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Development of professional autonomy of secondary school teachers in the Czech Republic

Summary

Teacher professional autonomy is a phenomenon that is lived through practice but appears to be unrecognised, tacit. If this autonomy is consciously acknowledged through reflection, teachers perceive it as independence in decision-making regarding matters of the profession and those arising from the profession. In this exploratory case study, we focus on the development and formation of teacher professional autonomy. The research sample consists of four secondary school teachers in the Czech Republic with varying years of experience, engaged throughout the entire school year. Data was collected until saturation, using a combination of observation, interviews, and direct classroom visits by the authors. Data was processed through coding, categorisation, and the search for common characteristics of the phenomena. It was found that the phenomenon of teacher professional autonomy develops dynamically in stages, which we identified in the process of collaboration with participants as the stages of preconceptions,

exploration, explication, and consumption of teacher professional autonomy. This autonomy can be influenced externally, which offers potential (among others) for teacher educators.

Keywords: professional autonomy, teacher, development of professional autonomy, reflection, exploratory case study

Introduction

The professional autonomy of teachers is a topic that resonates in both Czech and international research, though usually in connection with other research issues. When first encountering the term and its explanation, practicing teachers often respond with uncertainty. They claim to understand it, to know what it is about, yet they find it difficult to articulate. In our research, it is important to bring visibility to the term, as professional autonomy is often perceived implicitly. We began by seeking definitions of autonomy in general, psychological, and philosophical contexts. *The Pedagogical Dictionary* (Průcha et al., 2001, p. 22) defines autonomy as "self-governance… independence", and as "a feeling that an individual is the master of his/her own life". Jan Mareš and Jiří Mareš (2014) examine autonomy more detailed, describing it, for instance, as the moment when individuals find themselves and begin making decisions independently and sovereignly. They present autonomy as an expression of agency and a specific form of independence, although they focus on the education and upbringing of students rather than teachers. Lacinová et al. (2016) associate individual autonomy with personal identity, characterising it as a key attribute that accompanies entry into adulthood and viewing it as both a goal and a source of maturity. Philosopher Sokol (2010) describes autonomy as a trait of a person (thus, someone can be autonomous), as sovereignty and independence, and as the foundation of freedom.

We view the professional autonomy of teachers as a phenomenon, something that is, something that teachers perceive as autonomy within the profession. It permeates the research of many scholars, although it is rarely defined or explained. Various aspects of autonomy emerge in studies where researchers address the rights and responsibilities of teachers (Kalhous & Obst, 2002; Průcha, 2009), or how these powers are or should be exercised, especially by novice teachers (Šimoník, 1994; Vítečková, 2018). Teacher autonomy is associated with a holistic approach to the profession and professionalism (Lukášová, 2015), an awareness of responsibility (Korthagen et al., 2011), and the competence to create a supportive learning environment for students (Sehrawat, 2014). At the beginning of the 21st century, Václavíková (2001) directly addressed teacher autonomy, noting that teachers are legally granted authority to plan their activities, including contributing to curriculum development, although this authority is not always used effectively. The

author links autonomy to professional responsibility. The issue of autonomy was prominently discussed during the period of distance learning from 2019 to 2021. Šalamounová (2022) views autonomy in this context as the ability of schools and individual teachers to make decisions during challenging times.

There is considerably more international research on teacher autonomy than in the Czech context. However, some foreign authors tend to focus primarily on autonomous teacher behaviour as an individual trait (independence, individuality, decision-making ability). This behaviour is expected to serve as a model for students' autonomous behaviour (Sehrawat, 2014; Wood et al., 2008), a model for students' acting (Beyers et al., 2003), or even as a prerequisite for successful implementation of the educational process (Kyriacou, 2004; Petty, 1996). The challenge is that autonomy itself is not consistently defined, and such approaches often leave underexplored how professional autonomy is perceived, interpreted, and negotiated by teachers themselves. This gap was addressed in the previous part of our research (Ševčíková & Plischke, 2022), which asked what autonomy means to teachers regardless of their wishes or ideals. The findings showed that teachers tended to understand it primarily as independence in decision-making on matters related to and arising from the profession.

