to teach his or her own class.* (Teacher 6)

*We don't have any school inspections so there's nobody coming to my class and checking that are you doing this that you said you're going to do.* (Teacher 1)

- *Status of work contract: permanent vs fix term contract*

Even though this theme emerged in one interview, the researcher believed that it was a new finding in this study. Reflecting on her job status led one teacher commenting that when she first came to work in the current school, she felt that she did not know how to use her autonomy. The reason for this was that she was not a permanent teacher at that point so she tended to just follow everything given to her because she was not sure about her job status in the school.

*I think when I came here I didn't know how to use my autonomy like I know now. But when you come to the school and you are not permanent teacher and something like that, you don't have so much you can say, you can't choose. You have taken the thing that is given to you because you are not permanent and you never know the next year. It's always year after year and always the same thing and you even have to always all the time show that I'm good please give me more years, I'm so good, so it's smart acting those first few years.* (Teacher 7)

As a novice teacher, the respondent reported experiencing insecurity and uncertainty about her work contract, which influenced her sense of autonomy in her work.

Even though this theme was not repeatedly mentioned by the participants during the interviews but it was discussed by one of the participants being an inhibiting factor for her to exercise their autonomy.

In conclusion, the major changes that teachers have experienced are attributable to several different factors, including years of teaching experience, principal support, peer support, school culture, trust from parents, the school structure and status of employment.

## 4.3 Discussion

In this study, teachers' perceptions regarding professional autonomy and influencing factors towards teachers' perceived autonomy are examined. The findings from this study support previous studies on this topic but they contribute to the literature by giving new insights into individual teachers' detailed accounts; especially, participant teachers are from various grade groups and various stages of teaching career. The results also provide insightful questions for further research.

### 4.3.1 Teachers' understanding of teacher autonomy

In regard to the first research question: "How do Finnish class teachers perceive teacher autonomy?" findings from collected data suggest:

On an overall level, Finnish class teachers perceived that teacher autonomy was a complex construct. With respect to their definitions, the teachers all incorporated into their understanding of teacher autonomy several key components. All in all, 4 constructs were taken as constituting elements in the definitions of teachers' professional autonomy: responsibility, professional independence and competence and willingness. Firstly, the study showed that feeling of personally responsible for students' outcomes as well as students' well-being was viewed as central to the notion of teacher autonomy. Also, the result showed that teacher autonomy means professional independence which refers to the pedagogical freedom to make professional choices on their own within the curricular frameworks. Besides, participants defined teacher autonomy as professional competence and willingness which involves the capacity for actions that are in line with inner values and interests. Similar definitions of teacher autonomy are found in the case of second language teaching. As discussed in the literature, for instance, Little (1995) suggested a definition of teacher autonomy as taking full responsibility for teaching through reflectively evaluate and critically analyze their practice (p. 179). In 1996, William Littlewood provided a conceptual framework for learner autonomy which consists of two main components: "ability" and "willingness". The former entails necessary knowledge and skills to exercise independent choices. The latter consists of two elements: motivation and confidence. Lacking either of these two does not enable learners to perform autonomously and effectively. He also held that these components are distinctive by nature but closely linked at the same time (p. 428). Within the same line of thought, Jing Huang defines teacher autonomy as "teachers' willingness, capacity and freedom to take control of their own teaching and learning" (Huang, 2005, p.4 as cited in Usma Wilches, 2007,

p. 248). In the present study, it was not the case that one individual participating teacher could give a full definition of the concept, but most of the interviewed teachers were very aware of what the concept entails. In sum, Finnish teachers in the study viewed teacher autonomy from a reflective perspective. Teacher autonomy was conceptualized in terms of internal sense of responsibility, independence, competence and willingness.

