



# Discourses of teacher autonomy and the role of teachers in Estonian, Finnish and Bavarian teachers' newspapers in 1991–2010<sup>☆</sup>

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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Events in the social and political environment influence the autonomy discourse.
- The political response to PISA has been a stronger evaluation and control discourse.
- The Finnish newspaper advocates an extended concept of teacher professionalism.
- Restricted professionalism can be preferable if sufficient resources are provided.

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the construction of the professional role of teachers as reflected in the teacher autonomy and control discourses in teachers' newspapers during 1991–2010 in three national contexts: Estonia, Finland and Bavaria (Germany). Despite similar global pressures to increase the efficiency of education through output standardization and marketization, the local teaching traditions and policies have shaped different cultures of teacher professionalism. Throughout the national experiments with decentralization and recentralization of education, Estonian and Bavarian teachers have maintained restricted professionalism while Finnish teachers achieved extended professionalism in terms of the desired amount of teacher autonomy.

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## 1. Introduction

During the last two decades educational research has increasingly pointed to a need for teachers to have professional autonomy which is considered a prerequisite of teacher professionalism (Nemerzitski, Loogma, Heinla, & Eisenschmidt, 2013, p. 402; Wermke & Höstfält, 2014, p. 63) and an important motivational variable for job-satisfaction (Erss, 2016; Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). Moreover, teacher autonomy, which is sometimes referred to as agency (Biesta, Priestley, & Robinson, 2015), is one of the

central concerns in designing and implementing curriculum policies since the “make or break” role of teachers in any curriculum innovation has become widely acknowledged (Kelly, 2009, p. 14; Westbury, 2002). No matter, how “teacher-proof” the curriculum may be, teachers always use the curricular prescriptions “in their own ways and for their own purposes” (Kelly, 2009, p. 1). There is evidence showing this kind of teacher creativity and autonomy should be encouraged. The most successful countries in terms of human development indicators in the field of education and economy (Finland, Singapore, Canada) offer greater flexibility in teaching and learning and invest more trust in their uniquely qualified teachers without trying to direct everything from the top down (Darling-Hammond, 2008a; Hargreaves, Lieberman, Fullan & Hopkins, 2010; McKinsey & Company, 2007).

While national policies regarding teacher autonomy can be viewed through the prism of global diffusion of educational governance (Dale, 2003), we argue that the reactions of

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stakeholders to these influences can be, in the long perspective, observed by analysing public discourses. Professional, widely circulated media channels, in particular, comprise different interpretation strategies such as modification, mediation, resistance or support. Analysing the media discourse of teacher autonomy allows us to gain a deeper insight in the construction of views on that matter by different parties, e.g. teachers and policy makers.

In the last two decades, the nexus between autonomy and control regarding the teaching profession has often been epitomised as competing discourses in European teachers' media (newspapers and other periodicals addressed primarily at teachers). Although the representation of teachers and education political discourses in daily newspapers (Aava, 2010; Alhamdan et al., 2014; Cabalin, 2014; Wallace, 2006) or on television (Reimers, 2014) has been researched before, comparative research on discourses of autonomy in teacher specific media is rare. Beyond filling this research gap, the selection of teachers' newspapers as a data source has a further advantage of focusing on the discourse of teacher autonomy constructed within and for the professional community of teachers, which is likely to address the topics of autonomy and control in a greater detail than general public media. The study takes a comparative approach in studying the discourses of teacher autonomy and control in teachers' newspapers over the time period of 1991–2010 in Estonia, Finland, and Bavaria (Germany). We aim to reveal the construction of teacher autonomy and roles of teachers in public discourses, and the reactions of teachers to the policies related to autonomy and control.

Estonia and Finland were chosen for the study because of their close cooperation in the field of education. Particularly before joining the EU, Estonia used to borrow policies from Finland, which served as an example for curriculum reforms and decentralizing policies connected to teacher autonomy (Toots, 2009). Germany has played historically a very influential role in the Baltic region, however in this case it was selected for its different approaches to teacher autonomy (Erss, 2016). While Estonia and Finland have shown outstanding results in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Germany's disappointment in the test results has, since the early 2000s, led to a more rigorous standardization of education and the resulting mitigation of teacher autonomy (Bank, 2012, p. 205). Considering that Germany has 16 education systems it would have been too complicated to cover the entire federal state in a comparative study, therefore only one *Land* from Germany was selected: Bavaria. Apart from being one of the largest regions in Germany, it is also considered one of the most conservative, yet one of the most outstanding education systems in Germany according to the student achievement in PISA tests (Erss, 2016).