At the same time, contemporary international scholarship increasingly conceptualises teacher autonomy as a multi-dimensional and multi-level construct, encompassing both professional freedom in classroom decision-making and participation in wider school-level governance (Wermke & Salokangas, 2021; Wilches, 2007). This perspective is compatible with distinguishing between autonomy granted by the profession, anchored in professional standards and regulations, autonomy granted by the employer, shaped by local school governance and organisational conditions, and autonomy consumed by teachers as enacted in everyday practice. In this light, autonomy is not merely given but continuously interpreted and used, or withheld, within a recognised space of possibilities. Comparative work further highlights the so-called autonomy paradox. Increases in formal autonomy can be experienced as simultaneously empowering and burdensome because they intensify perceived risk, responsibility, and potential accountability for the consequences of pedagogical choices (Wermke & Salokangas, 2021). Autonomy therefore cannot be evaluated only by its formal scope. It also needs to be understood through teachers' subjective meaning-making, perceptions of risk, and experienced safety to decide.

Large-scale quantitative research provides important complementary evidence about the consequences of autonomy for teachers' professional functioning and well-being. Norwegian studies show that perceived autonomy is positively related to work engagement and job satisfaction, while negatively related to emotional exhaustion (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014). In England, national survey analyses similarly

indicate that higher professional autonomy is associated with more manageable workload, higher job satisfaction, and stronger intentions to remain in teaching (Worth & Van den Brande, 2020). In self-determination theory, autonomy is framed as a basic psychological need that supports intrinsic motivation and well-being when satisfied (Deci & Ryan, 2008). These findings underline that autonomy is not only a governance variable but also a motivational and affective resource.

However, our focus on the development of professional autonomy suggests that the relationship between formal autonomy, perceived autonomy, and its consequences is not uniform across teachers' careers. Perceived autonomy appears to be shaped not only by organisational constraints but also by teachers' biographical position. In early phases, teachers may intentionally restrict the use of their formal autonomy because they feel insufficiently competent, anticipate negative consequences, or experience autonomy as risky. Only later does autonomy tend to stabilise as a resource that sustains professional motivation rather than a threat.

International secondary analyses also point to autonomy as a mechanism linking school organisation and teacher innovation. Studies using TALIS 2018 data suggest that teacher autonomy mediates the relationship between distributed leadership and teacher innovativeness (Lin, 2022). Research informed by self-determination theory likewise indicates that autonomy-supportive school climates foster teachers' willingness to engage with reforms and experiment with new approaches (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014). A developmental perspective can help explain these correlations. In earlier phases, teachers may primarily test boundaries, often with colleagues. In later phases they may selectively invest their autonomy into innovations aligned with their professional values and biography. Conversely, when external demands are experienced as heteronomous and misaligned with those values, autonomy may remain formally present yet practically unusable. This echoes international findings on mismatches between school-level and classroom-level autonomy and their implications for professionalism and retention (Lin, 2022; Wermke & Salokangas, 2021; Worth & Van den Brande, 2020).

In our research, we therefore focus especially on the development of teacher professional autonomy. We believe that answers can be found by tracing its genesis, from pre-service teacher training through the stages of being a novice teacher to becoming an expert (Průcha, 2009). We are also interested in how teacher autonomy is or can be shaped by external pressures, or consciously by the teachers themselves, through their beliefs and reflections on experience. Taken together, the Czech and international literature positions professional autonomy as a dynamic, context-dependent and psychologically mediated phenomenon rather than a simple structural attribute of education systems (Wermke & Salokangas, 2021;

Wilches, 2007). This framing invites attention not only to how much autonomy teachers have on paper, but also to when in their careers they feel ready to accept and exercise it and under what organisational and relational conditions this autonomy is actually enacted and sustained.

Methodology

This exploratory case study was conducted in a qualitative design and focuses on the development and formation of teacher autonomy from late pre-service teacher education through the novice phase and into long-term professional practice. In this study, a teacher in pre-service preparation refers to a student at a faculty of education. A novice teacher is defined, following Vítečková (2018), as a person who is qualified for the profession but lacks sufficient practical experience. An experienced teacher or expert is understood in line with Průcha (2009) as a practitioner with extensive experience who is recognised by school leadership and colleagues as a professional and expert, and who may also support novice teachers during entry into the profession.

We worked with four participants, treated analytically as one case, meaning that the study synthesises four situated experiences into a single case narrative. The participants represented key career phases: a female teacher in her first month of practice with recent pre-service preparation experience, a male novice teacher in his second year of teaching, a female teacher with seven years of experience, and a female teacher with thirty years of experience. By case we mean the development and formation of professional autonomy in primary or secondary school teachers against the backdrop of the final phase of pre-service preparation, entry into practice and prolonged engagement with the profession. The case was examined in its natural environment and is considered a typical, representative example that does not deviate from common professional teaching practice.

