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# **Finnish Teachers' Professional Autonomy from a Relationality Perspective**

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Master's thesis

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### **Abstract**

This thesis explores Finnish teachers' autonomy from a relational justice perspective, highlighting the interconnectedness of teaching practices within a network of social relationships and responsibilities. Moving beyond the traditional dichotomy of autonomy versus constraints, it adopts the concept of relational autonomy to investigate the intricate interplay between autonomy and collaboration in Finnish school contexts. The theoretical framing emphasizes solidarity within the school culture and shifts the focus from individual decision-making to the teachers' relationships with other teachers, parents, and principals. The study poses two questions: the dimensions of teachers' autonomy and solidarity in school culture, and whether these can be conceptualized as relational autonomy. The research design is based on generic qualitative research involving semi-structured interviews with nine Finnish teachers – four of whom are candidate teachers. For the analysis of data, the study employs reflexive thematic analysis to delve into the complexities of teacher autonomy and solidarity in school culture. Findings reveal that autonomy, intertwined with collaboration, evolves with professional socialization and the cultivation of a communal professional ethos. This ethos is facilitated by dynamic negotiations and support among teachers, principals, and parents within a well-structured social and institutional context. In this context, the curriculum plays a pivotal role in shaping teachers' responsibilities and infusing a sense of duty as well as aligning their teaching practices with other teachers. Additionally, the role of testing extends beyond student assessment to impact on other teaching domains (planning and instruction) and overall teacher autonomy. The study concludes that teacher autonomy is inherently relational, and emerges from solidarity, founded on trust, mutual support, and collective goals.

**Key words:** Relational autonomy, relational justice, solidarity, collaboration, Finnish teachers

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## 1 Introduction

One of the most distinctive features of the Finnish educational system is the high level of autonomy afforded to teachers (EDUFI, 2023; OKM, 2023). This autonomy is associated with the high status of the teaching profession in Finland (Schleicher, 2020, p. 16). Despite this celebration of teacher autonomy in Finland, autonomy, as a multifaceted and complex concept (Wilches, 2007), requires a closer examination to grasp its scope and inherent challenges. First, it does not appear to be a monolithic phenomenon that applies uniformly across all teaching domains. For example, Finland is ranked below the OECD average in terms of teachers' autonomy in determining course content (OECD, 2020). Second, full autonomy may not be the ideal situation in all contexts as it does not necessarily lead to better teaching practice and can even be overwhelming for teachers (Wermke & Salokangas, 2021). Third, teacher autonomy can be interpreted in various ways based on the presence and nature of control mechanisms. These mechanisms could be hidden (Ingersoll, 2003; Wermke et al., 2019), or they could be internalized by teachers, as suggested by Erss (2018), who found that Finnish teachers are trusted and may not need external control because they internalize the curriculum goals. Moreover, control mechanisms and autonomy may not be mutually exclusive; the presence or amplification of one does not necessarily entail a reduction in the other within a given context (Ingersoll, 1996).

Whether the control mechanisms are hidden, explicit, internalized or forced; in much of the relevant literature, teacher autonomy is often characterized as a tension between constraining factors and autonomous decision-making. In this dichotomous approach, on the one hand, administration, curriculum, parental expectations, and examinations are presented as constraining factors limiting teachers' freedom. On the other hand, the idealized portrayal of autonomous teachers reflects professionals who can make independent decisions regarding their teaching content, pedagogical methods, and assessment. However, this binary perspective may oversimplify the complex realities of an educational system, and the two can coexist in a more nuanced interplay. As Wermke and Salokangas (2021) point out, the crucial question is not merely how constrained or free teachers are. Instead, the focus should be on whether teachers have appropriate support that they find helpful in dealing with the risk and complexity associated with autonomy (Wermke & Salokangas, 2021, p. 2).

Teacher autonomy has also been explored from fresh conceptual angles that move beyond the dichotomy of autonomy and control. In these novel approaches, interpersonal relationships

emerge as a significant dimension of autonomy. Elements such as “trust” (Paradis et al., 2019), “collegial autonomy” (Lennert da Silva, 2022), and “dialogic reflections” (Gülşen & Atay, 2022) have recently been analysed in relation to teacher autonomy. This focus on interpersonal dynamics has been conceptualized as relational autonomy suggesting that individuals are deeply embedded in their social contexts (Mackenzie, 2008, 2014; Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000b).

While there is a growing recognition of autonomy as an interpersonal construct, educational sciences seem to lack a cohesive conceptual framework for exploring relational teacher autonomy. Considering this gap in the literature, it seems crucial to recognize that autonomy is not only an individual trait or a psychological attribute, but it is also rooted in philosophical and political discourse. Specifically, autonomy is often scrutinized within the broader context of theories of justice in contemporary political philosophy (Nussbaum, 2006; Rawls, 1999; Sandel, 1998; Sen, 2009) as well as in critical social theories (Fraser, 2008). This study thus intends to extend the analysis of teacher autonomy by incorporating a theory of justice to the concept of autonomy.

## **1.1 Relational autonomy from relational justice perspective**

This study embarks on an interdisciplinary exploration, drawing on philosophy, sociology, and educational sciences. At its core, the study rests on two interrelated theoretical considerations. First, it recognizes that freedom is an integral component of justice, as in liberal theories of justice (Rawls, 1999; Sen, 2009). Second, it argues that both justice and freedom are concepts deeply embedded within societal and interpersonal contexts. Building on these considerations, the study employs relational autonomy (Mackenzie, 2008, 2014; Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000b) and relational justice (Lynch et al., 2021) as its dual foundation. Within this framework, autonomy is understood in connection with societal interactions and juxtaposed with the broader framework of a justice theory.

### **1.1.1 Relational autonomy**

Autonomy is traditionally defined as the “liberty to follow one’s will; control over one’s own affairs; freedom from external influence, personal independence” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023). This definition, particularly the phrase “freedom from external influence” seems to imply an overly individualistic perspective. A more nuanced definition could be “the capacity to be one’s own person, to live one’s life according to reasons and motives that are taken as

one's own and not the product of manipulative or distorting external forces, to be in this way independent" (Christman, 2020, p. 1). Unlike the former definition, the latter recognizes that autonomy does not mean total freedom from all external factors. Instead, it refers to "manipulative or distorting" ones. This aligns with the aims of this study, where not all external factors are seen as mere constraints to be avoided but rather as aspects to be negotiated, and even to be considered supportive. In the context of education, teacher autonomy can thus be understood "to operate within spaces constrained by institutional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal factors" (Jackson, 2018, p. 2).

The relationship between autonomy and these factors can be theorized as relational autonomy that draws on the critiques of individual rationality (Christman, 2020). These critiques emphasize "the rich and complex social and historical contexts in which agents are embedded" and stress "the need to think of autonomy as a characteristic of agents who are emotional, embodied, desiring, creative, and feeling, as well as rational" (Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000a, p. 21). Building on this understanding of individuals as social agents, Mackenzie (2014, pp. 21–22) outlines three foundational premises of relational autonomy:

1. An adequate conception of autonomy must be responsive to the facts of human vulnerability and dependency rather than assuming a conception of persons as self-sufficient, independent, rational contractors.
2. Persons are embodied and socially, historically, and culturally embedded and that their identities are constituted in relation to these factors in complex ways.
3. Social conditions restricting the exercise of self-determination are unjust.

Referencing the capabilities approach (Nussbaum, 2006) and relational inequality (Anderson, 1999), Mackenzie (2014) connects these premises to broader concepts of justice. She emphasizes that autonomy is not an isolated trait but a socially constituted capacity. Its development and expression can be obstructed by detrimental or oppressive relationships, as well as by social and political environments marked by injustice, inequality, and oppression (Mackenzie, 2008, p. 519).

### 1.1.2 Relational justice

The significance of interpersonal relations has also been emphasized by justice theorists such as communitarianism (Sandel, 1998), care ethics (Noddings, 2013), the capabilities approach (Nussbaum, 2006; Sen, 2009). Even John Rawls, a prominent liberal theorist criticized by

Noddings for reducing the richly complex, social individual to a reasoning machine (Noddings, 2016, p. 172), acknowledged the vital role of relational dimensions in justice. Particularly in the later editions of his influential book *A Theory of Justice*, he described individuals as “fully cooperating members of society over a complete life” (Rawls, 1999, p. XIII). According to Rawls, by nurturing intellectual and emotional capacities, individuals will better understand their place in society and “appreciate the mutual benefits of establishing fair terms of social cooperation” (Rawls, 1999, p. 402).

Similarly, the capabilities approach, another liberal theory inspired by Rawls, emphasizes rationality, focusing on “a person’s capability to do things he or she has *reason* to value” (Sen, 2009, p. 231, emphasis is mine). However, it also highlights the importance of social cooperation and recognizes that these two aspects are integral to the pursuit of justice. For example, Nussbaum (2006) argues that moral sentiments such as sympathy and benevolence should be developed through education in order to solve pertinent problems in the world (Nussbaum, 2006, p. 409).

Moreover, Lynch et al. (2021) argue that affective aspects such as love, care, and solidarity have often been neglected in studies on social injustices. Building upon Fraser’s (2008) tripartite classification of justice as economic, cultural and political, Lynch et al. (2021) make a call for sociology to include emotional and relational dimensions of justice in the investigation of social injustices. They argue that this fourth dimension would complement Fraser’s three dimensions. They base their argument on Tronto’s (2017) ontological distinction of human nature, emphasizing that humans are not only political (*homo politicus*) or economic (*homo economicus*) beings, but also caring (*homo curan*) beings. This perspective challenges the prevailing epistemological approach of neoliberal European culture, which often presupposes an autonomous and self-responsible individual; and tends to examine facts separately from values without giving emotions a central position in social justice studies (Lynch et al., 2021). In a multinational project on social justice, Lynch et al. (2021) further emphasized that social solidarity has an impact on psychological well-being at the micro scale and social equality at the macro scale (SOLIDUS, 2018).

### 1.1.3 Solidarity

Based on the discussions so far, solidarity emerges as a key concept at the intersection of relational autonomy and relational justice. It has gained prominence among non-individualistic ethical and political schools of thought, such as communitarianism, feminism,



and postmodernism, to challenge and provide an alternative to the individualistic and universalistic perspective of ethics, which has traditionally focused on the protection of individual rights of freedom (Bayertz, 1999, p. 4). In such alternative thoughts, solidarity has been conceived as “an antidote to the sense of alienation of the citizen in the modern nation state and the anonymity of the individual in the capitalist system” (Heyd, 2015, p. 55). From this perspective, solidarity may initially seem to conflict with or even stand as an alternative to autonomy in the rights based approaches, but the two concepts are in fact complementary (ter Meulen, 2016, p. 517).

While educational sciences often employ concepts like trust, respect, and cooperation to describe interpersonal relationships in school settings, the concept of solidarity in relation to autonomy is more frequently discussed in political philosophy (Kapeller & Wolkenstein, 2013; Kolers, 2014; Tava, 2023), and bioethics (Fainzang, 2016; Prainsack & Buyx, 2012; ter Meulen, 2016). This may tentatively suggest that solidarity in educational domain be regarded as a taken for granted concept as the relationships are institutionalized, unlike, for example, the ethical considerations in health interventions and scientific research. A deep rooted solidarity in a school setting can however be debatable especially when solidarity is defined as the bond of mutual assistance and sharing common goals (Prainsack & Buyx, 2012). The main reason for this speculation is the argument that solidarity suffers from fragmentation and individualization in the era of neoliberalism (Lynch & Kalaitzake, 2020; Morgan & Pulignano, 2020). It would be naïve to think that school settings are totally outside this, in Giroux’s (2011) terms, “hyper-individualization”. Such individualistic tendencies can undermine social experiences that could actually enhance autonomy (Nelsen, 2010). If the focus shifts from an “individual calculation of benefits and costs” to a more collective perspective, not only can solidarity be strengthened (Morgan & Pulignano, 2020, p. 21), but this enhanced solidarity could also serve to enhance autonomy rather than compromise it (Fainzang, 2016).

An overemphasis on individual autonomy of one stakeholder might obscure the true nature of autonomy. In the context of education, teacher autonomy is intrinsically linked to the autonomy of students and administrators (Ganza, 2008). The present study thus conceptualizes autonomy and solidarity in educational settings as intertwined and co-dependent rather than mutually exclusive. In light of this, the primary aim of this study is to explore the critical interplay between solidarity and autonomy in educational settings. The Finnish education system, renowned for autonomous teachers, offers an intriguing context to

explore relational teacher autonomy from a relational justice perspective. More specifically, the study aims to explore how Finnish teachers develop their professional identity to navigate between freedoms and solidarity in their teaching practice. The focus here extends beyond individual autonomy levels to encompass teachers' awareness of their own and others' responsibilities and the fulfilment of these responsibilities. The aims of the study are operationalized through the following research questions:

1. In the context of Finnish education, what are the dimensions of teacher autonomy and solidarity in school culture?
2. To what extent is Finnish teachers' decision-making reflective of relational autonomy?

The questions this study seeks to address have commonalities with the recent research on Finnish teachers' autonomy. Notably, the OECD's TALIS (Teaching and Learning International Survey) 2018 report, for the first time, integrated teacher autonomy into its analysis of teacher professionalism. Additionally, Wermke and Salokangas's (2021) comparative study, examining Finnish teachers' autonomy in relation to that of teachers in Ireland, Sweden, and Germany, provides valuable insights. In a more closely aligned study to the present one, Paradis et al. (2019) adopts a relational perspective to investigate the teacher autonomy within the Finnish context.

Building upon these studies, the present study intends to extend the conversation on Finnish teachers' autonomy. The distinctiveness of this study lies in its potential contributions to the conceptual and theoretical understanding of autonomy. In this regard, the study seeks to specify its theoretical approach by contrasting it with large scale studies such as the TALIS report and Wermke and Salokangas's (2021) research. This endeavour is essential to reveal the relatively novel theoretical stance on autonomy positioned within a relational framework. In other words, while the phenomenon under investigation remains consistent, with similar objectives at its core, the approach to conceptualizing it introduces a nuanced perspective.

Secondly, given the researcher's outsider position, this study engages with contextual insights from recent research on Finnish teacher autonomy. Such detailed contextualization was deemed necessary for an outsider researcher to navigate the intricacies of the research setting accurately. All in all, drawing on these studies, the following sections undertake a critical review, aiming to shed light on the theoretical underpinnings and contextual nuances that inform this study's approach to explore teacher autonomy in Finland.

## 1.2 Finnish teachers' autonomy in the TALIS 2018 findings

TALIS is a comprehensive study of teacher professionalism across 48 countries including Finland (OECD, 2019). The survey identifies five main pillars of teacher professionalism, as illustrated in Figure 1 (OECD, 2020). Among these pillars, “peer regulation and collaborative culture” and “responsibility and autonomy” are highly relevant to the relational autonomy perspective in this study. Given the perspective of the present study, these two pillars are however considered in conjunction rather than separately.



Figure 1. Five pillars of teacher professionalism in the TALIS 2018 report (OECD, 2020)

In a follow-up publication by the OECD, Schleicher (2020) interprets the TALIS data, suggesting that the high status of the teaching profession in Finland could be attributed to the high standards for entering the profession and the autonomy granted to teachers (p. 16). This interpretation, in line with the common discourse on Finnish teachers, might pose the risk of an oversimplified causality. To put it another way, understanding Finnish teachers' success by focusing solely on their selection from highly skilled graduates and the autonomy they enjoy might neglect the vital support needed during their in-service development. For example, it is also evident in TALIS data that Finnish teachers require and benefit from ongoing support throughout their careers. In the analysis of the relationship between participation in professional activities and teachers' self-efficacy<sup>1</sup>, a positive correlation was found in Finland (OECD, 2019, p. 161). This correlation, ranking Finland fourth<sup>2</sup>, indicates that participation in

<sup>1</sup> This is based on OECD's "index of self-efficacy measuring teacher self-efficacy in classroom management, instruction and student engagement" (OECD, 2019, p. 161)

<sup>2</sup> Following the United Arab Emirates, Shanghai (China), and South Africa

professional development plays a significant role in enhancing teachers' self-efficacy. The report further notes that across all countries, regular engagement in professional collaboration tends to correlate with higher levels of self-efficacy (OECD, 2020, p. 157).

Understanding the nature of professional collaboration in Finland, particularly in terms of self-efficacy and autonomy, necessitates a nuanced examination, as Finland diverges from other OECD countries in several key areas. To illustrate this divergence, the researcher has identified 33 survey items related to collaboration, autonomy as well as professional development and job satisfaction, as detailed in Table 1. Analysing the aspects in which Finland differs from other countries may yield valuable insights. Graph 1 displays the items in Table 1 where Finland is above and below the OECD average.