Regarding the significance of teacher autonomy, the results of the study indicated that teacher autonomy played an important role in teaching profession and that both teachers and students can benefit from teacher autonomy. Teacher autonomy was believed to be beneficial and vital for teachers' motivation, professional development, job commitment and student learning and autonomy. My findings with regards to the importance of teacher autonomy aligns with existing research in the literature regarding the beneficial impacts of experiencing a sense of autonomy on various psychological aspects such as teachers' job commitment and teacher motivation (Brunetti, 2001). Several studies have confirmed a positively strong association between teacher autonomy and their level of job commitment. A study conducted by Rosenholtz & Simpson (1990) on 1,213 teachers from almost 80 elementary schools in Tennessee, found that autonomy is one of the organizational factors that influence teachers' commitment to their workplace. Likewise, the present study confirmed the theoretical view that autonomy or self-determination is central to intrinsic motivation (Deci and Ryan, 1985)

In terms of student learning and autonomy, the existing literature highlighted a positive relationship between teachers' classroom autonomy support and students' academic performance. This is consistent with several studies' results (Assor, 2012; Reeve et al., 2004). For instance, Reeve and his colleagues (2004) conducted a study that consists of a control group and an experimental group. This study reported that teachers with autonomy has a tendency to employ more autonomy supportive instructional strategies rather than controlling one. It also showed that autonomy-supportive teachers can considerably increase students' engagement by corresponding to students' needs and interests which provide students in classrooms with the opportunities to actively involved during instruction and attempt to hold themselves responsible for their own learning. In other words, a greater use of autonomy-supportive behaviours of teachers during instruction, the greater engagement of students. Another research by Assor, Kaplan & Roth (2002) which involved 862 students (grade 3-8) in Israeli studied their perceptions of teachers' behaviours in relation to other variables pertaining to their perceived behavioral and academic engagement. According to this study, autonomy enhancement behaviours include providing choice, fostering

understanding and interests, and allowing criticism. The study's findings revealed that teachers' behaviours have big effects on students' cognitive and behavioral engagement in learning, both children and adolescents. Similar results were reported in other survey study designed by Tsai and his colleagues (2008) which revealed that students' interest experience in real-life classrooms was mostly predicted by teachers' autonomy-support behaviours in lessons.

The present study also found that teacher autonomy was essential for teachers' professional development. Firstly, teacher autonomy was regarded as a fundamental means for teachers to make use of their teaching competencies and talents as resources. In addition, some teachers also indicated that autonomy allows them to engage in increasing their knowledge and skills. These findings resonate with the literature both teacher professional development (Kuijpers et al., 2010; Evers et al., 2016; Kwakman, 2003). Throughout the literature on teacher's professional growth, autonomy has been seen as an essential factor. In fact, in a study examining the relationship between employees' learning opportunities and their workload and its effects on employees' experience of learning opportunities at work, Ruysseveldt & Dijke (2011) found that autonomy was a moderator of this relationship. Specifically, the authors found that low-level autonomy could jeopardize the positive effects of low-level workload on learning opportunities. By contrast, high-level autonomy can decrease the negative effects of high-level workload on learning at work (p. 478).

Besides, the qualitative investigation which was carried out revealed the existing viewpoints of teachers themselves on the characteristics of autonomous teachers. The participants of this study described an autonomous teacher as self-critical and self-reflective practitioners. Secondly, openness to personal and professional development was perceived as one of the characteristics of autonomous teachers. A number of participants see an autonomous teacher as being professionally competent. The finding also suggested that autonomous teachers are those who are self-reliant professionals. They have trust in themselves and they are able to act on different situations and make decisions on their own in their work. Finally, an autonomous teacher was also depicted as a responsible person.

Furthermore, data analysis of this study provides numerous insights into different domains of work teachers exercise autonomy. The fourth theme demonstrated that the Finnish class teachers in this study have been significantly involved in decision making about many aspects of their work both inside the classroom and outside the classroom or the school. This study showed that teachers could

engage in decision making about matters both inside the classroom and in a school as a whole. These include “teaching and assessment, curriculum development, professional development, and school functioning” (Wilches, 2007). Specifically, regarding areas related to teaching and assessing, the teachers appeared to have comprehensive freedom behind the classroom walls. As found in other studies, teachers perceived their classrooms as an area with the highest level of autonomy.