The case study builds on several years of prior field research conducted in primary and secondary schools. This earlier research addressed selected aspects of the formation of professional beliefs in beginning teachers (Ševčíková et al., 2021) and, more specifically, professional teacher autonomy and its reflection among novice teachers (Ševčíková & Plischke, 2022). In the present study, the research problem was expanded to include experienced teachers. The aim of this exploratory case study (Mareš, 2015), consistent with qualitative case study design (Stake, 1995), was to capture the dynamic development of teacher autonomy directly in the context of lived practice, using "pre- and post-structured reflections" (Slavík et al., 2017, p. 250).

Table 1. Overview of participants

Participant	Type of school / Teaching experience	Initial motivation for entering the profession	Autonomy and professional self-efficacy
A	Lower secondary school; first month of practice; recently completed pre-service teacher education	Long-standing aspiration to become a teacher	Reports limited confidence in exercising autonomy; prefers clear, authoritative leadership
B	Upper secondary school (six-year grammar school; teaches grades 8–9); second year of practice	Intended to pursue teaching	Desires autonomy yet experiences uncertainty; struggles with colleagues'/management authority; appreciates external decisions in high-stakes situations
C	Lower secondary school; seven years of experience	Chose teaching intentionally	Seeks autonomy but lacks confidence; prefers supportive backup; reports mild burnout symptoms linked to management changes
D	Upper secondary school; thirty years of experience	Long-term intention to become a teacher	Shows strong professional self-assurance; continues to find teaching fulfilling; stable autonomous functioning

Source: Authors' own work.

Research questions were derived from previous studies, with the expectation that additional questions would emerge during the process as data were gradually collected until saturation (Švaříček, 2005). The core questions were formulated after prior research and confrontation with academic literature confirmed that teacher autonomy is lived in practice (Ševčíková & Plischke, 2022) and that practising teachers consider professional autonomy a key aspect of the profession, although they associate it with varying connotations. The study addressed the following questions: How is professional autonomy perceived by the teacher? How does it develop? What influences affect its development, and how, when and through what means can its development be influenced?

Data collection was conducted in collaboration with the researcher, who also acted as an active participant in the reflective process, and took place from 2016 until 2024, when the data collection was concluded for the purposes of writing scholarly texts. The authors combined multiple data collection methods, ranging from written observation notes during class visits, evaluations of those visits, and

"autonomous writing" (Švaříček & Šeďová, 2014, p. 129) on assigned topics, to recorded reflections and self-reflections linked to professional situations encountered during the school year. Across all materials, particular attention was paid to how autonomy was described and understood by teachers at the time of reporting.

Written data were analysed through coding. Materials were first segmented into meaningful statements (codes). Through systematic comparison and the identification of recurring patterns, codes were grouped into categories. As new phenomena and datasets emerged, the material was re-coded and compared. Relationships between codes and categories were then examined, especially in relation to the conditions, causes and contexts of the phenomenon, as well as its anticipated and actual consequences.

A key challenge and initial limitation in the data collection process was building sufficient trust for participants to set aside expectations or ideals about autonomy and describe it as it was experienced at a given moment rather than how it should be. This was supported by reflection and self-reflection techniques, particularly those based on subsequently structured questions focused on the current issue being addressed (Slavík et al., 2017).

Results of the study

The observation of the case concerning the development of teacher professional autonomy and the data collection took place in several phases. It was confirmed that our participants perceive autonomy as a phenomenon encompassing "independence in decision-making regarding matters of the profession, arising from the profession itself". This conclusion was not presented to them in advance; they arrived at it themselves through their reflections on the first research question.

The respondents stated that the essence of the phenomenon is, at first glance, implicit (cf. Ševčíková et al., 2021). Teachers must first clarify and define what aspects of their lived practice and the professional situations they encounter belong to this phenomenon. To make it explicit, we used reflection techniques, assuming that teachers had already practiced such techniques during their pre-service education, and that contemplating issues and phenomena is (or should be) part of their professional competencies (Korthagen, 2011). While this assumption was not always confirmed, participants quickly developed these skills through guided practice. In our case, a single question was sufficient to reveal previously hidden content. The question was: "How do you perceive your professional autonomy?" The findings shows that professional teacher autonomy, as a phenomenon, is perceived from two perspectives:

- Assigned autonomy – autonomy given, granted, imposed, or delegated from the outside.
- Accepted autonomy – autonomy adopted, internalised, or understood by the teacher.