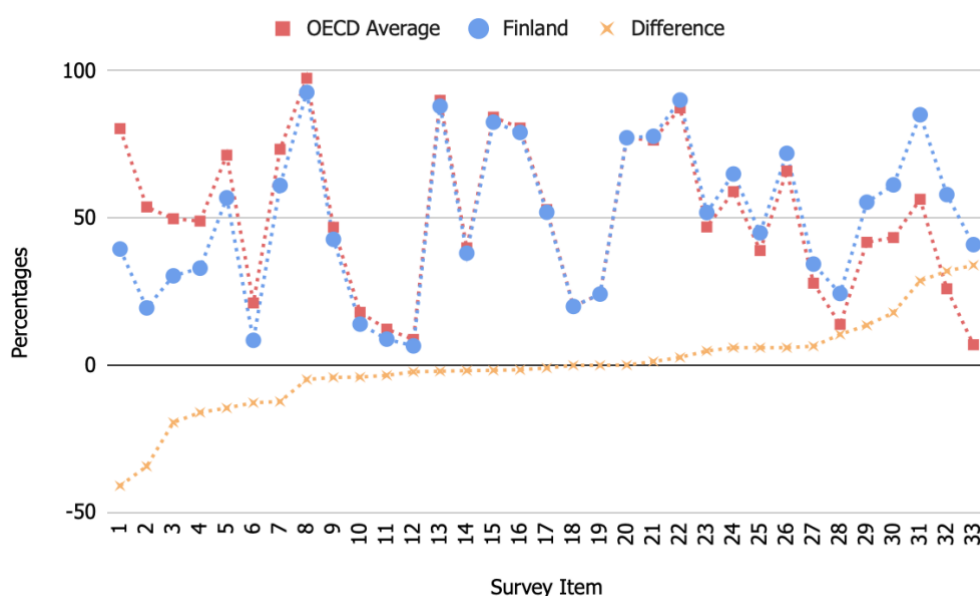


Figure 2. The comparative analysis of Finland and OECD average in the TALIS 2018 report. The yellow line represents the difference between Finland's percentages and the OECD average. The leftmost point indicates where Finland is most below the average, and the rightmost point shows where Finland is most above the average.

Table 1. The selected items from TALIS 2018 on teachers' autonomy, collaboration, professional development and job satisfaction

Item <sup>3</sup>	TALIS Survey Items <sup>4</sup>	OECD	Finland
1	Observation of the teacher's classroom teaching.	80.4	39.5
2	Assessment of the teacher's content knowledge.	53.8	19.5

<sup>3</sup> The items in this table are listed in ascending order, starting with the most negative difference between Finland and the OECD average, and ending with the most positive difference.

<sup>4</sup> The links to the OECD Database for each item is provided in APPENDIX A.

Item <sup>3</sup>	TALIS Survey Items <sup>4</sup>	OECD	Finland
3	Participation in professional development in classroom management	49.8	30.4
4	Percentage of teachers reporting that too much administrative work is a source of stress "quite a bit" or "a lot".	49	33
5	Percentage of teachers who report that the feedback they received in the 12 months prior to the survey had a positive impact on their teaching practice.	71.4	56.9
6(C)	Participate in collaborative professional learning.	21.2	8.5
7(C)	Engage in discussions about the learning development of specific students.	73.4	61.1
8	Percentage of lower secondary teachers who participated in professional development activities.	97.5	92.7
9(C)	Exchange teaching materials with colleagues.	46.9	42.8
10	Percentage of teachers who experience stress "a lot" in their work.	18	14
11(C)	Engage in joint activities across different classes and age groups.	12.3	8.9
12(C)	Observe other teachers' classes and provide feedback.	8.8	6.6
13	Percentage of teachers who, all in all, are satisfied with their job.	90	88
14(C)	Work with other teachers in this school to ensure common standards in student evaluations.	39.9	38.1
15(A)	Percentage of teachers who "agree" or "strongly agree" that they have control over determining course content.	84.3	82.6
16(C)	Percentage of teachers who "agree" or "strongly agree" with the following statement: "There is a collaborative school culture that is characterized by mutual support".	80.6	79.1
17	Professional development conflicts with the teacher's work schedule	52.9	52
18	Percentage of teachers who would like to change school if that were possible.	20	20
19(A)	Percentage of teachers who "agree" or "strongly agree" with the following statement: Teachers can influence educational policy in this country/region.	24.2	24.2
20(A)	Percentage of teachers who "agree" or "strongly agree" that this school provides staff with opportunities to actively participate in school decisions.	77.2	77.3
21(C)	Percentage of teachers who received any kind of support for participating in professional development activities.	76.5	77.8
22(C)	Percentage of teachers who "agree" or "strongly agree" with the following statement: "Teachers can rely on each other".	87.4	90.1
23	There are no incentives for participating in professional development.	47	51.9
24(C)	Percentage of principals who "often" or "very often" took actions to support co-operation among teachers to develop new teaching practices in the 12 months prior to the survey.	59	65
25	Percentage of teachers who are satisfied with the salary they receive for their work.	39	45
26	Percentage of teachers who are satisfied with the terms of their contract (apart from salary)	66	72
27(C)	Teach jointly as a team in the same class.	27.9	34.4
28(A)	Teachers' views are valued by policy makers in this country/region (when asked to teachers)	13.9	24.4
29(A)	Percentage of principals who report that teachers have a significant responsibility in a majority of tasks related with school policies, curriculum and instruction.	41.8	55.4
30(C)	Attend team conferences.	43.4	61.3
31(A)	Percentage of principals who report teachers to be represented on the school management team.	56.4	85.1
32	Percentage of teachers who think that their profession is valued in society.	26	58
33(A)	Percentage of teachers whose school principals report that their teachers are never formally appraised.	7	41

The items marked with “(A)”, which are directly related to teacher autonomy<sup>5</sup>, offer insights into how Finnish teachers perceive their control and influence within the educational system. Among these items, the percentage of teachers who feel they have control over determining course content is the only one below the OECD average (Item 15). The ability to influence educational policy is equally low (24.2%) in both Finland and the OECD average (Item 19). Similarly, only 24.4% of Finnish teachers think that their views are valued by policy makers (Item 28). Despite this limited autonomy at policy level, teachers report higher participation at the school level decisions. For example, 77.3% of Finnish teachers think that they have the “opportunities to actively participate in school decisions” – nearly on par with the OECD average (Item 20). When principals are asked whether “teachers have a significant responsibility in a majority of tasks related to school policies, curriculum, and instruction” the percentage in Finland is 55.4, compared to 41.8 in the OECD (Item 29). In a similar vein, one of the most distinctive aspects of Finnish context is principals’ perception that 85.1% teachers are “represented on the school management team”, compared to 56.4% in the OECD average (Item 31). Briefly, all items related to participation in decision-making processes is generally above OECD average and represented in the right side of the Graph 1.

On the other hand, the collaboration aspect at Finnish schools is represented at various levels compared to the OECD average. The items marked with “(C)” in Table 1 highlight how collaboration occurs at Finnish schools. For example, the percentage of teachers who “agree” or “strongly agree” that “there is a collaborative school culture that is characterized by mutual support” is 79.1 in Finland, slightly lower than the OECD average of 80.6 (Item 16). This item, emphasizing “collaborative school culture” and “mutual support”, is particularly significant for this study due to its alignment with the definition of solidarity.

Analysing this item in relation to others helps to understand how collaboration and mutual support are shaped in Finland. The TALIS data reveals that Finnish teachers are less likely to cooperate with fellow teachers in practical matters compared to their counterparts in other countries (Items 6, 7, 9, 11, 12, 14). For instance, they are less inclined to collaborate on “engaging in discussions about the learning development of specific students” (Item 7), “exchanging teaching materials with colleagues” (Item 9), and “engaging in joint activities across different classes and age groups” (Item 11).

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<sup>5</sup> Derived from TALIS 2018 Results Volume II, chapter 5 (OECD, 2020)

Conversely, when examining the items above the OECD average, Finnish teachers were found to receive support for participating in professional development activities (Item 21), rely on each other (Item 22), teach jointly as a team in the same class (Item 27), and attend team conferences (Item 30). This discrepancy may suggest that Finnish teachers are more inclined to cooperate in sharing ideas rather than collaborating in their practice (except Item 27), possibly indicating a greater autonomy in their actual teaching methods.

Further support for this interpretation comes from the data on the first five items (those with the most significant difference from the OECD average). Finnish teachers are less likely to be observed (Item 1), assessed (Item 2), or feel the need to participate in professional development in classroom management (Item 3). They also report having less administrative work (Item 4) and are less likely to believe that the feedback they receive positively impacts their teaching (Item 5).

These findings suggest a distinctive feature of collaboration in Finnish schools, where cooperation appears to revolve more around the sharing of ideas rather than collaboration on practical teaching methods. Unlike other OECD countries, Finnish teachers seem to engage less in joint activities related to classroom practice but are more involved in activities that foster idea exchange, such as attending team conferences and relying on each other for support. This pattern may reflect a less structured approach in the Finnish educational system, where collaboration on ideas is prioritized. The fact that Finnish teachers are formally appraised less frequently than the OECD average (Item 33) could further support this less structured approach.

The TALIS report also includes a set of statistical analysis that reveals the relationship between the teacher autonomy index<sup>6</sup> and several other indices, such as professional collaboration<sup>7</sup>, self-efficacy<sup>8</sup>, and overall job satisfaction<sup>9</sup>. In this analysis, Finland was found to have a weaker relationship between teacher autonomy and professional collaboration

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<sup>6</sup> The index of target class autonomy measures the level of control teachers feel over determining course content, selecting teaching methods, assessing students' learning, disciplining students and determining the amount of homework to be assigned in their target class (OECD, 2020, p. 203)

<sup>7</sup> The index of professional collaboration measures teachers' engagement in deeper forms of collaboration, including teaching jointly as a team in the same class, providing feedback based on classroom observations, engaging in joint activities across different classes and age groups and participating in collaborative professional learning (OECD, 2020, p. 203).

<sup>8</sup> The index of self-efficacy measures teacher self-efficacy in classroom management, instruction and student engagement (OECD, 2020, p. 204).

<sup>9</sup> The index of overall job satisfaction measures satisfaction with the profession and the current work environment (OECD, 2020, p. 204).

compared to the OECD average. Conversely, there is a stronger relationship between teacher autonomy and both self-efficacy and job satisfaction in Finland.

The relatively weak correlation observed in the professional collaboration index in Finland might lead some to question the relationship between collaboration and autonomy, potentially challenging the assumptions of the present study. However, it is essential to interpret these findings in the context of the specific metrics used in the TALIS report. This index includes activities such as “teaching jointly as a team in the same class, providing feedback based on classroom observations, engaging in joint activities across different classes and age groups, and participating in collaborative professional learning” (OECD, 2020, p. 203). Finland exhibits weaker performance in these specific areas. It is also important to highlight that the term collaboration in the professional collaboration index specifically refers to teachers collaborating with their peers and not with administrators. That is to say that the nature of collaboration in Finland encompasses different dimensions that are not included in the professional collaboration index. This is evident in Items 16, 21, 22, 27, and 30, as previously analysed.

The aspects in which Finland has a higher percentage in collaboration will be the main focus of the present study. This is because a collaborative school culture characterized by mutual support (Item 16), receiving support for participating in professional development activities (Item 21), teachers’ relying on themselves (Item 22), teaching jointly in the same class (Item 27)<sup>10</sup> and attending team conferences (Item 30) are the aspects whose meaning remains unclear without an in-depth qualitative analysis. Accordingly, these items have informed the interview questions in this study. The aim is to understand the nature of collaboration, or solidarity (RQ1), at Finnish schools and to interpret this in terms of relational autonomy (RQ2).

### **1.3 Comparative Analysis of Finnish Teacher’ Autonomy**

The TALIS data, while offering valuable insights into Finnish teachers’ autonomy, lacks the contextual depth needed to understand the phenomenon. In other words, a broader analysis solely in reference to the OECD average fails to capture a detailed and thick description that a qualitative comparison with similar contexts might reveal (Fraenkel et al., 2012, p. 428). To address this limitation, this section explores Wermke and Salokangas’s (2021) research on

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<sup>10</sup> This aspect is higher than OECD average, but it is still low with 34.4%.



teacher autonomy in Finland, Ireland, Sweden, and Germany. By comparing Finnish teachers' autonomy with that of teachers in these countries, which share certain educational and contextual characteristics, this section aims to offer a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of teacher autonomy in Finland.

Building on a comprehensive literature review, Wermke and Salokangas (2021) argue that teacher autonomy is inherently multidimensional and influenced by its context (p. 44). To show this multidimensionality they introduced a framework that encompasses four domains of teachers' decision-making: education (e.g., lesson content), social interactions (e.g., contacting parents), professional development, and administrative tasks (e.g., allocation of classrooms). These domains were further analysed at both the classroom and school levels. Inspired by Ingersoll's works (1996, 2003), they conceptualized teacher autonomy as the balance between decision-making and control to show how autonomy manifests across these domains and levels.

In their study, Wermke and Salokangas (2021) found that teachers across all four contexts perceived themselves as autonomous within their classrooms (p. 91). This perception aligns with the traditional view of classrooms as teachers' own realm, where they engage directly with students (Wermke & Salokangas, 2021, pp. 151–152). However, when considering the school-level educational domain, the nature of teachers' autonomy shifts from an individualistic to a more collegial orientation (Wermke & Salokangas, 2021, p. 67). Specifically, while 63.4% of classroom-level decisions in Finland are individually oriented (the highest among the four countries) and 35.1% are collegially oriented (Wermke & Salokangas, 2021, p. 68). Moreover, 93.1% of school-level educational decisions are made collegially. This places Finland second, following Germany (93.1%) (Wermke & Salokangas, 2021, p. 70).

The emphasis on collegiality in Wermke and Salokangas's (2021) findings is of particular relevance to this study. While their framework outlines decisions across four domains and two levels, their analysis further categorizes decisions based on whether they are made individually, collegially, by principals, or beyond school administration. Notably, their study does not explicitly refer to the concept of relational autonomy. Instead, their focus on collegiality is based on their description of teaching as a profession. Unlike professions like medicine or law involving severe risks, teaching encompasses its own unique risks and complexities. Navigating these challenges is a primary function of any profession, and in

teaching, collegiality emerges as a pivotal mechanism to address these risks and complexities (Wermke & Salokangas, 2021, pp. 152–154).

It is logical that there is greater collegiality at the school level and less at the classroom level, given that teachers encounter fewer risks during their instruction. However, when considering the other domains - social, developmental, and administrative - the nature of autonomy shifts from individual decisions to more collegial or external ones, as detailed in Table 2 and illustrated in Graph 2.

Table 2. Decision-making orientations across educational domains and levels in Finnish schools (Wermke and Salokangas, 2021)

Domains	Levels	Individually oriented	Collegial oriented	Principal oriented	Beyond school oriented
Educational decisions	Classroom	63,4%	35,1%	0,6%	0,9%
Educational decisions	School	5,8%	93,1%	0,0%	1,2%
Social decisions	Classroom	20,7%	32,3%	45,7%	1,4%
Social decisions	School	13,2%	69,4%	16,6%	0,8%
Developmental decisions	Classroom	20,5%	25,5%	35,6%	18,4%
Developmental decisions	School	3,2%	12,4%	59,3%	25,1%
Administrative decisions	Classroom	1,9%	6,0%	84,7%	7,5%
Administrative decisions	School	0,0%	13,2%	65,9%	20,9%

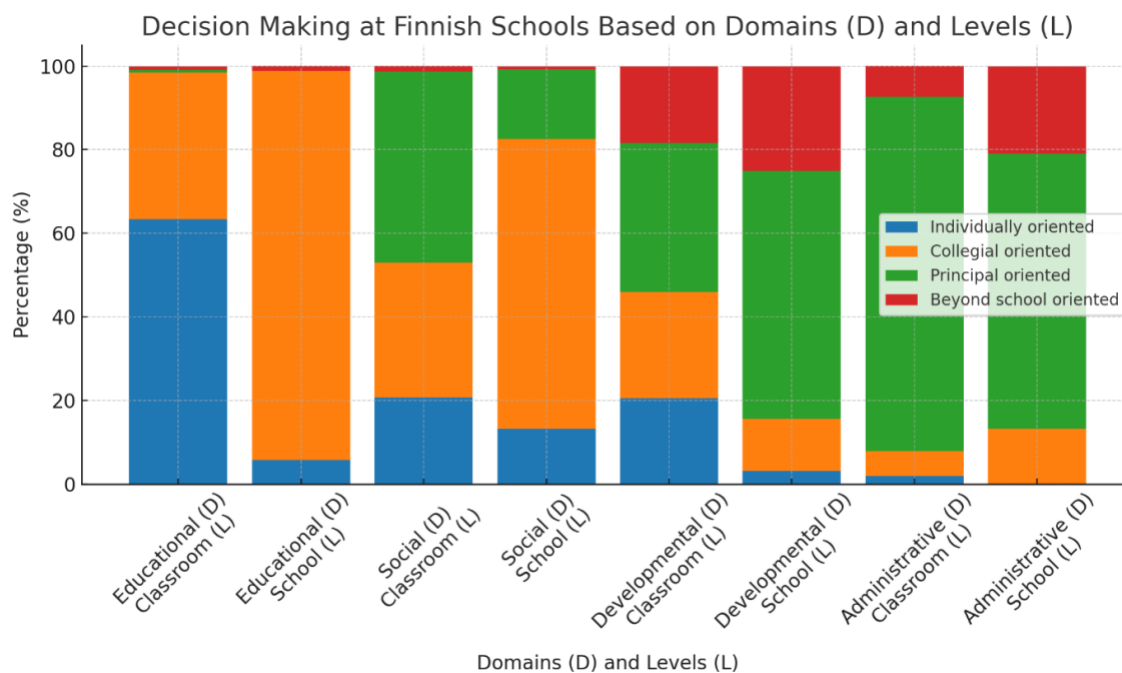


Figure 3. The illustration of decision-making orientations across educational domains and levels in Finnish schools (Wermke and Salokangas, 2021)

Referring to Ingersoll (2003), Wermke and Salokangas (2021) highlight the social domain as particularly significant when considering risk-taking in teaching. This domain includes “contact with parents in cases of misbehaviour or unexcused absence of a student, the consultation of professional help for students with psychological or other special needs, and decisions concerning the consequences in case of student misbehaviour” (Wermke & Salokangas, 2021, p. 98). Evidently, the choices made within this domain carry greater risks and responsibilities than those in the educational domain. Consequently, in Finland, and in the other countries studied, there is a trend towards collegiality in this domain. Teachers tend to collaborate and share responsibility of such critical and potentially risk-laden decisions with their colleagues and principal (Wermke & Salokangas, 2021, p. 118).

