



Knowledge relations and epistemic infrastructures as mediators of teachers' collective autonomy



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Analytical perspective links teachers' knowledge relations to professional autonomy.
- Characteristics of teachers' knowledge relations are consequential for opportunities to shape instructional development.
- The profession's epistemic infrastructure has implications for teachers' capacity to safeguard their knowledge base.
- Emphasis on individual notions of autonomy can jeopardise the profession's collective autonomy.
- Cultural historical, practice based approach links teachers' everyday work with institutional constraints and affordances.

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how teachers' knowledge relations and the profession's epistemic infrastructure shape collective autonomy. Professionals' autonomy derives partially from their responsibility for a specific knowledge base. This responsibility is currently challenged by educational policies and complex knowledge landscapes. Existing research has shown how epistemic policy instruments impact teachers' autonomy. However, less attention has been paid to how professional autonomy is informed by teachers' knowledge relations, and to collective, rather than individual, aspects of teachers' autonomy. Implications include how teachers can define the role of knowledge resources in professional work, and how the profession can navigate epistemic and political landscapes.

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1. Introduction

Historically, a source of legitimacy for professionals has been their relationship to a given knowledge base (Abbott, 1988). Trust is granted professionals partly because they keep up to date with their field of expertise and safeguard the foundation for professional work. From this perspective, the ability to define which knowledge resources should inform everyday work and how can be seen as a key source of professional autonomy.

In the teaching profession, autonomy over professional knowledge is currently being challenged. First, educational policies are increasingly employing forms of knowledge as policy instruments. Examples include the introduction of teacher standards (Bathmaker, 2000; Ceulemans, Simons, & Struyf, 2012; Evans, 2011;

Sachs, 2003), expectations of research-based practice (Hargreaves, 1996; Slavin, 2007) and systematic data use (Coburn & Turner, 2012). This policy orientation towards the epistemic dimensions of professional practices can be seen as attempts to define what forms of knowledge should be valued within the profession and how processes of work should be legitimately accounted for (Beck, 2008, 2009; Mausethagen, 2013). This orientation also represents an effort by policy makers to shape how a profession's knowledge base is developed.

A second challenge pertains to the characteristics of knowledge in contemporary societies. Present-day knowledge landscapes are complex and rapidly evolving. These landscapes involve multiple knowledge producers, including researchers, knowledge clearing-houses, educational consultants and practitioner-based networks. These actors generate knowledge resources from varied epistemological and methodological positions, and assessing their implications for practice can be a demanding task. Further, policy

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borrowing and digitalisation mean that teachers are often introduced to educational resources that were developed in contexts different to their own. As a consequence, significant analytical work is required to interpret the meaning potential of these resources and adapt them for use in local settings (Coburn, 2006; Hermansen, 2014; Nerland & Jensen, 2010; Spicer, 2011). This broader context makes the development and safeguarding of professional knowledge a complex endeavour and also reshapes the responsibilities associated with such work.

The term *professional autonomy* has multifaceted associations, including moral and ethical principles, accountability, a professional knowledge base and the capacity to justify decisions (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2007; Mausethagen & Mølsted, 2015; Wermke & Höstfält, 2014). Professional autonomy can be understood in both individual and collective terms (Mausethagen & Mølsted, 2015). Whereas the individual dimension typically refers to a professional's degree of control over everyday work, the collective dimension includes the capacity of teachers as a group to shape the structural factors that inform their work, such as the characteristics of their knowledge base, the ways in which professional work is governed, and content and design of teacher education programs. Historically, notions of individual autonomy have been strong in the teaching profession (Clement & Vandenberghe, 2000; Little, 1990; Lortie, 2002 [1975]). In many countries, teachers have enjoyed relative freedom in deciding which knowledge resources should inform their work and how, based on a historical division of labour between the profession and the state (Hopmann, 2007). However, the developments outlined above challenge traditional notions of individual autonomy. For example, recent policy developments emphasise shared standards and (more or less) prescribed approaches to professional practice that frequently have been developed by others than teachers themselves. These policies are typically coupled with forms of governance that emphasise output controls, which hold teachers accountable for their work in historically new ways (Day, 2002; Kleinhenz & Ingvarson, 2004). These attempts at introducing collective standards "from above" (Evetts, 2003) may impact teachers' sense of professionalism as well as the broader purposes of schooling, a topic which has been extensively covered in existing research (e.g. Biesta, 2004; Beck, 2009; Evetts, 2009).