The second most prominent domain of work that the interviewed teachers strongly feel they can get their voice heard is curriculum. Teachers seem to have some say in developing the curriculum and the freedom to stray from the mandatory curriculums. This was also found in other research (Niemi, 2013, p. 127). Even though curriculum serves as the guidelines for what must be taught for Finnish primary teachers, it still leaves quite some room for teachers’ interpretations and choice. Interview data analysis suggested that Finnish national curriculum provides many opportunities for teachers to take the initiatives to adapt to the curriculum in accordance with student’s needs, interests and their own teaching styles. The third domain of work that the interviewed teachers strongly feel they can get their voice heard is professional development, but this area was not emphasized much in teachers’ responses. In terms of school functioning area, a few teachers shared that they have the ability to get involved in decision making within school community concerning matters such as event organizing. However, this domain was not seen as prominent element as other domains of work teachers felt strongly autonomous.

#### 4.3.2 Teachers’ perceived factors influencing autonomy

With respect to the second research question, the analysis showed that for all of the participating teachers’ levels of autonomy increase across time. Besides the results regarding teachers’ understanding of the concept of teacher autonomy, qualitative data revealed some noticeable factors that may affect teachers’ perceived autonomy.

A key new finding of the study is that teachers’ perceived autonomy was influenced by years of experience, reflecting a link that has not been noted in previous studies on teacher autonomy. However, in the current study, years of experience was an important topic among respondents. My study revealed a positive relationship between age/years of experience with teachers’ sense of autonomy. Apparently, the more the teaching year of my respondents, the more autonomous they reported to feel. An explanation could be that experienced teachers having more teaching skills and capabilities, which help them do their job more easily, whereas inexperienced teachers, who are

very likely new in their teaching career, tend to need more support and constructive advice from their more experienced fellow teachers. Research indeed emphasized the need of support for novice teachers in the literature. Although it has been uncertain how age or years of teaching experience affected my findings, prior research suggests that further research into the relationship between age/years of teaching experience is definitely needed.

The leadership of school principals provide a critical lever in producing a school environment that maximizes teachers' sense of autonomy through personal and professional support for teachers to navigate through the demands and specialized needs of students in their classrooms. The result also shows that the teachers rely on principals' support, trust and respect for them to feel a sense of autonomy. Most of the interviewed teachers viewed their school administrators as instructional leaders who allow them freedom to make decisions on their own but never leave them 'out on their own'. The teachers I interviewed felt engaged in different ways. Their opinions were sought, their knowledge and expertise were valued and acknowledged. Previous research findings support the significance of positive relationship between leaders and teachers in schools (Earley & Weindling, 2004; Ringler et al., 2018). This study also showed that the current leadership in 3 primary schools was in a pedagogical way which means that school principals have the capacities to motivate and support teachers' work. They also managed to create a secure, open and supportive climate for effective learning. This reflects the reality of how principals in Finnish schools actually do when leading their schools (Saarivirta & Kumpulainen, 2016).

Data analysis also showed that collaborative work culture in schools is another influential factor on the teachers' perceived autonomy. The findings showed that the teachers were very willing to engage in professional collaboration in schools. All of the teachers reported that they felt open and comfortable to talk about their difficulties with their colleagues at work. In the literature on teacher collaboration, four categories of collaborative learning activities have been identified. They are: "story-telling and scanning, aid and assistance, sharing and joint work" (Doppenberg, den Brok & Bakx, 2012, p. 901). In an exploratory study of 260 secondary school teachers, de Vries and his colleagues distinguished two types of teacher collaboration: exchange activities and professional collaboration. In the current study, all of these forms of collaboration were present in teachers' responses. At the same time, my findings showed that Finnish class teachers held a reflective attitude towards autonomy, which allowed an openness towards collaboration and thus a collaborative attitude. The current research's findings are supported by the work of Vangrieken & Kyndt (2019) who found that the relationship between teacher autonomy and collaboration is

influenced by teachers' attitude towards autonomy. As discussed in section 2.2, teachers' attitudes can be reactive or reflective. Reactive attitude leads to teachers being resistant to external influences, isolating themselves behind the classroom doors. On the contrary, a reflective perspective focuses on personal choice based on an awareness of inevitable external influences and interdependence. The collaborative structure of the school was also evident in some teachers' responses when they stated that there is sense of mutual trust and respect for one another which creates a 'real sense of community' in schools. Trust and respect also come from the fact that the teachers viewed themselves and their colleagues as professionals. The teachers emphasized on the trusting culture within the school community, where mistakes could be aired and learned from.