Wermke and Salokangas (2021) prioritize the educational and social domains as the primary areas of autonomy, and the developmental and administrative domains as secondary. The developmental domain is seen as less pivotal for two reasons: firstly, teachers provided fewer insights about this domain in their responses, and secondly, from a risk-taking standpoint, decisions within this domain carry fewer risks (Wermke & Salokangas, 2021, p. 130). The administrative domain, on the other hand, merits further discussion. Here, principal emerges as an important actor, as shown in Table 2. This is especially relevant to the current study’s

focus on solidarity since principals, traditionally known as main decision-makers within the school community, are expected to have a substantial impact on fostering solidarity.

Moreover, Wermke and Salokangas (2021) characterize teaching as an “ascriptive” profession, a term borrowed from Vanderstraeten (2007). When teaching is seen through this lens, it suggests a profession deeply rooted in its organizational structure, where conflicts between individual teachers and the broader organizational interests are expected (Vanderstraeten, 2007, p. 629). Following this description, Wermke and Salokangas (2021) argue that teachers’ participation in administrative decision-making process creates an autonomy paradox because “the more decisions teachers are expected to make, the more teachers are accountable, and the more accountable teachers are, the more they may restrain themselves in order to cope with the risks of bad decisions” (p. 148). In other words, an increased autonomy can, paradoxically, lead teachers to be more cautious, potentially limiting their autonomy in an effort to mitigate the risks associated with poor decisions.

From this perspective, an increased involvement of teachers in administrative decisions might not always yield the desired outcomes, and greater participation does not necessarily equate to increased autonomy for teachers. Moreover, reduced involvement may not be interpreted as diminished autonomy. This viewpoint aligns with the relational autonomy perspective explored in the present study (see Section 1.1.3). Instead of an individualistic perspective - such as teachers versus principals – the involvement of teachers in administrative decisions can be better understood from a solidarity standpoint as it emphasizes shared responsibilities. Wermke and Salokangas (2021) highlight this nuanced understanding and identify it as a potential area for future research, especially in terms of how teachers can influence the distribution of responsibilities within school organizations (Wermke & Salokangas, 2021, p. 163).

The findings of Wermke and Salokangas (2021) and the TALIS 2018 data, collectively confirm the autonomy of Finnish teachers in their classroom practices. However, when viewed through the lens of relational autonomy, both sets of literature, despite their emphasis on collaboration and collegiality, appear rooted in an individualistic perspective. For instance, both parents and principals are conceptualized as control mechanisms. In their analysis of the interview data, Wermke and Salokangas (2021) articulate that “Finnish teachers felt mostly controlled by parents” (p. 115). Such a viewpoint suggests that teachers might be constrained by external entities like parents, potentially leading them to act against their professional

judgment, thereby diminishing their autonomy. The theorizing in TALIS and Wermke and Salokangas's study can be metaphorically represented as a two-sided scale with teachers on one side and other stakeholders (e.g., parents, principals) on the opposite. The equilibrium between these sides indicates the degree of autonomy, with a "perfect balance" being the ideal (Wermke & Salokangas, 2021, p. 2). Yet, from a relational autonomy lens, the present study argues that the true essence of teacher autonomy is not merely about achieving this ideal balance. It emphasizes that autonomy is more profoundly understood in terms of solidarity and the collaborative dynamics within the school community. Accordingly, even if one side in a school community exerts significant influence, it does not necessarily undermine the autonomy of the other.

Drawing from the relational autonomy perspective, the interdependence between teachers and schools becomes evident. Wermke and Salokangas (2021) also recognize this interconnectedness by describing teaching as an ascriptive profession where the presence of teachers and schools is mutually dependent (p. 74). Their methodology however seems to overlook this intrinsic relationship by fragmenting entities within the school's overall structure and placing an emphasis on individual roles. Such an approach offers valuable descriptive data on the influences shaping decision-making. However, the analytical conclusions drawn might be misleading when autonomy is ascribed to isolated entities. It is crucial to remember that when characterizing teaching as an ascriptive profession, the collective, social nature of education should be at the forefront. Education is a social phenomenon and should be examined as a social phenomenon rather than detaching it to isolated units of analysis (Vanderstraeten & Biesta, 2006, p. 171). Drawing on Dewey and Mead's pragmatism, Vanderstraeten & Biesta (2006) argue that communication, as a vehicle for "making of something in common", is central for social practices led by cooperative and coordinate action instead of intentions of individuals (p. 166). To make decisions in common can be better understood from a relational autonomy perspective, as argued in this study.

#### **1.4 Collaboration, Trust and Solidarity**

This section reviews studies that utilize three key concepts integral to the relational autonomy perspective: collaboration (also referred as collegiality), trust, and solidarity. Collaboration is a well-established concept in the field of autonomy, or broadly in education research. Trust, on the other hand, has recently received attention, most notably through the work of Paradis et

al. (2019) on Finnish teachers' relational autonomy. Lastly, the concept of solidarity is introduced to complement and enrich the existing body of research on these topics.

As previously discussed, the TALIS report treats autonomy and collaboration as separate entities. In contrast, Wermke and Salokangas intertwine the two, albeit not positioning collaboration as central within their theoretical framework. Their analysis, however, reveals that collegiality in their study emerges as a strategy to navigate the risks and complexities associated with decision-making. For instance, in situations where teachers bear significant responsibility with limited formal control, they lean towards collegial decision-making (Wermke & Salokangas, 2021, p. 165). This suggests that collaboration is not an external element to autonomy but is intrinsically linked to it, a connection further supported by Vangrieken et al. (2017).

Challenging the conventional dichotomy of autonomy and collaboration, Vangrieken et al. (2017) propose a conceptual framework that integrates both. Arguing that “autonomy in itself does not exclude collaboration”, they allege that autonomy can be envisioned as the degree to which people have collaborative attitude as well as freedom to make decisions (Vangrieken et al., 2017, p. 305). Their conceptual foundation draws from Koestner and Losier's (1996) dichotomy of *reactive autonomy* (linked with individualism and independence) and *reflective autonomy* (associated with interdependence and connectedness) (Vangrieken et al., 2017, p. 304). In a subsequent study building on this conceptual groundwork, Vangrieken and Kyndt (2020) analysed the interplay between teacher autonomy and collaboration. Their hypothesis centred on the idea that varying autonomy attitudes (reactive/individualistic versus collaborative/reflective) could influence collaborative tendencies. Their findings revealed that a significant majority (70%) of participants were both "autonomous and collaborative" and 20% leaned towards being “autonomous and individualistic”, while the remaining 10% exhibited a “low curricular autonomy and collaborative profile” (Vangrieken & Kyndt, 2020, p. 194). This study provides an empirical ground for showing the intimate relationship between autonomy and collaboration. It should however be noted that their study is grounded in psychological frameworks. In contrast, the current research suggests that perceptions of autonomy and collaboration are shaped by community dynamics, not just individual traits. This perspective extends the concept of collaboration beyond the classroom to broader school community. Collaboration with parents (as highlighted in the social domain of Wermke and Salokangas's study) and with principals (as demonstrated in Lin's (2022) research on distributed leadership) form an integral part of this collaborative perspective.

Another study that challenges the individualistic view of autonomy and advocates for a relational perspective is the comparative research conducted by Paradis et al (2019). This study places the concept of trust at the core of their analysis of relational teacher autonomy. Their findings indicate a correlation between teachers' perceptions of being trusted and their sense of autonomy. Specifically, Finnish teachers generally feel trusted, which explains their widely recognized sense of autonomy. In contrast, Canadian teachers often experience a lack of trust, which contributes to their reduced sense of autonomy. This study is highly relevant to the current research not only because it conceptualizes autonomy from a relational perspective, but it also focuses on the Finnish context. However, there are two key differences between Paradis et al.'s (2019) study and the present research. First, they base their understanding of relational autonomy on MacDonald's (2002) framework, deliberately distancing themselves from Mackenzie & Stoljar's theory (2000b), which is adopted in the present study. They make this choice based on the rationale that teachers should not be considered an oppressed group. However, not considering teachers as oppressed is a somewhat limited approach as it does not fully capture the depth of the societal influences and justice perspective explored. For example, according to MacDonald (2002) informing Paradis et al.'s approach, "the capacity and opportunity for autonomous action is dependent on our particular social relationships and the power structures in which we are embedded" (p. 283). It can thus be argued that in both MacDonald (2002) and Mackenzie & Stoljar's theory (2000b), schools operate within specific power structures although they may not manifest overt forms of oppression.

Another point of divergence between the present study and that of Paradis et al. (2019) lies in their choice of trust as a key variable for exploring relational autonomy. They define trust mainly as "confidence and reliance on the integrity and competencies of teachers, as individuals or as a profession, by others such as parents, principals, students, society, and even other teachers" (Paradis et al., 2019). However, this definition seems to conflict with the broader understanding of trust they refer to, which involves "interdependencies between the understanding of each party's own obligations and expectations of the obligations of the other party" (Paradis et al., 2019). The focus on trust in their study thus appears one-sided, primarily examining how teachers feel trusted by others. This approach positions teachers as passive recipients of trust, rather than as active participants in a network of social relationships. It overlooks the teachers' trust in other stakeholders, such as parents and principals, which is equally crucial for a nuanced understanding of relational autonomy.

Solidarity, as a concept that also encompasses trust, can better represent the interdependent societal dynamics inherent in educational settings. Among the limited studies that focus on solidarity in the field of educational sciences, the work of Hargreaves and his colleagues (2018) stands out. Conducted as part of a project in Canada (<http://ccsli.ca>), their research emphasizes the role of solidarity in understanding both collaboration and autonomy. In the project's final report, the researchers argue for a transition from professional collaboration to what they term *collaborative professionalism*, which is defined as “a kind of professionalism where teachers’ judgments are not all individually autonomous but are rooted in collaborative inquiry, joint work and collective responsibility” (Hargreaves et al., 2018, p. 20). This concept is further elaborated in a related publication by Hargreaves and O’Connor (2018), who argue that “collaborative professional relationships need better tools and deeper trust, clearer structures and stronger cultures, expertise and enthusiasm, knowing what to do and how to be with each other” (p. 24). They describe this approach as “solidarity with solidity” and advocate that teachers should “get their heads out of the sand and acknowledge that sustainable improvement requires both solidarity among colleagues and a solid grounding in research, expertise, and well-designed tools and protocols” (p. 24).

In summary, the literature review on autonomy has begun by examining quantitative data from the TALIS 2018 report, comparing Finnish teachers to the OECD average. The review has then delved into a qualitative and comparative analysis, utilizing Wermke and Salokangas’s (2021) study to offer a nuanced understanding of autonomy across different domains and levels of decision-making. Finally, the review has introduced the concepts of collaboration, trust, and solidarity as integral to the relational autonomy perspective. Despite the depth of existing research, a gap remains in understanding the complex relationship between solidarity and Finnish teachers’ autonomy. This study aims to address this gap by focusing on the relationship between solidarity and autonomy (RQ1, potentially offering a more holistic understanding of the concept of teacher autonomy (RQ2). In doing so, this study aims to both build upon and complement existing literature, providing fresh insights into the complex relationship between teacher autonomy and solidarity.



## 2 Method

This study explores the intricate relationship between solidarity and autonomy within the context of Finnish education and intends to understand teachers' professional autonomy from a relational perspective. Rather than focusing on the extent to which Finnish teachers are autonomous or collaborative, this research seeks to understand how these concepts interrelate and coexist. This goal is framed in research questions as exploring the dimensions of teacher autonomy and solidarity in Finnish school culture, and whether these can be conceptualized as relational autonomy.

Given the emphasis on “meaning and understanding”, a qualitative research strategy was deemed most appropriate, as it facilitates an in-depth exploration of complex human phenomena (Merriam & Grenier, 2019, p. 6). While established qualitative methodologies such as narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory offers valuable frameworks (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 28), this study opted for a generic qualitative approach. This choice was driven by the approach's inherent flexibility, which enables the capture of the intricacies of the studied phenomena without the constraints of a single established methodology (Kahlke, 2014; Liu, 2016). For example, phenomenology, which is rooted in philosophy (Urcia, 2021) and typically used to explore the essence of multiple perceptions of a phenomenon (Fraenkel et al., 2012) could be deemed appropriate for this study's aim of offering conceptual analysis. However, although this study involves such a phenomenological perspective to understand the essence of the concept of autonomy, the overall design of the research incorporates elements from other methodologies. Specifically, the researcher is not completely familiar with the research field, and some decisions were made based on an ethnographic framework. For instance, the interviews were carried out to understand the contextual factors as well as to answer the research questions. Thus, a generic qualitative approach serves as the overarching methodology in terms of the overall design of this research, from the initial decision on the structure to the data collection and analysis processes. For the analysis part, reflexive thematic analysis was conducted (see Section 2.3). While the study did not fully subscribe to any established theories, the study was guided by clear criteria and justifications to ensure trustworthiness and rigor, as detailed in the following sections.

## 2.1 Participants

The recruitment of participants was conducted employing “purposeful sampling” strategies, which involve “selecting information rich cases for in-depth study” (Patton, 2015, p. 401). The target population for this study comprised teachers with experience in Finnish public schools. This population was narrowed down to teachers at lower secondary level (Grades 7–9). This selection aimed to facilitate a cohesive dialogue with existing studies conducted with teachers at the same education level, such as the TALIS report (OECD, 2019, 2020) and Wermke and Salokangas’s work (2021).

Another selection criterion was based on the career status of the teachers, differentiating between pre-service and in-service teachers. Given the theoretical perspective of this study, which regards autonomy as a socially constructed capacity, the perceptions of pre-service teachers regarding their autonomy were deemed valuable for shedding light on the nature of teachers’ professional autonomy. This assumption was based on the notion that the socialization of pre-service teachers, and thus their perception of professional autonomy, might vary according to their employment status and length of experience. In this study, pre-service teachers were referred to as “candidate teachers” and those with full-time contracts as “qualified teachers”.

### 2.1.1 Qualified teachers

This group consisted of five teachers employed at a Finnish lower secondary school under full-time employment contract. The school where teachers worked at the time of the research is located in a town in the Southwest Finland. The schools in this region were identified through visiting the official websites of the relevant municipalities. The principals of these schools were contacted via email or phone to request assistance in reaching out to the teachers in their schools. One principal at a school volunteered to facilitate access to the teachers. Subsequently, all teachers in this school were informed about the research through emails, which included an attachment of the Privacy Notice (Appendix 3). From the teachers who were informed, all who volunteered to participate were considered for inclusion in the study. The first five teachers to volunteer within the decided timeframe for data collection were selected to be part of the research group.

### 2.1.2 Candidate teachers

This group included four candidate teachers who had experience in roles such as internships and substitute teaching. The participants were recruited by sending invitations through the University of Turku's email system and social media groups. Four candidate teachers volunteered to participate in the study. All participants, including the qualified teachers, are listed in Table 3. Pseudonyms were used to protect their privacy. The table was organized in ascending order based on their year of experience.

Table 3. Participants

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

## 2.2 Data collection

The data collection for this study was carried out using verbal interviews, each with an approximate duration of 40 minutes, in English. Interviews were conducted on Zoom and conversations were recorded on separate, offline device from the one used for conducting the interviews. The choice of English, a non-native language for both the researcher and the interviewees, might have influenced the research in two ways. First, those who felt confident in English might have been more likely to volunteer and this might serve as an indirect way of narrowing the sample. Second, the participants might have not expressed their thoughts as clearly as they wished due to the use of second language. Although the interviews did not

reveal any overt communication problems, this remains as a concern that may have gone unnoticed. Some minor vague phrases were clarified during the member checking process (see Section 2.4.1).

Upon completion of all interviews, the interviews were transcribed by using the European Union's digital tools (<https://language-tools.ec.europa.eu>). Subsequent to transcription, the data were anonymized, and all original recordings were permanently deleted. Prior to the interviews, informed consent was secured from each participant, facilitated through the dissemination of a detailed Privacy Notice. This process guaranteed that all participants were fully aware of the study's aims, their rights as participants, and the measures in place to protect their privacy and data.