The article is structured as follows: We will first conceptualize teacher autonomy within the framework of teacher professionalism while pointing out two different notions of autonomy, extended versus restricted, as corresponding to the European/continental *Didaktik* and Anglo-American curriculum tradition. Secondly, we will describe our data corpus and introduce the method of critical discourse analysis in connection with its operationalization strategies. The results section will present several related discourses of teacher autonomy. In the discussion we will demonstrate how the teacher autonomy discourses in the teachers' media have constructed different concepts of teacher professionalism in Estonia and Bavaria compared to Finland.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Teacher autonomy and professionalism

This paper adopts the definition of autonomy as both the

positive notion of “liberty to act” and the negative notion of “freedom from constraints” (Carter, 2012; Erss, 2016). Since there is a dialectic relationship between autonomy and control, both ends of the continuum must be examined to understand the phenomenon of autonomy. Of course, teachers never have complete autonomy; their role is characterised through the contradiction between their work as professional practitioners in the classroom (Erss, 2017, p. 195) and organizational constraints imposed by the school and curriculum provided by state governance (Hopmann, 2003; Wermke & Höstfält, 2014). The professional autonomy of teachers can be characterised as the “scope of action teachers have in dealing with this dilemma” (Wermke & Höstfält, 2014, p. 60).

Teacher autonomy is closely related to the concept of professionalism. However, what counts as professionalism and professionalization varies in lines of thought. According to Ingersoll and Merrill (2011, p. 185), the confusion around professionalism in teaching can be divided into three categories, which are supported by different groups. While the first group advocates the increase of teachers' knowledge and skills through professional development and more rigorous training, the second group stresses the formation of professional attitudes in teachers towards their work. The latter can be achieved through commitment to high standards and an ethos of public service. Unlike the first two groups, the third group aims at improving the organizational conditions under which teachers work. Nevertheless, professionalism is usually defined by an assemblage of different factors, that changing just one of them is not likely to bring out change in the entire perception of the profession.

In sociological research the criteria for professions have been clearly established. These include “rigorous training and licensing requirements, positive working conditions, an active professional organization or association, substantial workplace authority, relatively high compensation, and high prestige” (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2011, p. 186). However, such characteristics are fully present only in a few “paradigm” cases, among which the most frequently mentioned ones are medical doctors and lawyers. In most cases, the professions exhibit only a few of these characteristics or possess them to a different degree compared to the paradigm cases. For this reason most professions can be referred to as “quasi-professions” (Strike, 1990, p. 91). In fact, most professions have been historically, or are currently, undergoing changes regarding the presence of the above mentioned characteristics, which indicate the degree of “professionalization or de-professionalization” (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2011, p. 186).

Teaching is sometimes seen only as a semi-profession due to the external regulations and constraints (Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002; Strike, 1990). Nevertheless, the growing complexity and expectations to mass schooling have encouraged the demands for professionalization of teaching (Pearson & Hall, 1993; Webb et al., 2004). One argument supporting the view of teaching as a profession is the realization that “the working processes of professions can never be completely routinized [...] by mechanical or linear solutions” (Wermke & Höstfält, 2014, p. 61). Simultaneously, an opposite trend has occurred in some Anglophone countries, aiming at complete standardization of teaching procedures and the implementation of a “teacher-proof” curriculum which leads to de-professionalization of teaching (Darling-Hammond, 2008b, p. 507; Deng, 2017).

Yet professionalism is historically and culturally differently conceptualized: in the Anglophone tradition teacher professionalism is defined by teacher accountability to the markets (which can include the state as a client). It is the customers (read: society) and the state who judge the quality of the teachers' performance (Wermke & Höstfält, 2014, p. 62). According to this view a professional teacher is somebody who “effectively” implements

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