At the same time, contemporary knowledge landscapes demand complex epistemic engagement that would be unreasonable to designate as a purely individual responsibility. From this perspective, more collective approaches to the safeguarding of a shared knowledge base may have the potential to strengthen teachers as a collective expert community. This does not imply a 'standards based' approach where certain instructional approaches are collectively prescribed. Rather, collective approaches to the development and safeguarding of knowledge may include more systematic differentiation and specialisation within the profession, collectively shared processes aimed at identifying and evaluating relevant knowledge resources, or the development of translation mechanisms for analysing and recontextualising findings from research (Jensen, Lahn, & Nerland, 2012b; Nerland, 2012). Such approaches may also better position teachers to publicly justify and account for educational practices and their epistemic foundations, thereby strengthening teachers as political actors.

In summary, the notion of collective autonomy can appear both as a threat and a promise. In either case, professional autonomy is realised in part by the characteristics of the profession's knowledge relations. Against this background, this article discusses opportunities and challenges for collective autonomy as they emerge from teachers' approaches to professional knowledge, and the ways in which this engagement is mediated by epistemic infrastructures. Teachers' interactions with knowledge resources are interesting as a unit of analysis because they can be understood as processes

where professional knowledge is defined and developed, and where the characteristics of instructional practices are shaped. These processes of knowledge work also shed light on who decides what forms of knowledge should inform educational practices and how. From this perspective, teachers' knowledge relations can be seen as one factor contributing to how the profession's autonomy is constructed and maintained.

The main purpose of the paper is to illustrate how the characteristics of teachers' knowledge relations have consequences for a profession's collective autonomy and how different approaches to knowledge can expand or restrict teachers' abilities to define their professional practices. The argument is substantiated by three empirical representations of how teachers' knowledge practices and epistemic infrastructures can shape their professional autonomy. The next section outlines theoretical assumptions and analytical tools for examining teachers' knowledge relations. These perspectives are then applied to three different levels of analysis: the collective knowledge cultures of professions, knowledge relations in the context of school based development initiatives, and teachers' micro interactions with knowledge resources. The article ends by discussing implications for the understanding of teachers' autonomy in contemporary educational contexts.

2. Tracing teachers' interactions with knowledge: analytical perspectives

A point of departure for the analysis is that professional work is characterised by a connection to a specific knowledge base, which allows for a certain degree of autonomy and professional discretion in how professional practice is carried out (Abbott, 1988; Mausethagen & Smeby, 2016). The paper further employs analytical resources from cultural historical theory (Cole, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991) and social practice-based approaches to knowledge (Gherardi, 2009; Miettinen, Samra-Fredericks, & Yanow, 2009; Knorr Cetina, 1999, 2001). A key assumption within these perspectives is that human actions are constitutive of social order. Through micro-processes of routine actions, practices are sustained as expected behaviours, and everyday activities are reproduced. However, routine actions are never fully stable, and cultural tools can also be drawn on to change established conventions. Practices are renewed when their taken-for-granted aspects are scrutinised and established performances are carried out in new ways. The point of departure for examining the relationship between knowledge and autonomy is, therefore, to trace how teachers relate to different knowledge resources, how they create relationships between these resources and purposes of schooling, and how established practices shape (or are re-shaped by) these processes. This assumption further implies that the term 'practices' is a structural concept which does not simply refer to 'something teachers do', but to the institutionalised characteristics of their work.

A second assumption is that our relationship to the world is mediated by cultural tools (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991), understood as the conceptual and material artefacts that human beings use to interact with their surroundings. Artefacts are simultaneously material and ideal; in addition to their physical attributes, they are imbued with socially and historically constructed meaning potentials (Cole, 1996). When artefacts enter into dynamic relationships with each other and with human interactions, they provide direction for human action but may also have their characteristics redefined. Knowledge resources are here understood as artefacts that provide certain constraints and affordances for teachers' work. When knowledge resources are introduced to schools, they come imbued with meaning potentials that direct, but do not determine, teachers' activities. For new

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