Interviews in qualitative research provide “a unique access to the lived world of the subjects, who in their own words describe their activities, experiences and opinions” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 10). Among the four main types of interview questions “structured, semi-structured, informal, and retrospective”, semi-structured interviews were utilized in this study (Fraenkel et al., 2012, p. 451). This offered flexibility to “explore the topics raised in much more detail, if desired, or pass over ones that are not relevant”, allowing “for the unexpected and the unforeseen to be incorporated into the scope of the research” (Knott et al., 2022, p. 11). Such interviews are structured around a few themes or topics and used with a guide that serves as a roadmap for discussion during the interviews (Fraenkel et al., 2012; Knott et al., 2022). The interview guide for this study includes background information, lesson planning, instruction, testing, responsibilities of other stakeholders and the development of perceived autonomy (Appendix 2).

Another crucial aspect in the interviews is the way questions were formulated. Diverging from the individual-centric queries typical in preceding research (e.g., Ingersoll, 2003; Wermke & Salokangas, 2021), this study's interview questions were intentionally crafted to reflect a solidarity approach, emphasizing the aspects of “mutual assistance” and “sharing common goals” as described by Prainsack & Buyx (2012). The objective was to subsequently connect these aspects to the concept of professional autonomy.

As outlined in the previous sections, this study seeks not only to be complementary to but also theoretically challenge two major studies on Finnish teachers' autonomy: Wermke and Salokangas's study (2021) and the TALIS report (OECD, 2019, 2020). The data collection

through interviews adopted methodological insights from these studies and tailored them to suit the specific focus of relationality in this research. Key adaptation strategies include:

- This study views collaboration and autonomy as interconnected concepts rather than separate domains of teaching profession as in the TALIS study.
- When analysing collaboration (or solidarity as conceptualized in this study) and autonomy, certain characteristics of Finnish system are acknowledged as contextual circumstances rather than focal points of investigation as these aspects are evident in the TALIS report. For example, the fact that Finnish teachers are not observed in the class, and they are not assessed based on their content knowledge were not included in the inquiry. Some of the collaborative practices in the TALIS report were also deemed unnecessary to investigate further. As stated in the index of professional collaboration in the TALIS report, these practices include “teaching jointly as a team in the same class, providing feedback based on classroom observations, engaging in joint activities across different classes and age groups, and participating in collaborative professional learning” (OECD, 2020, p. 203). Rather than investigation of these aspects, the present study focuses on the relatively vague aspects in the report such as mutual support in the school community, and teachers’ relying on each other.
- Wermke and Salokangas (2021) investigated teacher autonomy in four domains (educational, social, developmental, and administrative) and on two levels (classroom and school). As teachers in their study conceive educational and social domains as “the core function of their profession” they refer to these domains as primary domains (Wermke & Salokangas, 2021, p. 155). And they conclude that decisions on the educational domain and classroom level are mostly individually oriented while the other domains and levels vary in composition (see Graph 2). The present study solely focuses on the primary domains (education and social domain). Although the focus in this study is on educational and social domains, it does not conceptualize these domains separately. The educational domain in Wermke and Salokangas (2021) includes planning, delivery and testing, as would be expected from a typical teaching profession (Leijen et al., 2022). And the social domain basically refers to the relationships with parents. The relationships with parents (and principals in the present study) are not treated as separate domains from educational domain but integral part of

it. This study thus argues that there is only one domain, which is teaching, and this domain is inherently social.

- Finally, the interview questions are not framed from an individualistic perspective by asking questions like “who is mainly responsible for the following decisions” (Wermke and Salokangas, 2021, p. 57). When the question about autonomy is framed from a perspective emphasizing the main responsibility, it implies (greater) autonomy for that ‘responsible’ person. The interview guide used by Wermke and Salokangas (2021, p. 55) includes questions implying such an individualistic perspective:

- 1) What are the most important decisions to be made for the teaching profession?
- 2) Who is allowed to make or makes such decisions?
- 3) Who or what frames teachers’ decisions?
- 4) Who controls whether the decisions made are appropriate?

This way of argumentation in an interview guide is contrary to the relationality perspective. This study emphasizes the interconnectedness of teaching practices by viewing the educational and social domains as a unified domain influenced by collaborative interactions among main stakeholders in the school community. Unlike the methodological approach in previous studies on teacher autonomy, this study thus investigated Finnish teachers’ autonomy by first exploring collaboration, subsequently linking it to autonomy, and this approach was reflected in the way interview questions were framed.

### **2.3 Data analysis**

The analysis of the data gathered from nine participants was conducted through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2022). It is a widely used qualitative method, but its application is varied due to the absence of a singularly accepted definition (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). This study employed *reflexive thematic analysis*, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2019). It was selected for its capacity to offer the nuanced analysis required for this study aiming to delve into a specific theoretical and conceptual understanding of teacher autonomy. Braun and Clarke (2019, p. 594) explains this approach as:

Themes do not passively emerge from either data or coding; they are not ‘in’ the data, waiting to be identified and retrieved by the researcher. Themes are creative and interpretive stories about the data, produced at the intersection of the researcher’s theoretical assumptions, their analytic resources and skill, and the data themselves.

This approach enabled a deeper interpretative engagement with the data, with a specific focus on the dynamic interaction between autonomy and solidarity. Rather than analysing these concepts separately, the study delved into their intersection, considering the notion of relational autonomy. Finlay (2021) describes this type of thematic analysis as an *artfully interpretative* path in which “researchers are more explicitly creative, artful and/or reflexive” in contrast to the path *scientifically descriptive* referring to “systematic and reliable coding procedures where inductively generated thematic categories are seen ‘valid’ and as representing the manifest data” (p. 104).

To facilitate a structured and efficient analysis, the transcribed interviews were uploaded into MAXQDA software. The utilization of this software streamlined the analytical process for more effective organization by creating codes and themes systematically. The analysis was carried out by following the steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, the researcher familiarized himself with the data by multiple readings, then generated the initial codes. *Code* refers to “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language based or visual data” (Saldana, 2016, p. 4). After prolonged engagement with these codes (n= 420), the themes were subsequently created, reviewed and defined, adhering to the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Although the interpretative analysis was the primary goal of this research, descriptive themes were also derived. They provided insights into domains where participants perceived their autonomy and collaboration. Interpretative themes, on the other hand, sought to uncover ‘latent’ meanings, aiming to “explore the underlying ideas, assumptions, and ideologies” that inform the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84). Briefly, the descriptive aspect in the analysis focused on identifying emergent themes, ensuring that the analysis remained grounded in the actual data. The interpretative aspect involved discussing these themes within the context of the study’s conceptual framework of relationality, thereby adding depth, and meaning to the findings.

Finally, during the analysis process, reflective notes were taken as memos – a feature of the MAXQDA Software enabling adding notes on the codes and documents. Incorporating these reflective notes into the analysis provided additional context and insights, significantly enriching the interpretation of the data. These notes offered a reflective lens through which the researcher’s perspectives and interpretations were continuously examined with the intention of enhancing the overall credibility of the analytical process.

## 2.4 Trustworthiness and ethical considerations

The study was conducted following the ethical guidelines of the University of Turku. The anonymity and confidentiality of participants were ensured throughout the study. This section presents the measures adopted for the study's rigor.

In qualitative research, trustworthiness is suggested as an alternative to the concepts of reliability and validity in quantitative research (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Trustworthiness encompasses the concepts *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability* and *confirmability* (Morse, 2015; Shenton, 2004). Among them, dependability is employed as a counterpart to reliability and confirmability to objectivity (Shenton, 2004, p. 64). To ensure dependability, it is recommended that research processes be meticulously documented to enable potential replication by other researchers (Shenton, 2004, p. 71). Although the methodological processes was described in detail, dependability was not the primary concern in this study as it was mainly interpretative. Similarly, confirmability (mirroring objectivity) was considered less critical, as researcher subjectivity was viewed not as a threat but as an enriching factor in qualitative inquiry (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Varpio et al., 2021). On the other hand, *credibility* and *transferability* were deemed central to ensure the trustworthiness of the research findings.

### 2.4.1 Credibility

Credibility is employed in parallel to internal validity referring to “the question of how research findings match reality” (Merriam, 2009, p. 213). Shenton (2004) suggests several strategies to enhance credibility. This study focused on two key strategies: member checking and thick description. Member checking (or respondent validation), “the single most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 239), refers to receiving feedback on the initial findings from some of the participants (Merriam, 2009, p. 217). After the initial analysis of the interviews, one candidate teacher and one qualified teacher were consulted to confirm the accuracy of the study's initial findings. This process served particularly as a clarification mechanism for idiomatic phrases and Finnish proper names. For example, one candidate teacher used the phrase “go under my skin” whose connotation was slightly vague in terms of whether it is in a positive or negative sense. Similarly, there were several proper names that were stated in Finnish and initially unclear to the researcher in the transcriptions. All these idiomatic phrases and Finnish proper names were marked with square brackets during the initial analysis. Those with a vague meaning in the entirety of the text



were reviewed with the relevant participants. Another technique used for credibility was “thick description of the phenomenon under scrutiny” (Shenton, 2004, p. 69). Thick description “is a term from anthropology and means the complete, literal description of the incident or entity being investigated” (Merriam, 2009, p. 43). This was achieved by presenting extensive excerpts from participants.

#### 2.4.2 Transferability

Thick description is also considered to be the major technique for transferability criteria – the counterpart of external validity in quantitative research (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 241). External validity deals with “the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to other situations” (Merriam, 2009, p. 223). This is however a controversial notion in qualitative research. Given this study’s deeply interpretative approach, the straightforward generalization of findings to other contexts might appear challenging. This research, conducted by a non-Finnish researcher, focuses on Finnish teachers’ autonomy to understand the concept of relational autonomy within a distinct context, while also exploring its broader implications. Recognizing the complexities of replicating this study even within a similar Finnish setting, it nevertheless aims to extract analytical insights that hold relevance across various contexts, including that of the researcher (Türkiye).

This study thus advocates for transferability in the manner Firestone (1993) describes as *analytical generalization*. Different from the other two types of generalizing (namely *sample-to-population extrapolation* and *case-to-case transfer*), analytical generalisation “does not rely on samples and population”, and aims to provide evidence supporting theory (Firestone, 1993, p. 17). This research’s exploration of Finnish teachers’ experiences and perceptions regarding their professional autonomy aims to contribute to the discourse on relational autonomy. The aspects deemed transferable involve “abstractions” or “concepts” from the research findings (Varpio et al., 2021, p. 4).

#### 2.4.3 Researcher Subjectivity

Researcher subjectivity is a crucial aspect of this study for two reasons. First, the researcher’s position as an outsider, specifically as an international student who had lived in Finland for a year and a half at the time the research was conducted, profoundly influences the research perspective. The researcher’s interest in the Finnish educational system, together with his relatively brief experience in Finnish culture, was transparently recognized for its potential

impact on the research process. Folkes (2023) argues that researcher subjectivity (or positionality) is integral part of “the research process from the very beginning and choosing the research topic, to the methodological choices made, analytical approach taken and theoretical underpinnings of the project” (p. 1314). This also explains why trustworthiness criteria, such as dependability and confirmability, were not the foremost objectives of this study. Instead, research decisions were articulated in the context of the researcher’s subjectivity, ensuring transparency regarding the subjective lens through which the study was conducted.

Furthermore, this study employs reflexive thematic analysis, a method where researcher subjectivity is intrinsically linked to the analytical process. This approach diverges from the conventional emphasis on minimizing researcher bias found in many qualitative research methodologies (e.g., Fraenkel et al., 2011). Following Braun and Clarke’s (2022, p. 4) guidance, this study refrains from focusing on bias; rather it integrates reflexivity throughout the analysis, thereby embracing the researcher’s subjectivity as a valuable component of the research narrative.

### 3 Findings

Based on the reflexive thematic analysis, a total of 420 codes and 5 themes were identified, as outlined in Appendix 4. These themes are a) *sense of autonomy and occupational socialization*, which illustrates the realization of autonomy through experience and socialization in school context; b) *“their work becomes my work”*, a theme named after a notable quote from a participant, capturing the shared responsibility among key stakeholders – teachers, principals, and parents; c) *curriculum infused sense of responsibility*, highlighting how the curriculum becomes internalized by teachers; d) *“planning mindset” synchronized by coursebooks*, contrasting the autonomous planning activities to the unifying influence of curriculum through coursebooks; e) *testing is more than testing students*, highlighting the significant role of the testing domain (use of ‘domain(s)’ in this thesis refers to planning, instruction, and testing). The findings are presented through comprehensive excerpts from participant responses to allow the data to convey its own narrative, thereby enhancing credibility. For ease of reference and to improve readability, these excerpts have been sequentially numbered and any additions by the researcher within these excerpts were shown in square brackets. To differentiate between candidate and qualified teachers in the excerpts, identifiers such as Q27 and C2 are used next to their pseudonyms. Here, “Q” stands for qualified teachers and “C” for candidate teachers, with the numbers indicating their years of teaching experience.

#### 3.1 Sense of autonomy and organisational socialization

Parallel to the prevalent literature (Schleicher, 2020; Wermke & Salokangas, 2021), Finnish teachers’ pronounced sense of professional autonomy emerged as a prominent theme in the dataset. Participants not only recognized their autonomy but were also acutely conscious of it. This awareness was evident in the way they expressed their autonomy. Rather than an individual trait, they mostly framed their autonomy as an aspect of Finnish system and characteristics of all teachers. This collective identity was evident in references to “we” and “Finnish teachers” and attributions to the “Finnish school” and “Finnish education system”, which suggests a systemic foundation and recognition of this autonomy (Excerpt 1, 2, 3, 4).

**Excerpt 1.** I think part of Finnish school is the freedom of teachers, that’s a big thing. So, if it comes from outside, what we should do, I don’t think so many teachers would enjoy their job so much (Marjukka\_Q10).

**Excerpt 2.** We can pretty much do whatever we want, which is like the strength of the Finnish educational system (Sakari\_Q27).

**Excerpt 3.** So there's very much freedom in Finnish education to do that. But this is, I think, mostly for like junior high and high school. It is a little bit more restricted in the elementary school (Juhani\_C1).

**Excerpt 4.** We are very autonomous we can do things in a way that we want to because, you know, that's our right as a teacher (Veera\_C4).

This collective articulation of autonomy, unprompted by the interview questions, suggests a deeply ingrained belief in autonomy as a defining feature of Finnish teaching professionalism. In other words, the perception of autonomy transcends individual or school-specific contexts and reflects a system-wide ethos. In one way this might be related to researcher positionality as they were responding to an outsider, who was seemingly trying to learn about 'their' system.

To reiterate, this study broadly conceptualizes autonomy as decision-making as articulated in RQ2. The dataset reveals that participants' capacity for decision-making evolves with experience and socialization within the school environment. Both qualified and candidate teachers reported a progression in their confidence and decision-making capabilities over time (Excerpt 5, 6).

**Excerpt 5.** Speaking about my decision-making progresses I'm very confident, I guess I'm at my most confident time of my life concerning that, because I have been in so many bad or difficult places and situations, and I have always lesson from them. So nowadays, when I have some kind of problem, I can always "Oh, that was then and then we did this and that and that worked and that didn't" I don't make the same mistakes anymore. I have made them made a lot of them during the years, so I'm trying not to make them again. And, to learn always something new when we get a new result, working with the parents, working with students and with the collaborators so on, so it's very nice time I'm having at the moment (Antti\_Q35).

**Excerpt 6.** First year was really awful. Like, I was really questioning myself really much. I was like, preparing every class like so many hours, like I was thinking what I will say exactly, how I will put my hands and so the students will get like, it's more relaxed now. So I don't feel so nervous. I'm just like, I know these things. I can, like, I can teach students like we can discuss, and let's see what they get, what they don't get, and then I try to say it in a different way. Hmm I think it's going like easier to me. Like normal tasks don't take so much time. So I can, like, do some experiments, like when students more like I can use my time to do some games and like if we go to do this differently. Like in Finland, there has been a lot of talk about different teaching methods like how students are trying to like study things at home, and then they go to class and then in class, there isn't really teaching, it's more like answering questions, kind of it. So that is

something I would have more time to maybe test with some classes when I didn't have so much like things to do as a new teacher (Riitta\_Q4).

Antti and Riitta's reflections reveal the transformative journey of teachers from navigating initial uncertainties to embracing autonomy and innovative practices. Antti, drawing from decades of experience, illustrates the confidence that comes with learning from past challenges. His narrative points to the evolution towards strategic decision-making and proactive problem-solving (Excerpt 5). Riitta's transition from meticulous class preparation to a more adaptive and explorative approach highlights a key aspect of professional growth (Excerpt 6). Together, their cases can be interpreted as a progression from apprenticeship to expertise, demonstrating how experience enriches teaching practice by fostering resilience, adaptability, and a willingness to innovate. This evolution can be linked to what Ericsson theorizes as "expert performance" achieved through "natural experiments" (Ericsson, 2014, p. 43). In this theory, as Glaser succinctly explains, "initially, the learner depends on others, and with time, begins to increasingly rely on self-mechanisms and on self-judgment about when to engage others as participants and coaches" (Glaser, 2014, p. 310). In this sense, teaching, probably as in most professions, follows a development form apprenticeship to expertise. In addition to achieving an expert performance, the accumulation and refinement of teaching materials in time seem to serve as tangible indicators of how teachers streamline their decision-making process.