Through this distinction, the perceived structure of autonomy, as seen by the teachers themselves, began to emerge.

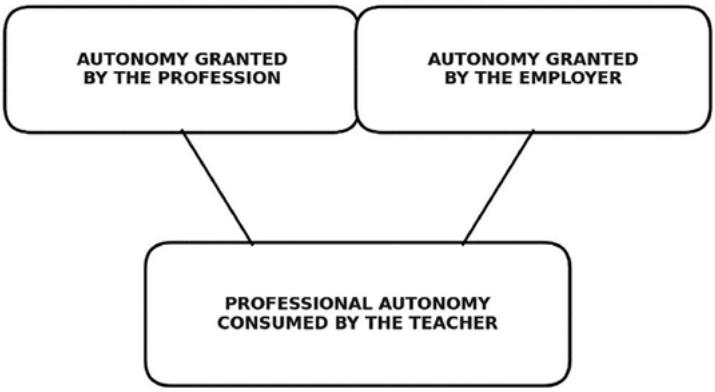


Figure 1. The structure of teacher professional autonomy.

Source: Authors' own work.

The externally granted scope of autonomy is represented by autonomy granted by the profession, and autonomy granted by the employer. At the same time the internally granted autonomy is represented by the autonomy that the teacher has personally accepted – the teacher is willing to accept and implement. These findings are illustrated by statements such as:

> Autonomy – meaning professional independence and freedom – has to be granted to me by someone (a superior) or something (the law), as a kind of authority. I need to know what I have the right and duty to do as a teacher. Then it becomes a matter of how much of that I can actually use – how much freedom I want and can handle. (Participant D)

Externally granted autonomy is represented by the decision-making rights and responsibilities that are assigned (by legislation, methodology, moral frameworks, or otherwise) to the teaching profession in general or to a teacher's specific employment role by their employer. The scope of professional autonomy granted to the profession as a whole is something an individual cannot significantly influence and it is given. A teacher must either come to terms with it or not. This portion of autonomy and its extent is predetermined. If a teacher wishes to pursue the

profession, they must become familiar with and accept these parameters once and for all. This form of autonomy can theoretically be studied and understood before entering professional practice, as evidenced by statements like:

> I had no idea (during pre-service training) how many responsibilities and how much accountability a teacher actually has. Sure, I knew we were responsible for the kids (for their safety, etc.), but also for the curriculum, the results, the behaviour, the atmosphere in the classroom. (Participant A)

Professional autonomy granted by the employer has attributes of fixedness – unless the teacher chooses to change employers or enters into negotiations regarding their scope of autonomy. This part of autonomy is only discovered on the specific job site and is difficult to anticipate in advance, as expressed in the following reflections:

> Our headmaster gives us a lot of freedom, but that feels more like a curse than a gift. I didn't expect that… it's all on me, I'm responsible for everything… the scope is huge and it scares me. I'd actually prefer more control from the leadership – that way, responsibility would be shared and wouldn't fall solely on me. (Participant A)

Professional autonomy consumed (or exercised) by the teacher, on the other hand, is a highly dynamic part of the phenomenon and offers room for change and development. The decision about the scope, extent, and implementation of one's own professional autonomy lies with the individual teacher. It includes both the autonomy granted by the profession and by the employer, and also the teacher's own decision on how to accept and embody these.

This aspect of professional autonomy evolves continuously and is clearly influenced by experience. It is this part, especially its development, that is of primary interest in this case study. We assume, and identify as a limitation, that it will be shaped by how participants perceive the autonomy granted by the profession and the autonomy provided in their workplace. These perceptions will, in turn, affect how they view the development of their individual professional autonomy.

After making their understanding of autonomy explicit, the participants supplemented their definition of professional autonomy by describing its manifestations as follow:

- *internal manifestation:* as a feeling and subjective personal experience of independence, ownership of one's actions, freedom, and responsibility;
- and *external manifestation*: as an objectively observable independence – visible in oneself and in colleagues, mutually observed and shared through professional reflection.