Parents' trust on teachers and schools was also perceived by the respondents to have influential effects on teachers' own sense of autonomy. Studies examining parent-teacher trust has found that trust is an important component of parent-teacher relationship (Schweizer, Niedlich, Adamczyk & Bormann, I. (2017) and students' learning outcome, especially in elementary school setting (Santiago, Garbacz, Beattie, & Moore, 2016). However, research that has investigated the effects and significance of parental trust level for teachers on teachers' autonomy are rare, if any, in the literature. Parent trust for teachers is a construct worthy of examination because it appears to influence parents' attitudes, behaviors and involvement towards teachers' classroom practice (Epstein, 1986). This might be assumed to consequently affect teachers' sense of professional autonomy.

Structural system of the school was recognized as one of the keys for teachers to be autonomous professionals which was described as the main principal of Finnish teacher education program (Niemi, 2013, p. 117). According to research literature on Finnish educational system, all teachers in basic education level are required to obtain a Master's degree to become qualified as a teacher (Niemi, 2013, p. 133) which in return builds trust from the society. Schools being free from external inspection is another typical feature of Finland's education system. The findings of the current study reflect the theory meeting the reality.

Although status of work contract did not seem to have any major effects on teachers' sense of autonomy, my findings indicated some effects on teacher autonomy, especially in the beginning of teaching career. An explanation might be that work status might have more of indirect or implicit effects on teacher autonomy. To verify this line of reasoning, it would be necessary to study teachers' work contract in relation to teachers' sense of autonomy in future research. Such research

seems especially essential to provide explanations for the rather surprising results in terms of the effects of teachers' work contract status on teacher autonomy.

To sum up, this study significantly contributed to the pool of knowledge by unfolding the influential factors affecting teachers' perceived level of autonomy. These factors consists of various elements including both personal and contextual aspects.



# 5 CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This chapter gives an overview of the whole research. Firstly, it restates the objectives of the research. After the key findings from the data analysis are summarized. Secondly, it speaks to the interpretations and recommendations. Moreover, research limitations and future research directions are also mentioned in one section. Last but not least, theoretical and practical implications of the study will be presented in the final section.

## 5.1 Summary of the study

This study seeks to answer the following questions: 1) How do primary class teachers perceive their professional autonomy as a teacher? 2) What are the perceived factors that foster/ hinder teacher autonomy?

Based on the research findings, the following conclusions were drawn. Regarding the first research question, the interview data showed that all of the teachers were generally in agreement concerning the importance of teacher autonomy in their job as a teacher. Finnish primary teachers perceived that there are several components in the concept of teacher autonomy. Of all the definitions and ideas of teacher autonomy offered by Finnish primary teachers, teacher autonomy was perceived as professional responsibility, independence and ability and willingness. In the analysis of teachers' responses relating to autonomous teachers' characteristics, the most common features were self-reflective, open to personal and professional development, competent, independent, and responsible. Teacher autonomy among the Finnish teachers was not constrained to the classroom. In this study, autonomy entails classroom autonomy and participation in decision making at the school level. Irrespective of gender and teaching years, Finnish class teachers in the study believed that they have autonomy over four different aspects of their work: teaching and assessing, curriculum, academic development and school functioning. The result also showed that Finnish primary school teachers endorsed a reflective attitude towards teacher autonomy (Vangrieken et al., 2017)

Along with these efforts, this research also endeavours to identify different factors that influence teachers' perceived autonomy. Throughout the process of analyzing data, major factors emerged

that are related to the level of autonomy teachers perceived they have. These factors include: years of teaching experience, principal support, peer support and 3 other minor factors (e.g. parent trust, educational system and work status). These factors could be viewed as the theoretical components that might be worth examining in the future research.

All in all, this study has meaningful insights into the constructs that impact teacher autonomy, as well as multiple manifestations of the construct in reality.