**Excerpt 7.** I have gathered them [materials] a lot in my class. They are very available... I make my tests myself, they are made by me, but of course, I have a good battery of different kinds of tests throughout the years. So I can pick up some ideas from there and there and there, which are from the test of the same subject (Antti\_Q35).

**Excerpt 8.** I've been accumulating like stuff on the computer or in the cloud a lot. Digitizing like old material so whatever I'm teaching, I already have kind of a library where I can choose whatever I use also, I've been using, like when we had the distance learning, I'd be like taping things from the internet (Sakari\_Q27).

**Excerpt 9.** I remember one school that they had, you know, one, it was a file on Google Drive, and all the teachers put some materials there, and everybody was free to, you know, use whatever they needed (Veera\_C4).

Even candidate teacher participants in this research exhibit a significant growth in autonomy, reporting several years of teaching experiences through substitute roles and internships (see Table 3). Despite critiques of Finland's teacher training for its few induction programs (Korhonen et al., 2017), the contextual factors, such as availability of substitute roles for candidates, seem to provide this induction period that promotes early practical engagement.

Such pre-service experiences seem to prepare candidates for full-time teaching positions (Excerpt 10, 11).

**Excerpt 10.** I think I'm somehow confident that I know that I will do whatever it takes. And I have seen that I have skills and I know how to do and I know how to do so yeah, so I think I'm quite confident. But still I'm sure when the day comes that I have my own class I'm sure I will ask a lot of questions from anyone who will answer (Sari\_C2).

**Excerpt 11.** When I started, I was very nervous. And, you know, I followed for example, learning materials very, very strict strictly but nowadays, you know, I feel more free to do whatever I feel the best and whatever I feel is the best way to do things. For example, if I find some nice materials I knew like outside you know, the ones that we're using in class for example, on the internet, I'm you know, okay, we can do this and it's more easy to you know, your lesson plans as well I think is you know, I can combine more things now that I you know, know, a lot more. Yeah, and I think it will continue developing, you know, the more you do this, the more you teach, the more you work as a teacher it gets easier in my opinion (Veera\_C4).

Autonomy in teaching evolves not solely through accruing professional experience but is also deeply influenced by the specific context of teaching. Sakari's confidence in teaching at the lower secondary level for 27 years contrasts with his cautious approach to upper secondary teaching, where he is little experience and feels a need for more detailed planning (Excerpt 12). Similarly, Riitta emphasizes the benefits of a permanent position, pointing out the advantage of familiarity with the school context (Excerpt 13). These insights suggest that the development of autonomy is a dynamic process, intricately linked to the teacher's specific educational setting as well as overall professional experience.

**Excerpt 12.** Experience. Absolutely experience. I've done this so many years. How many...? 25 years. And in the beginning, I used to do it a lot. The first year, I was planning all the lessons. For many years I did that. Okay. I have to admit that I still do that on the high school side, lukio [Finnish word]. Those lessons, I still plan. Because I haven't done the lukio thing for a long time. So my tenure is like on the lower secondary and upper secondary (Sakari\_Q27).

**Excerpt 13.** It's always, like, new book, new order how they teach so that takes more time. But, like, if I could get permanent job, it would make easier because then I would have the same book, same material that I would know the students. I don't need to, like, use time to, like, learn how students, like, learn things. And yeah, so I think that is something that will, like, come easier with experiments (Riitta\_Q4).

Given this, teachers gain confidence in decision-making as they both proceed in their careers and get familiarized with the teaching context. The data also reveals that this growth often

occurs through formal and informal interactions within the school environment, where teachers exchange ideas and develop their teaching practices. Such interactions, identified in literature as “organizational socialization” involve the adaptations of newcomers to the workplace (Cooper-Thomas & Anderson, 2006; Richards et al., 2014). This socialisation, evident in the dataset, seems to facilitate a culture of shared learning and mutual support among teachers. The informal way of this socialization is illustrated in the following excerpts from candidate teachers.

**Excerpt 14.** But I’ve learned this attitude of like, I don’t have to know everything, but I will have to give like this open kind of like attitude and how it will evolve I hope I will get more, let’s say tools for dealing with different social dynamics (Juhani\_C1).

**Excerpt 15.** I’m sure when the day comes that I have my own class I’m sure I will ask a lot of questions from anyone who will answer (Sari\_C2).

**Excerpt 16.** Sometimes I feel like there comes like, of course, opinions, and maybe some like pressure, when, like, someone else’s class is like doing better in the same subjects at the same time. So, of course, then I can feel like, “oh, no, am I doing something wrong in that, like, my class is not that great?” Of course, their teaching methods and stuff, they might not be like correlating with the results. Of course, they can be just that the learners are different. But of course, I kind of feel like “oh, no, like, am I doing something wrong?” (Anneli\_C4).

In a similar line, the qualified teacher Marjukka does not need her colleagues’ approval any more in the 10<sup>th</sup> year of experience (Excerpt 17); and Ilmari, who used to get positive affirmation beforehand, feels more confident in the 5<sup>th</sup> year of his professional life (Excerpt 18).

**Excerpt 17.** I think I have gained more trust on what I do. I don’t need my colleagues’ approval to do something. So, yeah, I think that has increased during time. And I trust that my methods are working (Marjukka\_Q10).

**Excerpt 18.** I was very lucky; I was in a different school than I am now. But the principal was very supporting. And the other older teachers were also like, when I came and then I told what happened or what I did and stuff like that, and then said “yeah, yeah, that’s, that’s just the right thing to do”. So I got the, like positive affirmation, for my doings. At the moment, I’m much more confident than I was (Ilmari\_Q5).

As for the formal mechanisms of socialization, two subthemes emerged in the dataset: the organisation of school meetings and the influential role of school administration. These two aspects are also related to collaborative practices in the following section. However, as they

were deemed more relevant to the formal ways of organisational socialisation, these two themes are presented here.

The data reveals three distinct meeting formats at Finnish schools: faculty-wide gatherings, parent-teacher meetings, and subject-specific teacher gatherings. The first two could be typical of any school contexts. Moreover, there seem to be plenty faculty-wide gatherings in the Finnish schools, based on the TALIS report in which 85.1% of principals report that teachers are represented on the school management team” (see Item 31 in the previous sections).

However, the prevalence of subject-specific teacher gatherings seems particularly noteworthy for the purposes of this study. These meetings, varying in frequency across disciplines, offer a fertile ground for teachers to exchange ideas and jointly refine their teaching practices. For instance, mathematics teachers (Riitta\_Q4) gather every Friday to discuss pedagogical strategies, and language teachers (Sakari\_Q27) meet once or twice a month (Excerpt 19, 20).

**Excerpt 19.** Every Friday at 12, we meet like with the math, physics and chemistry teachers. And then we discuss whatever is in our mind. And of course, like, sometime, like, between classes, we always, like, talk, if there is something in our mind. So I can ask, like, "how did you do that physics thing where there is so much history that is really boring to me and students. So how do you do that?" So it's more like fun, and something that they can really take something with them. So it's not so, like book, or I will just talk for forty five minutes about history. So yeah, it's like discussing how you do that. And then telling how I'm doing that. And then you maybe not do the same thing that someone else is doing, but you get ideas that, "oh, she's doing that way, that thing, So maybe I will do kind of similar, but maybe I can, like, do always this and like" (Riitta\_Q4).

**Excerpt 20.** We have kind of regular meetings for language teachers in our group. All the groups they have every now and then, let's say, could it be, like, twice a month or once a month, where we get together. One of my colleagues, she calls us together and she's very into computer enhanced teaching. And she tells us different, like, things that she has found, she's much more active than I am ever. And she comes with some ideas, some of them good, some of them bad, and what is good, I'll take, of course. So we have these kinds of things. And, and if I, like, come up with a good idea, I usually share them to my colleagues. (Sakari\_Q27).

Moreover, the school administration, especially the role of principals, was identified as a cornerstone in fostering an environment that supports both autonomy and solidarity within the school culture (RQ1). Principals, by virtue of their hiring authority, seem to influence the social climate of the school. For example, the adoption of technology in teaching can be a school-specific approach, with principals preferring teachers inclined towards integrating



digital tools into their teaching practices (Excerpt 21). This supports the context-dependent nature of teacher autonomy, suggesting that autonomy, while broadly supported, is nuanced by the micro-cultures within individual schools. As discussed above in Sakari's and Riitta's case (Excerpts 19, 20), the development of autonomy is not linear but context dependent. Quite related to this aspect, a particular school has its own unique culture and sets of values (Excerpt 22), and this might shape the way teachers socialize and exercise their autonomy depending on the school they have been hired.

**Excerpt 21.** Some schools is, like, saying that we want to go more, like, using computers or something like that. So they, like, affect teaching more, like, when they hire some teachers, like, who they hire is, like, the main, probably, way to affect teaching. Like, if they want computer to be more often used in the teaching, then they hire teachers that says that, yeah, "I like to use computers pretty much" (Riitta\_Q4).

**Excerpt 22.** That's very important thing, the values, and that we share the same values. I think that's the main thing keeps us alive, doing this job (Antti\_Q35).

The data indicate that principals are not only influential in shaping the school culture when hiring, but they also have a significant role in the process, particularly in situations requiring guidance on legal or procedural matters (Excerpts 23, 24). Moreover, it becomes evident that principals' direct engagement in teaching domains is limited, primarily to faculty-wide meetings and administrative concerns. This is in line with the literature on Finnish teachers' being trusted in their teaching practice. A notable deviation from this pattern is observed in the case of special needs education, where principals are more actively involved in the planning process (see also Section 3.2).

**Excerpt 23.** In schools that I have been teaching, they are really supportive. Like, if I have questions, like, that is, like, "Can I do this?, like "what does the law say?" Or something like that. They always answer and, like, they are always really supportive with my choices, but, like, it's more, like, affecting something that can I do this with student, like, if student is making noise that is, like, disturbing my teaching, "Can I, like, put him outside of the class, or something like that. So it's more like that, not something that how I teach or what I teach or anything like that (Riitta\_Q4).

**Excerpt 24.** I don't know what school administration is, like, in my own school. Well, it's very free. I don't think it's like very supervised, if something happens, so they get feedback from the parents or students, maybe then they'll come and look, but I think it's based on trust (Marjukka\_Q10).

This theme reinforces the established understanding that Finnish teachers perceive significant autonomy within their teaching domains, with minimal direct intervention from school

principals. This autonomy is not instantaneous but develops over time and as teachers get familiarized with their specific school context. This gradual development of autonomy aligns with the literature on expert performance (Ericsson et al., 1993a; Glaser, 2014), which refers to a changing agency from “externally supported” to “self-regulatory” (Berliner, 2001, pp. 478–479). While the role of “prolonged efforts” are commonly emphasized in expertise (Ericsson et al., 1993b, p. 363), socialization is also crucial in the development of expert performance, as emphasized by Collins and Evans (2018). They argue that mere practice is insufficient for attaining expertise; individuals must also engage in “linguistic discourse”, through which they “acquire the tacit knowledge needed to use their knowledge in ways that other group members recognize as correct” (Collins & Evans, 2018, p. 28). Viewing teachers’ growing autonomy through the lens of socialization suggests that becoming an expert is not solely about developing one’s skills in isolation but involves active participation in the linguistic and social practices of the profession.

In summary, this study identifies two key aspects of socialization within Finnish schools: subject-specific meetings and the influence of principals in socialization through their recruitment choices and administrative support. These aspects provide profound insights for answering RQ1. While the findings do not unveil new aspects of how Finnish teachers perceive their autonomy, they significantly illuminate the solidarity perspective based on the presence of subject specific meetings and administrative support. This theme, providing a comprehensive understanding of autonomy and solidarity, sets the stage for an investigation into the nuanced interactions and collaborations within the school context.

### **3.2 “Their work becomes my work”**

This theme, encapsulated by a quote from participant Juhani, delves into the dual nature of collaboration within Finnish schools. While Juhani’s remark bore a negative connotation – referring to the potential burden teachers bear when/if parents fail to fulfil their responsibilities – it may also be read from a positive perspective. This duality is pivotal for the present analysis as it emphasizes both the potential challenges and the intrinsic value found in collaborative efforts.

The exploration of this theme extends the discussion on the socialization perspective in the previous section and provides a deeper insight into how collaboration is not only systemic but also deeply rooted in the daily practices within the Finnish schools. Accordingly, this theme provides incidents of collaboration in teachers’ work life. It is noteworthy that these incidents

do not exclusively occur inside the school context. For example, candidate teachers report their participation in virtual communities which seem to serve as key resources for sharing, advice, and collective problem-solving (Excerpt 25).

**Excerpt 25.** There are some big Facebook groups where there are a lot of teachers, and they share ideas. “Hey, we did this, we did this or this” teachers asking, “Hey, I have this kind of tough situation, what would you do?” And then 100 teacher reply saying what they think, so this kind of, like supporting and sharing (Sari\_C2).

For in-school practices, participants expressed their enthusiasm for collaboration in various ways. For example, there seem to be coteaching practices at Finnish schools. Although only one qualified teacher directly mentioned coteaching (Excerpt 26), it’s noteworthy that the TALIS report indicates 34.4% of Finnish teachers have experience with co-teaching, surpassing the OECD average of 27.9%. This may suggest a broader implementation of coteaching methods within the country.

**Excerpt 26.** I have taught in collaborations in the lessons so that there have been two teachers in one class. I’ve done that. So I know what can be get out of it. I think it’s good thing. And one school that I’ve been with did a lot collaboration, and especially when I was a young new teacher there. It was helpful, a lot (Marjukka\_Q10).

On the other hand, Marjukka’s positive reflections on coteaching present a contrast to concerns about the possibility of “dominant teachers” during collaboration (Ilmari\_Q5) and dissatisfaction after a shared testing practice (Sakari\_Q27), which reveals the nuanced realities of teacher collaboration. Despite these singular and potential challenges, the majority of teachers engage in collaborative practices, particularly in sharing and developing ideas across three main domains of teaching (Excerpt 27, 28).

**Excerpt 27.** In physics and chemistry, there is, like, the things that you do with students, like, you use magnets and stuff like that, that I, like, plan with another teacher. I have, like, another physics and chemistry teacher that we go and test everything (Riitta\_Q4).

**Excerpt 28.** One of my colleagues, she calls us together and she’s very into computer enhanced teaching. And she tells us different, like, things that she has found, she’s much more active than I am ever. And she comes with some ideas, some of them good, some of them bad, and what is good, I’ll take, of course (Sakari\_Q27).

Moreover, teachers seem to collaborate more on sensitive issues and those related to the application of school rules (Excerpt 29, 30). This aspect is reflective of Wermke and Salokangas's (2021) argument on "risky decisions", which are more collegially made.

**Excerpt 29.** They need to sit for one hour and not to do anything, it's, like, punishment or doing something wrong. But after I discuss it, like, my colleagues and ask it whether they have something like that happening in their class and what they did. They were all same, like, yeah, they did the same thing. Grade is four, and then that they need to do the time out. it was, like, "Okay, I did everything right. So now I can answer the parents that I'm really sorry that if this is like something that doesn't feel right, but this is how our school is, like, doing every time that this is happening" (Riitta\_Q4).

**Excerpt 30.** I think it's fairly not unrestricted, but kind of, like, we have lots of freedom there, like, in the teaching in the planning, the actual execution of the plans and teaching. I don't know, only one thing comes to mind is, if there's some very controversial topics, for example, right now, there is, well, Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Palestine, these kinds of questions, which are controversial and very, like, emotionally loaded subjects. So those kinds of things, for example, in my subject could be, let's say, something that causes, I don't know, like emotional reactions, let's say, in the students, and then they report or, like, the principal here cares about it somehow. And there might be some kind of conversations of, like, well, how we actually teach this. But I don't see that necessarily as a bad thing, because those are controversial subjects. It is needed to have conversations on those. But yeah, I don't know if it would be a problem, because I don't feel, like, in the Finnish system, any subject is, like, prohibited or like, told that this is exactly what you have to teach. At least, I don't feel, like, it is like that in Finland, thankfully (Juhani\_C1).

Another significant aspect of collaboration at Finnish schools emerged as the support system<sup>11</sup> and the role of special needs education (SNE) teachers (see National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014; EDUFI, 2016). Among participants, two of them (Ilmari and Antti) are qualified SNE teachers, and one candidate teacher is specializing in SNE besides primary school education. The findings based on their interviews showed that SNE teachers differ from other subject teachers in that they engage more extensively in collaborative practices across all domains of teaching. A key element of this collaboration is the development of individualized learning plans, created in partnership with parents, students, and other teachers (Excerpt 31). Moreover, unlike their counterparts in other subjects, SNE teachers submit their personalized plans to school principals. This process emphasizes the adaptation of curricular goals to suit individual student needs rather than adhering strictly to a standard curriculum or

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<sup>11</sup> Throughout the text, when the term "curriculum" is used, it refers to National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014. In this document, support system involves three levels as; *general*, *intensified* and *special support* in Section 7.1.

specific textbooks, as in other subjects (see section 3.4 for choice of materials). Obviously, the identification and dealing with those needs require more collaboration.