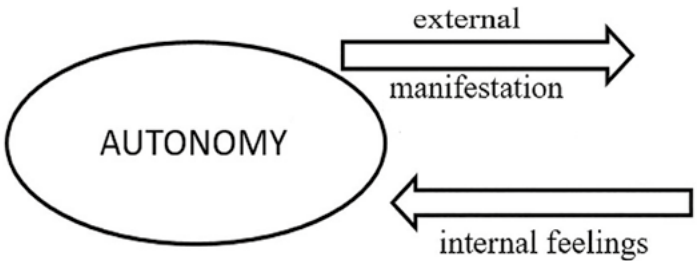


Figure 2. Teacher professional autonomy demonstrated and perceived.

Source: Authors' own work.

The question we pose is as follows: "How do our participants make the development of their individual professional autonomy explicit?"

Findings of Phase One

The development of individual professional autonomy during pre-service teacher education, especially during continuous teaching practice, is described by participants as consisting of preconceptions. These are ideas about teacher autonomy that are informed by knowledge of professional requirements, rights, and responsibilities, but they remain unlived, untested by reality, existing only in the future teacher's mind as imagined scenarios:

How would I handle this in the classroom (with parents, students, colleagues, supervisors)... How would I make independent decisions... How would I take responsibility for those decisions. (Participant C)

We can present a narrative of autonomy development through condensed authentic statements emerging from the data:

I looked forward to making decisions about my work, but I actually knew nothing about it. (Participant B)

I really didn't know what my rights or specific duties were – it was more of a vague idea… What does it even mean to manage the educational process?" (Participant A)

Relative independence and a feeling of power? Sovereignty? But under the control of my mentor teacher, for which I was grateful. (Participant B)

I made a decision – but was it the right one? Was it not? I was scared to make another/ I was thrown off when the students didn't respond the way I expected. I had to call for help and compare my decisions with an authority (the mentor teacher or a colleague). (Participant C)

Parent-teacher meetings? An attempt… Panic… A feeling of helplessness… A cry for help. (Participant B)

Sure, I have the authority (to make relevant decisions and feel responsible for them), I'm supposed to learn to use it, it's part of my job, given by the employer… but do I want it? Not yet! I'm still a student (Phew, what a relief). (Participant A)

Participants retrospectively recalled their reflections during pre-service practice, when the external demands for autonomy began to become visible, for example what they had the right and obligation to decide independently, when and within what limits, and how prepared they felt. They were often caught off guard. However, recognising that they were still students – *learners*, not full professionals, helped them cope. It enabled them to simulate autonomous behavior and then confront it with feedback from authority figures (mentor teachers or school leadership):

It was like an awakening – from the initial feeling of power and sovereignty, which was too much for me, to the realisation of responsibility… but a responsibility I didn't yet have to bear, because I was still a student. (Participant A)

During this phase, professional autonomy appears as preconceptions, dominated by perceptions of external demands for independence sovereignty and fears about meeting them.

Findings of Phase Two

The second developmental phase, experienced by a novice teacher in the first month of her career (September), is defined as a period of exploration – discovering autonomy. It is characterised by lingering ideas about autonomy now being confronted with reality. Again, the trajectory can be illustrated with selected statements:

Gradually, I started to understand it – I know how to do things, what I can and can't do. I'm clarifying the school leadership's expectations and comparing them with what I think are my rights and responsibilities. (Participant D)

I can prepare my lessons autonomously, because I have supporting materials – school curriculum and thematic plans. I have something to lean on, and I have experience from university. (Participant A)

I'm learning how to independently decide how to handle discipline issues. I know it's my responsibility, but I still seek support from leadership… I need my decisions to be approved. I'm far from fully confident. (Participant C)

When my colleagues asked for my opinion on revising the school curriculum during the computer science reform, I almost collapsed. Decide on what to teach? (Panic). (Participant B)

In this phase, professional autonomy is experienced as exploration, a time of intense discovery in all directions. The teacher is still largely processing external

demands but now he/she begins to compare those demands with lived experience, and builds personal, professionally grounded autonomy, not just speculative ideas.

Findings of Phase Three

The third phase of professional autonomy development, occurring throughout the first year of teaching practice, is defined as a period of explication, that is, fine-tuning or calibrating one's approach to autonomy. The teacher's reflections during this phase focus on negotiating the boundaries between assigned and accepted autonomy, as well as grappling with personal responsibility for decision-making. Some representative statements from participants include:

Now is the time to step away from advisors and take responsibility for my own decisions – it's an opportunity. (Participant B)

I know that some decisions are my right and duty, but they feel inappropriate – no single teacher should be making them. It could harm the students. There should be oversight (e.g., curriculum development, changes in scheduling). (Participant D)

I'm dealing with how much decision-making power to share with colleagues who also teach in 'my' class. (Participant C)

I'm considering whether I'm 'mature enough' to work without the mentor teacher's support next school year. (Participant A)

At this stage, teacher autonomy is experienced as explication: understanding, articulating, and refining the concept – gradually adjusting it toward an individual ideal.

