Teacher autonomy and collaboration: A paradox? Conceptualising and measuring teachers' autonomy and collaborative attitude

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HIGHLIGHTS

- The paradoxical relationship between autonomy and collaboration is disentangled.
- Teacher (classroom) autonomy is defined in relationship to collaboration.
- Two autonomy attitudes are distinguished: A reactive and reflective attitude.
- A measure distinguishing between autonomy and collaborative attitude is developed.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This study starts from the finding that a complex — sometimes even paradoxical - relationship exists between teacher autonomy and collaboration. Teacher autonomy is often equated to independence and individual work, excluding collaboration by definition. Hence, the first objective includes disentangling this paradoxical relationship by defining perceived autonomy and collaborative attitude as two distinct concepts. As existing autonomy measures are not equipped to capture this distinction, the second objective includes the development of a measure in line with the proposed conceptualisation. This resulted in an instrument consisting of three scales (collaborative attitude, didactical-pedagogical autonomy, curricular autonomy) with confirmed psychometric quality.

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Autonomy seems to be a central construct in education: Teachers strongly value autonomy as a desired workplace condition and it is perceived to affect their professional status and job satisfaction (Strong & Yoshida, 2014). At the same time, the importance of teacher collaboration is becoming more strongly emphasised (Ronfeldt, Owens Farmer, McQueen, & Grissom, 2015). This combination may provide challenges for traditional interpretations of autonomy. It also makes it crucial to investigate the (evolving) meaning of autonomy and how this relates to (the increasing importance of) collaboration.

Teachers' common-sense beliefs and the theoretical definitions of autonomy often equate autonomy to individualism or independence (Moomaw, 2005; Street & Licata, 1989). The long-standing culture of teacher isolation and individualism relates to and amplifies teachers' interpretation of individualised autonomy as

independence. In 1975, Lortie (Westheimer, 2008) described the working context of teachers working in isolation in their classrooms as 'egg-crate' schools. This is supported by structural arrangements in schools (e.g., focus on individual teaching in separated classrooms, lack of scheduled common time for collaboration) and the 'live and let live' posture of many teachers (Anderson, 1987; Cameron, 2005; Smith, 2009; Tschannen-Moran, Uline, Woolfolk Hoy, & Mackley, 1999; Westheimer, 2008). However, these conceptualisations of autonomy become untenable in an environment characterised by a rising significance of collaboration. Teachers are expected to be effective collaborators as interrelated benefits of collaboration were found for students, teachers themselves, as well as for the school as a whole (Vangrieken, Dochy, Raes, & Kyndt, 2015). For example, teachers demonstrate improved instructional practice and morale (Bertrand, Roberts, & Buchanan, 2006), student learning and performance improve (Main & Bryer, 2005; Ronfeldt et al., 2015), and a school climate that is more supportive of innovation is realised (Moolenaar, 2010).

This trend towards collaboration challenges the aforementioned

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understanding of autonomy as being equal to individual and independent work. As a consequence, there appears to be a complex, sometimes even paradoxical, relationship between autonomy and collaboration. Equating autonomy to independence induces a negative attitude towards interdependent collaboration because teachers view this to be a threat to their autonomy (Moolenaar, 2010; O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991; Vangrieken et al., 2015). Hence, these conceptions of autonomy become untenable in a context in which collaboration is becoming key. Teachers, students, and schools as organisations benefit from a more lenient and inclusive autonomy concept that does not exclude a collaborative culture and attitude. This has the potential of creating win-win situations by both alleviating experienced tensions and elevating the teachers' sense of empowerment (Somech, 2005).

These challenges and tensions are demonstrated in the evolving definitions of teacher autonomy in scientific literature. While older definitions focus on autonomy as meaning independence through isolation and alienation, more recent conceptions include collaborative decision-making and freedom to make prescriptive professional choices (Willner, 1990, in Pearson & Moomaw, 2005). These definitions reveal different interpretations of and attitudes towards autonomy. They also open up a new understanding of the relationship and tension between autonomy and collaboration. This study aims to map this evolving nature of teacher autonomy and how this demonstrates varying degrees of openness towards collaboration. To realise this overarching goal, this study has two objectives. The first involves conceptually exploring and defining teacher autonomy and the relationship with teachers' attitudes towards collaboration. It aims to clearly distinguish between autonomy and collaborative attitude as two distinct constructs and thus presents a more inclusive autonomy concept that does not exclude collaboration in its definition.