**Excerpt 31.** It's the individual educational plan. And we do that for every student that is in the level of special support. That is a plan which we go through with student and with parents (Antti\_Q35).

**Excerpt 32.** I know that the subject groups are doing collaboration for their exams and then because I'm working with them, then I get the fruit of their work because they are very, very glad to share their exams to me also. So I know what they are doing (Ilmari\_Q5).

Consequently, this pervasive collaboration from planning through to assessment cultivates a sense of heightened autonomy (Excerpt 33) and job satisfaction (Excerpt 34) among SNE teachers. They report a distinctive freedom and enjoyment in their roles, which can be attributed to the dynamic nature of their work.

**Excerpt 33.** I guess I have the most freedom that any else teacher in my school (Antti\_Q35).

**Excerpt 34.** I love this job because it's so different, because when I was studying, I did some substitute things like a general subject, teacher. And the days were so boring because you are going through the same class over and over again. Now, like, every day, and every class is a little different. So it keeps you on the edge much better. And then you need to develop your own doing every year because every group is so different. And what works this year might not work next year, or what work last year is not working this year. So I need to be constantly, like, two or three steps ahead, which is pretty nice. I like it (Ilmari\_Q5).

This apparent paradox – that greater autonomy in SNE leads to a heightened need for collaboration – affirms the theoretical underpinnings of this study. It illustrates that autonomy does not exist in isolation but thrives on collaborative efforts. This phenomenon, termed as relational autonomy in the present study, is vividly exemplified in the context of Finnish SNE.

Moreover, the heightened autonomy experienced by SNE teachers fosters deeper collaboration with their mainstream subject teacher counterparts, which seems to enrich the teaching experience for both groups. In other words, SNE teachers, by focusing on students requiring tailored educational approaches, allow subject teachers to engage with the broader student body more effectively. This is not directly based on the data, but interpretively, support system can easily be read as a shared responsibility at the advantage of subject teachers too, who do not need to deal with students who “are in danger of dropping out of society” (Ilmari\_Q5) or “have all kinds of problems” (Antti\_Q35). It thus seems safe to say that the very existence of support system at Finnish schools seems to make room for the other

subject teachers to practice their profession. This may be considered as a good example for a systemic way of organizing shared responsibility, which may not be the case in other contexts where SNE students are in the responsibility of regular subject teachers unless they have a diagnosed learning problem (e.g. Türkiye). From this perspective, some findings in the TALIS report cause confusion about whether the role of SNE teachers are included in the collaborative practices. More specifically, Finnish teachers report less engagement in “discussions about the learning development of specific students”, with the percentage of 61.1 in comparison to the OECD average 73.4 (Item 7). Considering the possibility of such discussions taking place with only SNE teachers in Finland, this lower percentage is understandable, but can hardly be interpreted as a lower rate of collaboration.

The collaborative dynamics between teachers, and specifically between subject and SNE teachers, emphasize the interplay between autonomy and collective responsibility, as explored in RQ1. This brings depth to Juhani’s phrase “their work becomes my work”, which should be read not solely in a negative light but as a reflection on the responsibility of principals, parents, and peers. The interviews also revealed participants’ concerns over the potential neglect in duty by key stakeholders at schools.

A potential lack in commitment from principals was noted to have widespread effects, with Sakari noting it “would affect everything”, Juhani observing it could “compromise the whole working atmosphere”, and Sari stating it “affects their job greatly”. Marjukka further exemplifies this point, suggesting that a principal’s lack of engagement not only impacts teacher motivation but also the cohesive community feel of the school (Excerpt 35). This highlights the crucial role of leadership in fostering an environment conducive to both autonomy and collaboration within an educational context. The role of principals in cultivating this environment was also emphasized by Maaranen and Afdal’s (2022) recent study on Finnish teachers’ autonomy in comparison to Norway and the USA. They conclude that principals in all three contexts play a significant role in the realization of teacher autonomy, whether through supportive or restrictive practices (Maaranen & Afdal, 2022).

**Excerpt 35.** I think that [principal’s lack of commitment] reflects also on the teachers commitment, and the whole schools’ feel of community if it’s not coming from up to down. And also in school, the curriculums and the daily schedules rules, it will be really hard to follow the rules if there aren’t someone, like, make sure that the most difficult things get done. I think it gives me more and more work if it’s a bad principal. Yeah, and the good principal is easy to rely if I have a difficult situation, which, say, or with one parent, so it’s easy to rely

that we are at the same side with the principal rather than on the opposite sides (Marjukka\_Q10).

Similarly, a lack of commitment by parents is also deemed to affect teaching at school. Participants report that educating children (Marjukka, Juhani, Veera) or teaching how to behave (Riitta, Sakari) should be primarily parents' responsibility. The overwhelming view is that a deficit in this parental duty detrimentally impacts the quality of teaching and learning within the school environment. Ilmari articulates this impact effectively, noting that issues stemming from home life not only challenge teacher's ability to conduct lessons effectively but also permeate the classroom and affect other students (Excerpt 36).

**Excerpt 36.** When the child is not well, and it's because of the situation at home. Of course, it's affects you as a person, because they are so fragile, the students, and it's not their fault. And if they are having any troubles at home, of course, it affects them here. So, they might not be themselves or as active or stuff like that. So, then I need to find ways to get them through the day sometimes or then motivate them to do the things we need to do and stuff like that affects the most to my teaching. And it also affects the other students also because they see the one that is not doing so great. But they are not talking about it of course. So they sense it that everything is not right, because they know how they are (Ilmari\_Q5).

The role of parents' lack of commitment in how well students do at school can actually be considered as common-sense knowledge. This study validates and reiterates this intuitive understanding. However, the data also reveals significant insights into teachers' strategies for addressing home-related issues. Participants (Ilmari, Antti, Sakari, Veera) report the possibility of involving social workers [kuraattori in Finnish] available in Finnish schools for such matters. From the perspective of "their work becomes my work", this aspect seems crucial. Home-related issues faced by students inevitably impact the classroom environment, and in the cases of severe difficulties, teachers have the opportunity to pass on these responsibilities to specialized professionals.

Finally, participants perceive the impact of colleagues' commitment on their work as less critical compared to that of principals and parents. However, an incident shared by one teacher illustrates a potential negative impact that a colleague's lack of commitment can have on their teaching practice (Excerpt 37).

**Excerpt 37.** And if somebody, some of my colleagues, if they don't do the job seriously, and they do, like, if they're lazy, they do some stuff that will affect all of us at our school. I used to have a colleague whose lessons lasted only 30 minutes. And I was a new teacher that she was teaching next to me in the classroom. And my students, they always complained, "why do they get out, go to

the break? And we are still sitting here?” Because we had 15 minutes left. Why? Why are they doing? I don’t know. I don’t have an answer to that. Real answer would it be like because she’s smoker. She likes to get her cigarette. And that’s why she does it. It was outrageous (Sakari\_Q27).

In conclusion, the theme “their work becomes my work”, derived from a participant’s quote, captures the essence of collective responsibility and solidarity. This theme provides robust evidence that supports the conceptualization of autonomy as relational (RQ2). The most striking evidence for this relational autonomy is seen in the collaborative dynamics that emerge within the Finnish approach to SNE. This approach fosters a distinctive collaborative culture that influences broader school-wide collaboration. The Finnish curriculum embodies this collaboration remarkably:

Flexible arrangements are used to provide part-time special needs education by means of collaborative teaching, in a small group or as individual instruction. The objectives and contents of part-time special needs education are connected with other instruction received by the pupil. The implementation of part-time special needs education shall be planned, the pupil’s needs for it shall be assessed, and its effectiveness shall be evaluated in cooperation between the teacher, the pupil and the guardian (EDUFI, 2016, Section 7.5.2).

### **3.3 Curriculum-infused sense of responsibility**

A prominent theme emerging from the analysis is the frequent reference to the curriculum, which seems to be the single most important document shaping education in Finland. Some participants even analogized the curriculum to the ‘government’, which captures its authoritative influence on Finnish education. Riitta expresses this succinctly; “government says that these things we need to teach, but everything out of that, it’s completely like what we want”. This perspective sheds light on the dual aspects of teachers’ professional identity: adherence to the curriculum and the exercise of teacher autonomy within the boundaries set by this document. The breadth between these two aspects – the prescriptive curriculum and the teachers’ autonomous application of it – emerges as a space where Finnish teachers’ renowned autonomy is most evident. Notably, the absence of intermediate regulatory or oversight mechanisms (e.g. classroom observations and inspections) in this space seems to be an obvious indication of Finnish teachers to be considered autonomous.

The findings illustrate how the curriculum serves as a crucial reference for teachers in articulating their teaching practices. Antti mentions being “so familiar with the curriculum”, while Ilmari finds it “in check with my [their] teaching philosophies”, and Riitta uses it as a checklist to confirm by asking; “am I teaching everything that I should do?”. This alignment



between personal practices and the curriculum's directives also seems to foster a sense of security among teachers. Veera emphasizes this protective aspect of adhering to the curriculum in the following excerpt:

**Excerpt 38.** I think when we follow the curriculum, teachers are, you know, kind of protected, because, you know, we can always, you know, say, this is, we do this, because it's mentioned in the curriculum, this is the way we do it (Veera\_C4).

This sentiment reveals how the curriculum not only guides educational content and goals but also serves as a shield for teachers, legitimizing their instructional choices and methods. In this regard, the curriculum acts as both a blueprint for teaching and a bulwark against criticism. Almost all participants stated that they would provide rationale in case of parental feedback, and that the curriculum is the main reference point in provision of this rationale. More specifically, parents' feedback on exam results are responded by referring to curriculum (Excerpt 39, 40).

**Excerpt 39.** I would react by taking the curriculum out and giving the points from there, like, why I'm doing this stuff this way, and then show them that that is actually the way that the curriculum says and supports it (Ilmari\_Q5).

**Excerpt 40.** Parents do know their rights, and, you know, sometimes they demand some things, but then, in this case, you know, is the curriculum and then we can always say that, you know, we are very autonomous we can do things in a way that we want to because, you know, that's our right as a teacher ... but then it's the curriculum and, you know, yeah, that we have done this and this. Teacher has to be, you know, able to, you know, justify and reason why they have done something, you know, there are always, you know, some parents that are like that. So, yeah I think we have to be able to justify the things that we've done. That's the most important thing that we think about (Veera\_C4).

The curriculum's role extends beyond a mere reference point, and act as a unifying force that ensures consistency and standardization across the three domains of teaching. In participants' words, "the curriculum is always there in the back" (Antti\_Q35) and teachers "can't really deviate too much from that" (Juhani\_C1). This is a critical inquiry into the nature of teacher autonomy - how it coexists with the need for uniformity across different classrooms, especially when teachers are autonomous enough to "do whatever they want" (Sakari\_Q27). The dataset reveals that the national curriculum serves as the foundational framework for this uniformity (Excerpt 41, 42).

**Excerpt 41.** There's the national curriculum. So that's the basics for everyone. And that's where everyone should draw their own planning from and not just making it up. So there's that, of course, like in the big picture (Sari\_C2).

**Excerpt 42.** It [curriculum] guides teachers a lot about what to do and when to do and how to do as well (Antti\_Q35).

While the curriculum acts as a pivotal guide in teaching practices and a foundation for justifying decisions, it would be simplistic to view it merely as a directive to be adhered to. Instead, it functions more aptly as a navigational tool or a roadmap that outlines the journey rather than dictating the destination. This nuanced perspective becomes particularly apparent when examining the sources of accountability identified by participants. Participants feel accountable to principals (n=1), themselves (n=4), parents (n=5), and students (n=8)<sup>12</sup>. Such an understanding of accountability implies a “curriculum infused sense of responsibility” that goes beyond a straightforward, rule-following mentality.

**Excerpt 43.** The feeling of accountability is more with the kids themselves and their parents and me (Sari\_C2).

**Excerpt 44.** Students, absolutely students. Absolutely. Yeah. That's why we are here. that's why I'm doing it. It's my responsibility that they will learn English or Swedish. Yeah, absolutely. That's the highest accountability there is. In a way, this is a stupid way to say, but in a way, I'm just like working for them. And I'm this servant in a way, which they don't understand (Sakari\_Q27).

This theme reflects how the curriculum's values not only guide but also permeate to teachers' professional identities, shaping their sense of duty. In this regard, the findings presented in this theme is in par with Vermke and Salokangas's (2021) study showing that curriculum, as a binding document, is internalized by teachers, which in turn leads to Finnish teachers' being trusted.

“It is very interesting to note too that, for our apparently autonomous Finnish teacher, who also reported that the most important educational decisions are in the hands of the individual teacher, the importance of government documents as frames for decision-making have the highest value of all four countries. This might correlate with the idea that Finnish teachers actually feel autonomous and have the trust of the state, because they can be trusted to follow the rules. In other words, their “rules” are similar to those of their superiors” (Wermke & Salokangas, 2021, p. 74).

Moreover, the present study has illustrated the significant role that curriculum plays in the standardization of teaching practices. This raises the critical question of how prevalent the

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<sup>12</sup> The numbers refer to time each aspect is stated, not the number of participants.

solidarity as well as the level of teacher autonomy in Finnish schools. In the previous sections, solidarity was characterized by ‘mutual assistance’ and ‘sharing common goals’ (Prainsack & Buyx, 2012). Following this definition, the role of curriculum on standardization could be interpreted as the ground for solidarity in which curriculum serves as the ultimate mutual goal for all stakeholders while teachers exercise their autonomy in fulfilling these “common goals”.

Moreover, the data reveals the nuanced dynamics of testing. Wermke and Salokangas (2021) identify testing as a domain characterized by “increasing parental pressures and involvement” (p. 5). Despite recognizing these pressures, their analysis differentiates “educational autonomy” from “social autonomy”. They assert that “Finnish-style, trust-based professionalism”, affords teachers a broad scope of action with minimal oversight, particularly in the educational domain (Wermke and Salokangas, 2021, p. 92). This assertion, however, carries a degree of ambiguity. While suggesting that the educational domain remains largely autonomous for teachers, it concurrently acknowledges parental involvement in testing - a crucial component of this domain. The distinction Wermke and Salokangas make between educational and social autonomy raises questions when viewed through the lens of this research. By adopting a more integrated approach that sees educational and social domains as interconnected, this study proposes examining testing from a perspective of solidarity (RQ1), which in turn fosters an understanding of relational autonomy (RQ2). Given its critical role in the interdependence among educational stakeholders, testing will be explored in further detail in Section 3.5.

### **3.4 “Planning mindset” synchronized by coursebooks**

The previous section has explored how curriculum is internalized by participants in a way to become their professional identity. This section recognizes that teachers are not merely isolated agents in the direct application of curriculum mandates. On one hand, teachers embody curriculum in their professional identities and act as autonomous agents. On the other hand, curriculum standardizes teaching practice by virtue of being a reference point. This theme explores the concrete way of this standardization through the selection process of materials and contrasts it to teachers’ “planning mindset”.

As part of their training, candidate teachers are involved in detailed planning activities. And this was reported to create, in Sari’s words, “a planning mindset, so when [they] go to work, [they] don’t have to write down minute by minute because [they] have it in [their] head”.

Equipped with this ‘planning mindset’, qualified teachers reported to be engaged in various planning activities varying from daily, weekly, and periodically to yearly depending on teachers themselves and school.

The data reveals that there is no formal planning requirement for qualified teachers (Marjukka\_Q10), with the exception of SNE teachers. Planning was described as an individual endeavour (Marjukka, Sakari, and Veera), and alignment in instruction among teachers was considered hard due to different teacher personalities (Sari, Sakari). This absence of formal planning requirement and perception of difficulty in alignment in instruction can easily be interpreted as evidence for overtly individual autonomy. However, this should be approached in caution as there seems to be considerable exchange among teachers (Excerpt 45, 46) – an aspect also discussed in the previous themes.

**Excerpt 45.** We always, like, with another math, physics and chemistry teachers we make up, like, discuss, and then we say “okay, we will do this first, say like, well equations, and then we go to geometry, and then algebra and stuff like that (Riitta\_Q4).

**Excerpt 46.** I think that it also like you also have to plan the, like, semester planning you also have to kind of do it together. If there are, like, other teachers teaching, like, same age groups. Oh, yeah, we should have, like, the same materials, same structure that we go through. So like, how should I say, like, partnership work. You kinda have to work, like, with a partner with the other teacher when planning (Anneli\_C4).

Given this collaboration, the “planning mindset”, while an individual asset, seems to find its fullest expression in the collective endeavour of teachers. This collaborative effort highlights the complex interplay between individual autonomy and collective action in all teaching domains. This was especially pronounced in “testing groups” referring to the fact that teachers “use the same test and they make it in a group” (Antti\_Q35). Although SNE teachers encounter distinct challenges in utilizing uniform tests due to the diverse needs of their students, a collaborative spirit is also present in SNE (Excerpt 47).

**Excerpt 47.** I know that the subject groups are doing collaboration for their exams and then because I’m working with them, then I get the fruit of their work because they are very, very glad to share their exams to me also. So I know what they are doing. And then they also say that I can do what I want with the exam, so I can take some questions from there and leave the others out that I don’t feel suitable for me. Or then they say “just make the little corrections or changes on it then use it”. So there is a collaboration for me also doing the testing for some, and then the other is I do it by myself. And then just to check them, I show them for the other teachers and ask, I don’t ask, like, straight that, “is this good or no?”, but like,

“what do you think about this?” And then they say it’s good or then they might say that “this question might be a little too hard or too easy”. And you might want to change, and then stuff like that. So I think my testing is also pretty collaborative work with others (Ilmari\_Q5).