The externally granted autonomy (from the profession and the employer) is, by this time, more or less internalised, accepted, and cognitively processed. Ideally, it is perceived as appropriate in its complexity and fully integrated. However, it may still be partially rejected, reflected upon as too limited or too broad. In such cases, the teacher must continue working through these tensions while constructing their own individual professional autonomy. The ideal has not yet been fully achieved.

According to our findings, the development of the relationship to accepted, individual autonomy proceeds through three interrelated stages, which may overlap but are conceptually distinguishable. All three participant teachers demonstrated this pattern in their experiences. These stages represent a model of professional autonomy development that continues to evolve throughout the first year of professional practice and beyond.

Below we present shortened statements from the reflections:

At first, you feel liberated – free from oversight (independent) – but at the same time, there's fear: do I even want this, am I ready for it, can I handle it?... You wrestle with that for a while…

then you decide to embrace that independence. You're ready to not submit and to seek your own sovereign path (sovereignty)… and finally – but really only at the end – comes that wonderful sense of freedom. You understand and accept responsibility for your (professional) actions, for your work, for your decisions. You can justify them, and you know how to stand by them. (Participant D)

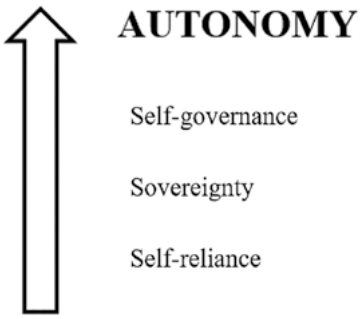


Figure 3. Development of the teacher professional autonomy.

Source: Authors' own work.

The names of these individual stages may vary, but their substance appears to reflect a general pattern in the development of this component of professional autonomy. The teacher gradually becomes independent, gains confidence, searches for and finds their professional path, and finally finds themselves, as Jan and Jiří Mareš (2014) describe.

Lacinová, Ježek, and Macek (2016) define autonomy as a key attribute of adulthood, and they see it both as a goal and a source of maturity. If we adopt their model here, applied to the maturing of a teacher within the profession, this phase represents the moment when the teacher is expected to reach maturity – and thus, functional professional autonomy, or true self-governance.

Findings of Phase Four

The fourth developmental phase, characteristic of experienced teachers or experts, is defined as a period of autonomy consumption, a time when already-acquired autonomy is actively and mindfully exercised. Some illustrative reflections follow:

I know what I'm doing – and why I'm doing it… and that's how it should be. (Participant D)

I'm clear on the rules of the profession. I know what my employer allows. I know what I want. I look for ways to achieve it… and that's how it should be. (Participant C)

That doesn't mean doubts or new questions won't arise – but… now you simply know you'll find your way if you keep looking. It's up to you, and you accept that – you count on it. (Participant D)

In this phase, professional autonomy appears as the consumption of autonomy, a state where externally granted autonomy (by the profession and the employer), and internally recognised and accepted autonomy (by the teacher) are in reasonable harmony. The teacher oscillates around the ideal, balancing independence, responsibility, and professionalism with self-awareness and maturity.

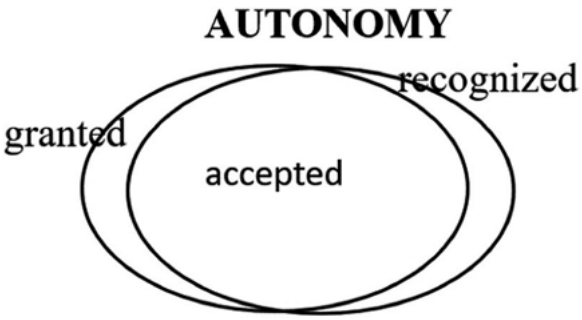


Figure 4. Overlapping (blending) of autonomy.