Over the past few decades, there has been considerable discussion in the literature about the notion of teacher autonomy. The term tends to have differing definitions. The researcher believes that studying the concept of teacher autonomy is more than just examining the gains and loss it brings to decide whether we should be the advocates. All the studies about either teacher or student autonomy should be directed towards reinforcing responsible exercise of autonomy in education environments. Since the loss of professional autonomy will very likely lead to the de-professionalisation of teachers and the teaching profession (Wermken & Forsberg, 2017; Webb, 2002).

This study has made a special effort to explore the concept of teacher autonomy from teachers' perspectives. Throughout this study, the researcher has emphasized that developing autonomy in teachers goes beyond individual freedom from control by others to act and behave in isolation. The concept of autonomy is, undoubtedly, of controversial nature; yet, it is a desirable need of human beings in general and teachers in particular (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

## **5.2 Limitations and suggestion for future research**

Even though several significant findings can be drawn, this study has a few limitations that need to be aware of. Also, the present study indicates a number of recommendations for future research. First, one of the most primary limitations of the current research is that it was entirely based on semi-structured interview as a single source of information. Hence additional data source might help enhance the validity of data.

Another limitation is that the present study was conducted among a sample of 8 classroom teachers from three primary schools in Tampere region. Out of which, there are five teachers from the same school. Consequently, this is not a representative sample of all classroom teachers at primary school level. The small sample on which these findings are yielded does not allow for the

generalization to other teachers in other school levels; therefore, further research is needed to replicate findings on a larger and more representative scale.

However, this study does provide promising findings to guide other studies that investigate teacher autonomy. In future research, it would be worthwhile to conduct a study on a larger participant sample using more data collection sources. Additionally, throughout the literature, studies on teacher autonomy during the last decade were based on either quantitative or qualitative designs. Thus, to develop further from the current study, it would be beneficial to study this concept using mixed methods approach to quantitatively assess the influential factors. This can be followed up by a qualitative interview with specific participants.

### **5.3 Theoretical and practical implications**

Despite being exploratory in nature, this study significantly contributes to the knowledge of teacher autonomy and has a number of practical implications.

Theoretically, the current study firstly clarifies the meaning of teacher autonomy from teachers' perspectives. The empirical findings in this study confirm the complex nature of the concept of teacher autonomy. The findings from this study also replicate the reflective conception of autonomy proposed by Deci and Ryan (1985) in their self-determination theory. More precisely, the participants defined teacher autonomy focusing on a subjective sense of professional agency to make choices based on their values with an orientation towards students' needs. It should be noted that freedom to make decisions exists within and is shaped by larger social-cultural relations and political conditions. The present study offers empirical evidence for reflective view on autonomy and this reflective viewpoint was believed to associate with teachers' pleasant experiences in everyday social experiences with their peers and school principals (Koestner & Losier, 1996, p. 486). In addition, the current study utilized the model of work domain teachers exercise their autonomy by Friedman (1999) as an analytical framework. The contribution of this paper regarding the theory is that it does not just approve the usefulness of the model but also confirms that teachers' sense of professional autonomy varies across these domains. An explanation for this might be that teachers' exercise or rejection of autonomy in a specific domain depends on a number of internal and external factors including their perceived personal competence, principal support, collegial support and school climate (Wilches, 2007). Therefore, it is important for these conditions to be met to enhance teachers' view and exercise of autonomy.

Additionally, the findings of this study confirm the significance of teacher autonomy on both teachers and students. Practically, it suggests several implications for novice teachers' autonomy development and experienced teachers' autonomy sustainment. It should be kept in mind that providing more decisions to make does not necessarily increase teacher sense of autonomy. The results also contribute to a better understanding of the influencing factors of teacher autonomy. Therefore, the results yielded from the present study may well be used by educators or policy makers in terms of meeting the preconditions for developing and sustaining a sense of autonomy in teachers. Existing studies across countries have highlighted the importance of teacher autonomy in relation to teachers' professionalism (Kosar, 2015), teacher motivation (Wu, S. M, 2015), job commitment and retention (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005). Because teachers are the most important factors in educational settings, teachers' perceptions and beliefs about their autonomy are also of utmost importance because these are significant predictors of their practice and actions. Thus, it is very essential, not only for teachers but also educators and national policy makers, to have a sound conceptual understanding of this concept.

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