Since an instrument capable of quantifying teacher autonomy in relation to collaboration currently does not yet exist, the second objective focuses on the development and validation of a questionnaire based upon the proposed autonomy conceptualisation.

1. Conceptualising teacher autonomy

In line with the first objective, this conceptual part of the study focuses on defining teacher classroom autonomy, with a focus on its relationship with collaboration.

1.1. Defining autonomy

Different definitions of (teacher) autonomy are proposed in the literature. The one suggested by Hackman and Oldham (1975), explaining autonomy as the freedom a worker has to schedule work and to determine the procedures he/she used to carry it out, is often used. Translated to the educational context, Husband and Short (1994) argued autonomy to be "the ability to control daily schedules, to teach as one chooses, to have freedom to make decisions on instruction, and to generate ideas about curriculum" (p. 60).

Autonomy is often confounded with participation in decision-making. Although both constructs together are captured with the concept of control, they are distinct job aspects. Ashford and Saks (2000) argue that autonomy includes control over the immediate parameters of one's work, while participation refers to the degree of input into or influence over issues (in)directly affecting one's task domain. The difference between the two constructs derives from the areas over which one has an influence: classroom decisions (autonomy, operational) and decisions that affect multiple classrooms, the school, or the district (participation, strategic) (Firestone & Pennell, 1993). The focus here is on autonomy regarding classroom decisions, not participation in decision-making at the school level.

Over the years, there has been a shift in the conceptualisation of teacher autonomy (Zeng, 2013). Looking at definitions put forward through time, the focus has changed from independence and non-reliance, centred in the norms of individualism described earlier, to personal choice and collaborative decision-making. For example, Wilches (2007) argued, "teacher autonomy can be conceptualised as a personal sense of freedom from interference or in terms of teachers' exercise of control over school matters" (p. 245). Similarly, Willner (1990, in Pearson & Moomaw, 2005) identified an older and a newer concept of teacher autonomy. While the first focuses on teachers' independence through isolation and alienation, the more recent conception of teacher autonomy includes collaborative decision-making and the freedom to make prescriptive professional choices. This evolution is related to the complex relationship between teacher autonomy and collaboration. The different definitions reveal different attitudes towards autonomy, especially in relation to collaboration. These attitudes are described below.

1.2. Attitude towards autonomy

Related to the aforementioned evolution in the conception of teacher autonomy, two attitudes towards autonomy are distinguished based upon a distinction made by Koestner and Losier (1996). First, a *reactive autonomy attitude* corresponds to perceptions of autonomy mostly found in older definitions of teacher autonomy that focus on independence and non-reliance (Street & Licata, 1989). In contrast, the conception of autonomy put forward in the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) by Deci and Ryan (1991) includes a *reflective autonomy attitude*. The latter corresponds to more recent definitions of teacher autonomy, focusing on personal choice and feelings of agency. An overview of the key differences between both attitudes can be found in Table 1.

1.2.1. Reactive autonomy attitude

The idea of a reactive attitude towards autonomy originates from the work of Henry Murray (1938). He defines autonomy as "to resist influence or coercion; to defy an authority or to seek freedom in a new place. To strive for independence" (Murray, 1938, p. 467). A reactive attitude refers to individuals having the propensity of being resistant to external forces, pushing them away from others' influences, even to their detriment (Chirkov, Ryan, Kim, & Kaplan, 2003; Murray, 1938). According to Murray (1938) "the need for autonomy controls those who wish neither to lead nor to be led, those who want to go their own way, uninfluenced and uncoerced by others" (p. 152). Similarly, Gough and Heilbrun (1983), Hackman and Oldham (1975), and Street and Licata (1989) refer to *independence* from others, institutions, or social values and expectations when defining autonomy. These definitions are related to the description of schools as *loosely coupled systems* (Weick, 1976). From this perspective, teachers tend to operate as separate individuals, more or less independent in their classroom setting. They are loosely coupled to their colleagues in the sense that limited coordination is required and that they can perform their jobs mostly individually and independently.

Hence, from a reactive perspective on autonomy, the focus is on *freedom from* governance or influence of others, including *independence and non-reliance*, presenting an *interpersonal process of resistance* to external influences (Hodgins, Koestner, & Duncan, 1996; Koestner & Losier, 1996). Autonomy is defined in its relationship to others - not depending on others for one's own (job) functioning, not being influenced by others — and is related to an individualistic perspective. Thus autonomy can be seen as opposite to relatedness or *promotion of individualism* (Koestner & Losier, 1996). In the case of teachers, this conception is based on individually centred autonomy in the classroom, independent and