Accordingly, the “planning mindset” should be viewed alongside earlier discussions on socialisation and collaboration. This “planning mindset” also contrasts with the selection of materials, which seems to be another avenue for achieving alignment in teaching. While subject teachers report a high degree of autonomy in selecting materials, it is the collective decisions that often guide the choice of coursebooks. Importantly, material selection is based on curriculum (Excerpt 48), and this selection is often carried out collaboratively (Excerpt 49, 50).

**Excerpt 48.** If we want to use some extra material from the internet, or something like I think we’re pretty much free to use, of course, we have to be, you know, kind of follow the curriculum, we can’t take just anything (Veera\_C4).

**Excerpt 49.** We can decide pretty much which book we’re going to use. For example, on Thursday, I’m going to go for a dinner where there’s a publicist who is treating us with some dinner and they are going to talk about the new book series (Sakari\_Q27).

**Excerpt 50.** The books are chosen by, I think, a teachers’ team. All the teachers’ books are the same (Veera\_C4).

While the selection of materials is a collective effort, not every teacher participates in this process each year since materials are chosen for several years. New teachers entering a school may need to adopt the existing coursebooks until the next selection period (Excerpt 51). Moreover, it has been evident that some coursebooks are selected by the local authorities (Excerpt 52), although the data does not specify the level of teacher involvement in such cases.

**Excerpt 51.** The book is something that we choose in collaboration. But, well, now that I’m a new teacher in here, I haven’t been in the planning systems before. So that’s the book is something that we choose in collaboration. And I’m going with that, maybe if I would use some internet material, that’s something that I can choose. The book is what it is (Marjukka\_Q10)

**Excerpt 52.** A teacher can have an opinion or, like, a wish for the Town Council what, like, books series they would like to use, sometimes the town council, just, like, choose the series by themselves, then I don’t have a say in it, what book series we are going to use (Anneli\_C4).

Given the discussions so far, it has become evident that coursebooks seem to play a crucial role in fostering a degree of coherence and standardization. This underlying unity, facilitated

by the collective selection of coursebooks, seems to align teaching practices across the school and even in the entire nation (Excerpt 53, 54, 55, 56).

**Excerpt 53.** One I think, a hidden way or not so hidden, is the books. Because a lot of teachers teach according to the books. So, and a lot of schools use, there aren't so many publishers. So there are not... there's either one option, or maybe four at the most to choose from, if you want to use books. So that somehow in its own way creates coherence (Sari\_C2).

**Excerpt 54.** I think the book is something that combines us so we do approximately the same things. But I don't know if it's good idea to follow the book so much (Marjukka\_Q10).

**Excerpt 55.** And we use a lot of the same materials, for example, the books, they're pretty much the same in every school (Veera\_C4).

**Excerpt 56.** We, all the teachers, probably are using the same test packages. So that's how it gets like probably aligned in that way. if you did all your tests by yourself no time on Earth would be enough for you. there's also like life. So it makes it like faster. But yeah, that's how all the things are aligned in the Finnish school system probably (Sakari\_Q27).

For SNE teachers, the selection of teaching materials, as in other domains, exhibits distinct patterns (Excerpt 57). Similarly, history and civics subject teacher stated that they had no book for their course and chose the material themselves (Excerpt 58).

**Excerpt 57.** I'm not using any book, but I'm gathering the material by myself from the different sources that I think it's reliable (Ilmari\_Q5).

**Excerpt 58.** Let's say I had to teach this one class, which was the course was 'world today'. It was very clear, like recent history, and then current world situations. So there was no book and we did the material for the class totally ourselves, different links, different articles, stuff like that (Juhani\_C1).

Overall, this theme indicates that planning is a domain where teachers are not required to follow strict procedures, and this could initially suggest autonomy based on their "planning mindsets". However, a deeper investigation from a relationality perspective uncovers that teachers actively employ these planning mindsets in concert with their colleagues. Within this collaborative framework, coursebooks emerge as pivotal tools, significantly influencing the practical application of these planning approaches. Moate (2021) describes this as "textbook-based character of Finnish education" in which coursebooks play a significant role in "quality control, pedagogical management and source of information" (Moate, 2021, p. 10).

### 3.5 Testing is more than testing students

Testing is similar to the other two domains in that teachers act autonomously, and it is to some extent synchronized through idea exchange and collaborative coursebook selection (Excerpt 59). However, the data reveals a unique role testing plays in collaboration with parents and teachers' self-evaluation. This theme explores this role beyond the mere student assessment.

**Excerpt 59.** It [testing] is really individual, like we, every teacher should do their own unless they want to share their exams. But yeah, there is, like, government's saying that, when the ninth graders are getting their grades, it's, like, in math, if they know how to do simple equation, then the grade is this and, like, that kind of thing. So I try to, like, see that when I do the exams. And then I, like, think how the points will go and how the grades will go. So it would match as well as it can with the government saying, but yeah, mostly I do my exams task like myself, I can take some tasks from the book, or the materials that books are, like, offering. But, like, mostly, I, like, to make myself, so I know, like, what things I'm, like, trying to see if the students can't do or can do (Riitta\_Q4).

Riitta's excerpt summarises the overall approach in testing. Briefly, it is an individual endeavour but there are occasions of collaborative texting practices, and it is always aligned with the curricular goals with cases of adaptation from coursebooks. This is a flexible yet curriculum-aligned approach (Marjukka, Riitta, Sari). This flexibility is evident in Marjukka personal choice of various formative assessment types rather than a few summative exams (Excerpt 60).

**Excerpt 60.** I don't do only test, I do a lot of different things that I give grades. So I think the more that I have the material, then it's easier to give the final grade (Marjukka\_Q10).

The various testing approaches and methods seem to create a degree of subjectivity. Considering the absence of national exams at the lower secondary level in Finland, this subjectivity may raise some critical questions regarding testing. Sari summarises this concern succinctly in Excerpt 61.

**Excerpt 61.** It was just said in a newspaper article how comparing secondary school the certificate you get when you finish grade nine, it is not comparable through Finland, because of the variety of teachers and evaluating in another place, you will get a nine for the same way you've done, and in another place, you get a seven. So that's, like, that's one part that it is very subjective as it is. Then again, I don't know if national exams would be an answer to anything. Since students are so different. And what one critical aspect is also that what are we evaluating. Is it the knowledge? Or is it the development? Or is it the attitude

toward everything? I think it has been, like, in the past, and even now, it is mostly about the knowledge, the actual knowledge, knowing what is two times two. And I, in a way, I think it's good. Cuz if that is the goal to get a child to count. That's how you measure it. But then, is that everything? Is that how you get your grade only by measuring the knowledge they've acquired? And where is the line between I did not teach well and they did not learn?, like, what is affecting, or they did not study (Sari\_C2).

Two aspects need to be emphasized in Sari's excerpt above. First, she raises her concerns about whether national tests could be a solution to the flexibility in teachers' testing, as also articulated by other participants (Excerpt 62, 63). Second, she employs test results as a vehicle for self-evaluation of teaching.

**Excerpt 62.** I truly wish that there won't be a national test that then things will go downwards after that (Sakari\_Q27).

**Excerpt 63.** It [testing] is very subjective as it is. Then again, I don't know if national exams would be an answer to anything since students are so different (Sari\_C2).

For the potential detriments of national exams at lower secondary, Sakari refers to the matriculation exam at upper secondary by critiquing its influence for overshadowing actual subject teaching (Excerpt 64).

**Excerpt 64.** They [upper secondary teachers] are not teaching the subject anymore, but they are training for the test, like, they do in high school in Finland, like, you know, matriculation examination, it's got too much power. Absolutely too much power! (Sakari\_Q27).

This absence of nation level exam obviously creates more flexibility and teacher autonomy. However, this leads to the involvement of parents in testing process to a greater extent. Unlike the other two domains (planning and instruction), parents are involved in testing, either by being informed through an application called Vilma or direct communication (Excerpt 65). The data also shows that principals are not involved in the testing process.

**Excerpt 65.** When I give the test back to the student. He or she shows it to her to her parents and the parents sign test. And then I check that it has been seen by the parents ... If one test goes very poorly, it's mostly so that I phone them before they have a chance to phone to me. So I phone them in advance, telling them that now the test went very poorly (Antti\_Q35).

**Excerpt 66.** Once parents have been really, like, surprised that students get really low grade from exam. So they ask if they can see the exam, and, like, student's answers, and after that, they really didn't, like, say anything (Riitta\_Q4).



Testing serves as a crucial mechanism for teachers to reflect on their instructional effectiveness. The consensus among participants (n=7) is that exam results can act as a mirror, revealing the success or shortcomings of their teaching methods (Excerpt 67).

**Excerpt 67.** Tests are one thing that if you make a test and everyone fails, it probably means you did not teach the thing very well and you don't do your job (Sari\_C2).

Overall, this theme, together with the insights on parental feedback in the Section 3.3, has revealed the significance of testing on teacher autonomy and solidarity. Testing is the domain where teachers have the most interaction with parents. Regarding this interaction, teachers did not express any overtly negative thoughts. Instead, the way these interactions and parental involvement is articulated implies a higher teacher accountability and professional responsibility, which is also in line with the preceding findings.

Obviously, the absence of national exams at the lower secondary level in Finland allows the formation of these dynamics. In a review study on the relationship between teacher autonomy and various regulatory models<sup>13</sup>, Parcerisa et al. (2022) analysed 101 articles between 2017–2020, concluding that performance based accountability (e.g. resulting from high stakes exams) limits teacher autonomy as they are “conditioned by external assessment, performance metrics, and related policies” (Parcerisa et al., 2022, p. 17). Following this, the mere absence of high-stake exam seems to be one of the main reasons for the autonomy Finnish teachers exercise. In addition to this acknowledgement, this study's findings suggest that this autonomy bears substantial relationality since the absence of explicit regulatory policies (as expected in a high-stake exam-based system) is filled with interpersonal relationships. Teachers prepare their own testing practices based on their individual and collaborative approaches. Their autonomy in testing brings more responsibility, and this leads to more collaboration – a pattern previously observed for SNE teachers too. The teacher-parent interaction around testing also reveals a foundation of solidarity that, while ostensibly placing decision-making in teachers' hands, suggests that such decisions create higher accountability and responsibility rather than a solitary endeavour. Briefly, this mechanism – framed by the curriculum; applied through interpersonal collaboration or curriculum-based materials and

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<sup>13</sup> These models include; a) market model, b) training model, c) bureaucratic model, d) professional skills model applied across various educational systems (Parcerisa et al., 2022)

evaluated by teachers themselves based on the feedback – can easily be interpreted as relational autonomy as a response to the RQ2.

## 4 Discussion and conclusion

This study has reaffirmed the extensive autonomy attributed to Finnish teachers. This autonomy is situated within a broad space bounded by the curriculum on one end and its implementation by teachers on the other. In a similar study on Finnish teachers' autonomy, this *space* is described as “professional space” as an alternative concept to broaden the concept of teacher autonomy (Maaranen & Afdal, 2022, p. 134). Interestingly, the present study, starting with an alternative idea of autonomy as relational, has identified this professional *space*. This space can be characterized by minimal regulatory mechanisms, such as principal involvement, formal quality controls, and nationwide high-stakes exams. The absence of such stringent controls, although a well-known characteristic of Finnish context, should not be misconstrued as an unregulated space where teachers operate in isolation. Despite their relatively informal and unstructured nature, Finnish teachers usually engage in collaborative decision-making processes and feel high level of professional responsibility as well as accountability to students and parents. By integrating such considerations, this study has shifted the focus from an individual autonomy to a juxtaposed examination of autonomy and collaboration.

When autonomy and collaboration are analysed as interdependent, rather than mutually exclusive concepts, this study provides evidence to conceptualize Finnish teachers' autonomy as relational. The isolated examination of these concepts, as exemplified in the TALIS report (OECD, 2019, 2020), yields valuable insights into specific aspects of the teaching profession. However, separating the analysis of autonomy from collaboration might not fully capture the essence of both. A discussion centred solely around teachers' decision-making could potentially overlook the social and systemic elements essential for autonomy's realization. For instance, the TALIS report shows Finnish teachers have lower autonomy in selecting course materials than the OECD average (OECD, 2020). Yet, a deeper exploration in this study reveals the collaborative and positively perceived nature of the material selection process, which lacks the negative connotations of reduced autonomy in this aspect. As demonstrated, coursebooks are chosen following a collaborative period, with selections always aligned with the curriculum and supported by teachers. Thus, individual teacher involvement in material selection appears unnecessary, suggesting that focusing on autonomy in isolated aspects fails to represent its full scope.

This study also challenges the distinction between educational and social domains made by Wermke and Salokangas (2021), revealing the inherently social nature of all domains, notably through testing. Unlike their study, which classifies testing within the educational domain as predominantly an area of individual autonomy, this research identifies testing as fundamentally collaborative and social. In fact, this view is supported by their observation of “increasing parental pressures and involvement in assessment” (Wermke & Salokangas, 2021, p. 90). However, viewing domains as distinct entities and classifying them into educational and social categories may obscure a holistic comprehension of how autonomy manifests. To consider testing in isolation from the planning and instructional domains undermines the interdependencies within the educational process. Parental engagement in testing seems to influence both planning and instruction, thereby highlighting the interconnectedness of these domains. The responsibility of teachers in crafting and interpreting tests, coupled with their accountability to students and parents, is likely to shape their approach to both planning and teaching. In this context, the autonomy experienced during the initial stages of planning and instruction is influenced by the testing phase, which acts as a reflective mechanism. Testing, thus, transcends its role as a terminal phase, becoming an integral component that informs planning and instructional strategies. In other words, Finnish teachers experience a form of unstructured autonomy in the initial stages, which culminates in a testing phase that serves as a critical self-evaluation tool, ultimately reframing autonomy as a collaborative endeavour.

Moreover, common narratives and studies like Paradis et al.’s (2019), which suggest Finnish teachers’ autonomy is associated with their being trusted, are re-evaluated. This study introduces the concept of trust as bidirectional, showing that understanding autonomy requires recognizing teachers’ trust in other stakeholders as equally important. The potential disregard for the responsibilities of other stakeholders could detrimentally impact teaching practices. Consequently, the extent to which other stakeholders fulfil their responsibilities emerges as a critical factor for teachers to effectively exercise their autonomy.

Reflecting on the critiques of existing research on teacher autonomy illuminated by this study’s findings, a call is made for a holistic and integrated approach that recognizes the essential interdependencies within educational organizations. According to Vanderstraeten (2007), these interdependencies form the very foundation of the teaching profession. In other words, the essence of teaching is intrinsically linked to the organizational context to which it belongs. This perspective sets teaching professionalism apart from fields like medicine and law. For instance, the World Medical Association advocates “a system of professional self-

regulation [that] will enhance and assure the individual physician's right to treat patients without interference with his or her professionally-based judgement" (WMA, 2009). This highly individualistic understanding of professionalism may be suitable for medicine, and the researchers rightfully discuss the preservation and enhancement of this individual autonomy (e.g., Hoogland & Jochemsen, 2000; Tezuka, 2014). While such an approach may align with the demands of medicine, applying a similar framework to teaching overlooks the profession's inherent collaborative nature and its reliance on organizational dynamics.

Distinguishing the teaching profession from fields like medicine, this study illuminates the pervasive social dynamics within teaching professionalism. It concludes that the nature of the teaching profession is not merely dictated by the presence or absence of systemic control mechanisms, but rather by the manner in which these elements are integrated within the educational organization. Thus, the principle of "without interference with his or her professionally based judgement" can hardly be applicable to teaching profession as "judgements" are inherently tied to collective objectives and such "interference", in the form of collaboration, is essential.

An understanding of autonomy that neglects the relationality and solidarity inherent in educational organizations and school cultures might encounter difficulties when attempting to apply specific autonomy aspects in other contexts. For illustrative purposes, as customary in justice theories, a thought experiment could be considered. In a hypothetical scenario where, Finnish teachers are assigned to a context where high-stake exams exist, and teachers and principals are appointed to schools by the central government, they would probably experience a significant reduction in autonomy. This serves to demonstrate that autonomy cannot be adequately understood without considering contextual influences. The relational justice perspective in this study has provided the required lens for analysing these contextual factors and dynamics.

This study, with its relational autonomy and solidarity concepts, aligns closely with the insights by Hargreaves and his colleagues who propose the concept of "collaborative professionalism" referring to building "trusting relationships with one another" and "using precise strategies and protocols, where appropriate, and engaging and in rigorous dialogue together" (Hargreaves et al., 2018, p. 32). Their concept of "collaborative professionalism" (Hargreaves et al., 2018) or "solidarity in solidarity" (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) echoes with this study's relational autonomy perspective. In another study outside the educational

research, “connective professionalism” is suggested with a parallel vision of professionalism in which professionals “navigate relations, get wired in, understand social experiences, navigate risks, and gain respect” (Noordegraaf, 2020, p. 219).