Source: Authors' own work

Discussion

The study examined how secondary school teachers in the Czech Republic perceive and develop professional autonomy across career phases. The findings confirm that autonomy is initially tacit and becomes articulable mainly through guided reflection. Once made explicit, participants defined professional autonomy as independence in decision making regarding matters of the profession and those arising from it. A key contribution is the distinction between assigned autonomy and accepted autonomy, which offered teachers a clear way to describe their lived experience and to differentiate what is formally expected from what they are personally ready to enact.

In the Czech context, the results extend earlier approaches that have often treated autonomy primarily as a professional right and duty linked to responsibility, for example in curriculum and instructional planning (Václavíková, 2001). Our findings show that responsibility is not automatically internalised with formal autonomy. Especially in early career stages, autonomy can be experienced as risky and emotionally demanding, and teachers may temporarily prefer clearer leader-

ship direction because it shares responsibility and provides psychological safety. This complements Czech research highlighting the fragility of autonomy in the induction period, the role of mentoring, and the importance of reflective support for beginning teachers (Lukášová, 2015; Ševčíková & Plischke, 2022; Vítečková, 2018). It also resonates with organisational work showing that school culture and leadership shape the space teachers have to decide, as seen during the period of distance learning (Šalamounová, 2022).

Internationally, our distinction between autonomy granted by the profession, autonomy granted by the employer, and autonomy consumed by the teacher parallels multi level conceptualisations of autonomy that include both classroom decision making and participation in school level governance (Wermke & Salokangas, 2021; Wilches, 2007). The experiences of our participants also align with the autonomy paradox, as greater formal autonomy can be both liberating and burdensome because it increases perceived risk and accountability (Wermke & Salokangas, 2021). Large scale survey studies from Norway and England show that perceived autonomy is associated with higher job satisfaction and engagement, lower emotional exhaustion, more manageable workload, and stronger intentions to remain in teaching (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014; Worth & Van den Brande, 2020). Our developmental model refines this picture by suggesting that the same formal autonomy may function differently across career stages. In early phases some teachers deliberately limit the use of autonomy because they do not yet feel competent or safe, while in later phases autonomy is more likely to be experienced as a stable motivational resource, consistent with the view of autonomy as a basic psychological need in self determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008). International analyses also link autonomy to innovation and reform engagement, for example in the context of distributed leadership and autonomy supportive school climates (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014). Our phase model offers a plausible mechanism by showing how teachers first test boundaries and seek legitimisation, and only later selectively invest autonomy into innovations aligned with their values and professional biography.

For practice, the findings suggest that autonomy should be made explicit in pre-service education and developed through repeated, reflected decision making in authentic or simulated professional situations. In the induction period, structured mentoring and accessible leadership support appear crucial, not as restrictions of autonomy but as scaffolding that reduces perceived risk and helps teachers gradually accept responsibility for autonomous decisions. The study supports viewing professional autonomy as a dynamic, context dependent and psychologically mediated phenomenon rather than a fixed structural attribute and it invites attention to when teachers feel ready to exercise autonomy and under what organisational and relational conditions autonomy is genuinely enacted.

Conclusion

Teacher professional autonomy is a complex and dynamic phenomenon. It involves becoming independent in making decisions about, and arising from, the teaching profession. This phenomenon is not perceived as static; rather, it evolves and transforms throughout the teacher's entire professional life. All our findings support this assertion.

The foundations (or potential) of individual professional autonomy are granted externally. The teacher must first become aware of them and then accept them in a concrete form. Only then can the teacher consciously choose to exercise their individual professional autonomy with all the associated benefits and possible risks. According to our findings, this development unfolds in phases:

1. Preconceptions of autonomy
2. Exploration of autonomy
3. Explication (refinement) of autonomy
4. Consumption (use) of autonomy

These phases are not strictly time-bound, but the case study revealed an ideal, participant-recommended model:

- The preconception phase should ideally end with the completion of pre-service teacher education.
- The exploration phase occurs in the first days, weeks, or mostly months after entering professional practice.
- The explication phase aligns with the adaptation period, when the teacher is still a novice and considers themselves inexperienced.
- The consumption phase emerges with the teacher's perception of having sufficient experience and expertise.

However, there may be regressions or overlaps between the phases, particularly between explication and consumption, during major professional transitions, such as legislative changes, a new employer, or a significant, often negatively perceived event (e.g., professional failure) that disrupts the teacher's sense of autonomy (self-governance), returning them to a phase of "fine-tuning". Finally, the development of professional autonomy can be shaped and influenced at every stage, both through external factors and through the teacher's own efforts, especially via reflection and self-reflection.

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