Adopting such novel perspectives invites a significant shift in both future research and educational policy towards recognizing teacher autonomy as an integral element of a complex network of relationships within the educational ecosystem, rather than an isolated attribute. Specifically, this exploration highlights three promising avenues for further investigation. Firstly, the execution of SNE emerges as a significant area for further inquiry, focusing on the shared responsibilities of all teachers. This suggests a rich terrain for examining the collective obligations and collaborative efforts inherent in providing comprehensive educational support. Additionally, the study’s focus on teacher participants reveals an opportunity for broadening the scope of inquiry to include other key stakeholders such as principals and parents. Their inclusion in future research could yield more profound insights into the dynamics of teachers’ relational autonomy and the essence of solidarity within educational contexts. Studies such as Maaranen and Afdal’s (2022) have already pointed out that principals can have a considerable impact, either positive or negative, on teachers’ autonomy in Finland. Moreover, the concept of distributed leadership, as explored by Lin (2022), presents a compelling framework for discussing relational autonomy within a leadership context. Third, the role of testing in shaping teaching practices warrants closer examination, with a particular focus on its influence on and interaction with other teaching domains and its impact on teachers’ perceptions of autonomy.

In sum, by embracing a holistic approach that considers the systemic features and all key stakeholders, educational policies and research can more precisely tackle the notion of teacher autonomy, viewing it as a shared resource rather than a solitary attribute. Though based on small-scale data from the Finnish context, this study contributes a refined comprehension of teacher autonomy as fundamentally relational. For policymakers and researchers, fostering a culture of solidarity within schools should be prioritized over the mere expansion of teacher autonomy. This approach, as exemplified in Finnish schools, emphasizes the pivotal role of collective engagement and shared values in enhancing the teaching profession.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1 The links to the items derived from the TALIS 2018 report

Survey Item No	Link to OECD Database
1	<a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934083905">http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934083905</a>
2	<a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934083905">http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934083905</a>
3	<a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888933932893">http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888933932893</a>
4	<a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934083183">http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934083183</a>
5	<a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934083924">http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934083924</a>
6	<a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934083734">http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934083734</a>
7	<a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934083734">http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934083734</a>
8	<a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888933932741">http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888933932741</a>
9	<a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934083734">http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934083734</a>
10	<a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934083183">http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934083183</a>
11	<a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934083734">http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934083734</a>
12	<a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934083734">http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934083734</a>
13	<a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934083164">http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934083164</a>
14	<a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934083734">http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934083734</a>
15	<a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934084190">http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934084190</a>
16	<a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934083829">http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934083829</a>
17	<a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888933933007">http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888933933007</a>
18	<a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934083183">http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934083183</a>
19	<a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934083145">http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934083145</a>
20	<a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934084266">http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934084266</a>
21	<a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888933933026">http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888933933026</a>
22	<a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934083829">http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934083829</a>
23	<a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888933933007">http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888933933007</a>
24	<a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934083145">http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934083145</a>
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27	<a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934083734">http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934083734</a>
28	<a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934084266">http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934084266</a>
29	<a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934084171">http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934084171</a>
30	<a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934083734">http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934083734</a>
31	<a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934084038">http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934084038</a>
32	<a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934083164">http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934083164</a>
33	<a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934083145">http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934083145</a>



## Appendix 2 Interview guide

### Background

Which subject(s) are you qualified to teach?

How many years have you been in the teaching profession?

A teacher's pedagogical knowledge mainly includes planning, instruction/delivery and testing. I would like to discuss how you make decisions and collaborate with others in these three domains of teaching practice.

### Planning

1. Could you describe the planning activities you undertake (daily, periodically, or annually)?
2. Are your lesson plans checked or reviewed by someone else? If yes, how?
3. How do you ensure that your planning aligns with other classes at the same level?
4. To what extent do you think you are free to choose materials?
5. Who or what do you feel accountable to in all your planning activities? (It could be anything or anyone from principals to curriculum or from your own teaching philosophy to your professional identity)

### Instruction

6. What strategies do you use to evaluate the effectiveness of your teaching?
7. How do you perceive the role of school administration in influencing your teaching practices? Are there any specific policies or practices that you find supportive or restrictive?
8. How important do you consider aligning your teaching methods with the teachers in similar classes?
9. How often do you exchange ideas or collaborate on practical matters (instruction) with other teachers and administration?

10. Have there been instances where collaborations with others seemed to limit your professional autonomy? Please describe such situations.
11. If a parent were to comment or raise a concern about your teaching style or method, how would you address it?

### Testing

12. How do you prepare your exams? Is it an individual effort, collaborative, or guided by specific frameworks or standards?
13. What similarities and differences have you noticed in testing methods between yourself and other teachers?
14. What kind of challenges do you face in your testing practice?
15. How do you navigate the challenges and issues related to testing? Do you seek solutions individually or ask help from others?
16. How do you handle feedback from principals or parents regarding test results, and how might this feedback influence your assessment methods?

### Responsibilities of other stakeholders (administrators, fellow teachers and parents)

17. How would a lack of commitment or seriousness from school administrators in their own professional roles affect your teaching experience and responsibilities?
18. How do you think your fellow teachers' lack of dedication to their professional responsibilities might influence your teaching experience in the classroom?
19. In your experience, how does the extent to which parents fulfil their responsibilities affect your teaching experience?

### Evolution of perceived autonomy

20. How do you think your autonomy as a teacher has evolved and will further evolve? More specifically, can you elaborate on how your confidence level in decision-making has changed over time?

## Appendix 3 Privacy Notice

Privacy Notice for Research Data

### 1. Data controller of the research

University of Turku, FI-20014 Turku, Finland

### 2. Parties involved in research conducted as a collaboration project and division of responsibilities

*The research project will be conducted by one researcher.*

### 3. Research project leader or responsible group

*The research project will be conducted by one researcher.*

### 4. Contact information of the Data Protection Officer

Contact information of the Data Protection Officer at the University of Turku: [dpo@utu.fi](mailto:dpo@utu.fi)

### 5. Person conducting research

*Mehmet Akif Ince*

### 6. Contact person in matters related to the research registry

*Mehmet Akif Ince at [maince@utu.fi](mailto:maince@utu.fi).*

### 7. Name of the research registry

*University of Turku - Education and Learning Programme (EdLearn) master's thesis on teachers' perception of professional autonomy in the Finnish Educational System.*

### 8. Purpose of processing personal data

*Investigation of Relational Teacher Autonomy in the Finnish Educational System based on teachers' verbal interviews.*

### 9. Legal basis for processing personal data

The legal basis for processing personal data is the Article 6 or Article 9 of the EU General Data Protection Regulation.

The EU General Data Protection Regulation, Article 6 Section 1 (select one basis for processing data for each usage):

consent of the data subject

compliance with the data controller's legal obligation

legislation:

task carried out in the public interest or in the exercise of official authority vested in the controller

scientific or historic research or statistical purposes

archiving research or cultural heritage materials

legitimate interests pursued by the controller or by a third party

which legitimate interest:

Article 9 of the EU General Data Protection Regulation (special categories of personal data):

consent of the data subject

archiving purposes in the public interest, scientific or historical research purposes or statistical purposes

## **10. What categories of personal data the research data includes**

*In the context of this research project, the following categories of personal data will be collected, processed, and stored from participants:*

1. *Demographic information: This includes the participants' gender.*
2. *Professional information: This covers the participants' years of experience in their respective fields, the type of school they are currently studying, getting training or working, and their subject specialization.*
3. *Interview data: This comprises the participants' responses to interview questions related to the research topic.*

*No directly identifying information, such as names, dates of birth, or contact information, will be collected in order to protect the privacy of the participants and ensure the anonymity of the collected data.*

## **11. Which sources the personal data is collected from**

*The personal data for this research project will be obtained directly from the participants through face-to-face or online interviews depending on their availability.*

## **12. Transfers or disclosures of data outside the research group**

*The personal data collected for this research project will not be transferred or disclosed to anyone outside the sole researcher responsible for conducting the study.*

### 13. Transfers or disclosures of data outside the EU or the European Economic Area

*No personal data will be transferred or displayed outside EU/EEA.*

### 14. Automated decision-making

*This research project does not involve any automated decision-making or profiling. All data processing, analysis, and interpretation will be carried out manually by the researcher to ensure a thorough understanding of the participants' perspectives and experiences as they relate to the research topic.*

### 15. Principles of safeguarding personal data

The data is confidential

Basis of confidentiality: The confidentiality of the data is maintained to protect the privacy of the participants and to ensure that their personal information is not misused or disclosed to unauthorized parties.

Safeguarding manual data:

- *Data collected during the interviews will be stored securely on a password-protected personal device, accessible only to the researcher.*

The data processed in the information systems is safeguarded with the following measures:

account credentials  password  registering usage  access control  other measures, what:

Processing direct identifiers:

Direct identifiers are not collected during the data collection process to ensure the anonymity of the participants.

The data is analysed including the direct identifiers, because (basis for keeping the direct identifiers): Not applicable, as direct identifiers are not collected.

### 16. Processing of personal data after the research has ended

The research register is disposed of

The research register is archived  without identifiers  with identifiers

Where is the data archived in, and for how long: *a period of 2 years after the completion of the research project. After this period, the data will be disposed of in a secure manner.*

### 17. Rights of the data subjects and possible limitations to them

The data subject has a right to cancel the consent they have given if the processing of personal data is based on consent.

The data subject has the right to lodge a complaint with the supervisory authority if the data subject considers that the processing of personal data related to him/her has violated the information security legislation currently valid.

*The rights of the data subject under the GDPR can be deviated from in scientific research with the following safety measures:*

- *The processing of personal data is based on the research plan.*
- *The research has an appointed person or a group responsible for it.*
- *The personal data is used and disclosed only for historic or scientific research purposes or other comparable purposes, and other actions are also implemented in a manner ensuring that data identifying an certain person is not disclosed to outsiders.*
- *If the research includes processing of the personal data referred to in Article 9 Section 1 of the GDPR (special categories of personal data) and Article 10 (personal data relating to criminal convictions and offences), in addition to complying with sections 1—3 mentioned above, the persons conducting the research must also compile a data protection impact assessment as defined in Article 35 of the GDPR and deliver it to the Office of the Data Protection Ombudsman 30 days before the research is started.*

*The following rights of the data subject under the EU General Data Protection Regulation will be deviated from in this research for the following parts:*

*Select which rights of the data subject have been decided to be limited. In the text field, write down the justifications for why this is necessary.*

- The data subject has the right to inspect their registered data (Article 15).
- The data subject has the right to rectification of their data.
- The data subject has the right to erasure of their data (Article 17). The right to erasure of data is not applied in scientific or historical research purposes in so far as the right to erasure is likely to render impossible or seriously impair the achievement of the objectives of that processing.
- The data subject has a right to restrict the processing of data (Article 18).
- The data subject has a right to object the processing of data (Article 21).

*Since the research data collected is anonymized, and no direct identifiers are collected, there is no need to limit the data subjects' rights under the GDPR. The research design ensures that the participants' privacy is protected, and the data is used only for research purposes.*

## Appendix 4 List of codes and themes

				Frequency
Themes	Subthemes	Codes		
Occupational socialization of teachers				0
	High awareness of being autonomous			17
	Enhanced professional confidence in time			13
		Accumulation of materials over time		6
		Learning how to deal with different social dynamics		2
		Candidate teacher might care more about how well others are doing		1
		Confidence improves through positive affirmation from other stakeholders		1
Role of administration in socialization				0
		School meetings		8
		Supportive school culture		4
		Candidate teachers' lack of knowledge on how administrative work is conducted		1
		Criticism for top-down educational decisions		1
		"There must be a hierarchy at a school"		1
		Permanent job status affects the autonomy		1
		Ask help and support from principal in case parental feedback		1
		Schools hire the teachers that they deem appropriate for their expectations		2
		Feeling of being trusted		2
		Sharing the same values with the principals		2
		Principal affects the issues outside teaching		5
		Principal's supervision		7
			Conversation with the principal on sensitive topics	1
			An example of poor supervision	1
			paperwork as a threat to autonomy	2
"Their work becomes my work"				0
Collaborative practices				0
		Collaboration with native language support teachers		1
		Co-teaching experience		2
		Collaboration on planning not in teaching		1
		Desire for more collaboration if more time possible		2
		Planning depends on "school community"		1
		Yearly plans are collaborative		1
		Collaboration is NOT a threat to autonomy		6
		There might be times when collaboration limit teacher autonomy		2

		Collaboration with fellow teachers	12
		Individual preferences despite collaboration	1
		Collaboration with teachers on social media	1
		Checking the problem-solving ways with fellow teachers	1
		Collaboration with parents	3
		"Foremaster" teachers communicate with parents	1
		Principals are not considered as an expert on subjects	1
		Inherently collaborative special needs education in Finland	0
		Special education is different from other subjects	13
		Students' involvement in planning	1
		Special education teachers' alignment in planning with subject teachers	1
		parents' involvement in planning	1
		Individual educational plan (for special needs)	3
		Planning is based on curriculum	1
		Special education is less boring, and more fun compared to other subjects	1
		Collaboration with special education needs teachers	5
		Responsibilities of stakeholders	0
		Principals' commitment affects teachers' commitment	7
		"Their work becomes my work"	1
		A better teacher might affect the feelings of others	1
		Sensitivity to the responsibility of other teachers	1
		Fellow teachers' attitude affect teaching	2
		Parents' attitude towards school affects teaching	2
		Parents' responsibility is to teach how to behave	2
		The primary responsibility is parents'	3
		Involvement of other professionals in family related problems	5
		Parents' lack of responsibility affects teaching	11
		Fellow teachers' own professional life do NOT affect the other teachers	5
		Fellow teachers' professional life might affect the issues outside the classroom	3
		Curriculum infused sense of responsibility	0
		Government in reference to curriculum	5
		"Curriculum is always there in the back"	0
		Curriculum is binding in all three domains	5
		Curriculum frames planning activities across classes	8
		Curriculum shapes coherent teaching across classes	2
		Curriculum maintains standardization in testing	3



		Curriculum is not described as accountability but guidelines	1
		Familiarisation with the curriculum	2
		Change in curriculum	1
		Satisfaction with the curriculum	1
		Curriculum protects teachers	1
	Being accountable mostly to students		0
		Teaching philosophy/sense of responsibility	4
		Individual education plan is binding for special education teacher	1
		Principal	2
		Students	8
		Parents	5
		Handling feedback	0
		Managing the emotions in replying feedback	2
		Providing rationale in replying feedback	9
		Curriculum as a reference point	4
		Feedback from parents	5
		Asking help from others in the case of parental feedback	1
		Parents' feedback are rarely positive	1
		Not much feedback from parents	4
Standardization mechanisms outside curriculum			0
	Planning		0
		Variety of practices in different schools	2
		Having a "planning mindset"	1
		No official need for planning	1
		Candidate teacher's lesson planning is reviewed by supervisor	2
		Detailed planning during training creates a planning mindset	1
		Planning sequences	9
		Planning is an individual practice	3
		Relying on coursebooks in planning	1
		Big plans are applied according to individual situations	3
		Review of the plans by principal varies according to schools	1
		Plans are reviewed by principal	1
		Plans are NOT reviewed by principal	11
		Planning as a requirement of sense of professional responsibility	1
		Coworking	3
		Talking with colleagues	3
		Coursebooks maintain alignment in planning	6

	Instruction		0
		Same set of values at nationwide	1
		Alignment in instruction coming from same subject teachers' planning together	1
		Alignment is NOT possible due to different teacher personalities	3
		Guidelines to follow	2
		Coursebooks maintain alignment in teaching	1
		"Collegial work" with fellow teachers	1
		Professional background	2
		Gap in different generations of teachers	1
	Testing		0
		Special education's collaboration across different cities	1
		Familiarisation of what others are doing	1
		Incoherence in testing among teachers	4
		Guidelines to follow	7
		Nationwide tests	4
		The possibility of a national high-stake test seems a threat	1
		Testing groups	6
		Collaboration on testing	2
		Tests adopted from coursebooks	8
	Choice of materials		1
		All the teachers' books are the same	1
		Freedom in choosing materials seems to differ in subjects	1
		Restriction to choose audio materials	2
		Local authorities choose the materials	1
		No freedom in choosing materials	1
		Materials are chosen in collaboration	2
		Materials as they are based on curriculum	1
		Adaptation of materials based on needs	2
		Freedom to choose materials	5
		Teachers' involvement in the choice of coursebooks	1
		Freedom to choose materials on the internet	5
		The new teacher follows the chosen material	1
	Testing is more than testing students		0
		Use of Vilma App to share exam results	1
		Calling parents regarding test results	1
		Exam papers are shared with parents	2
		Testing is an individual practice	15
		Testing skills are not taught during pre-service training	1

		Special education students are the biggest challenge in testing	1
		Tests are created considering the variety of levels in students	1
		Different testing practices based on needs	1
		Flexibility in testing methods	3
		National tests might limit the autonomy	1
		Strategies for evaluation of teaching	0
		Self-evaluation based on observation of students	2
		Self-evaluation based on feedback from students	1
		Self-evaluation based on exam results	9
		Feedback from parents	2
		Discussion with fellow teachers	1
Total Codes			420