

AUTONOMY IN EDUCATION

## Shifts in curriculum control: contesting ideas of teacher autonomy

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This article addresses how the introduction of a more product-oriented curriculum in Norway has challenged and altered more traditional ideas of teacher autonomy. Based on interview data, the study investigates prominent perspectives on autonomy through an analysis of how teachers, principals, a district superintendent and educational administrators perceive the current steering and control through the national curriculum. The findings show three main perspectives on teacher autonomy as (1) pedagogical freedom and absence of control, (2) the will and capacity to justify practices and (3) a local responsibility. However, these varying viewpoints are contested and highlight the multidimensionality of teacher autonomy. These should be discussed in relation to one another for an increased understanding of the associated and current dilemmas arising in the teaching profession with the shifts in curriculum control. The findings also shed light on how an increase in local responsibilities related to student outcomes and school development interferes in the unofficial contract that has historically existed between teachers and the state.

Keywords: *autonomy; curriculum control; education reform*

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This article addresses how recent changes regarding curriculum control in Norway are perceived at different institutional levels, as well as how they challenge and alter ideas of teacher autonomy. Although the issues of accountability and autonomy in education have received significant attention in international research (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2007; Day, 2002; Evetts, 2008; Helgøy & Homme, 2007), how teacher autonomy is framed by specific state-based curricula has been researched to a lesser extent (Mølstad, 2015a). Therefore, this study investigates how teachers, principals, a district superintendent and educational administrators perceive steering and control within an outcome-based national curriculum and associated assessment policies with a stronger accountability element than that of previous curricula (Skedsmo & Mausethagen, 2015; Tveit, 2014). Furthermore, the study addresses the multidimensionality of teacher autonomy, as well as how an increase in local responsibilities related to school development and student outcomes for municipalities and principals interferes in the unofficial contract that has existed between teachers and the state.

Norway is an interesting context for studying teacher autonomy since policymakers have recently increased their emphasis on student outcomes, assessment practices and teacher accountability. At the same time, Norway has

a long-standing, strong tradition of compulsory schooling, and the teaching profession has historically held a relatively important position (Rovde, 2006; Slagstad, 1998). However, since the release of the first Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results in 2001, educational reforms, schooling and teacher education have been criticised as not satisfying societal expectations (Karseth & Sivesind, 2010), which legitimised the introduction of a national quality assessment system (NQAS), including national testing, in 2004, and an outcome-based curriculum in 2006 [The Knowledge Promotion (LK06)]. The LK06 represents a shift from a content oriented to a more outcome-oriented curriculum (Engelsen, 2009). Additionally, municipalities were given increased responsibilities in terms of school development and student outcomes (Sandberg & Aasen, 2008). As such, these reforms have affected both the curriculum and the structure of the educational system, focusing on increasing the responsibility of municipalities and schools to improve student outcomes, as well as placing more emphasis on school leadership (Skedsmo & Mausethagen, 2015). Therefore, the emphasis of educational policy has shifted from a somewhat traditional interpretation of autonomy – where teachers enjoyed a high degree of classroom autonomy, coupled with a limited evaluation of student

outcomes – to placing more responsibility on local actors (municipalities, schools and teachers) and their documentation on succeeding in improving student outcomes and the overall quality and efficiency of teaching.

The implications of new assessment and accountability policies on teacher professionalism and autonomy have been extensively addressed in existing research, particularly in the Anglo-American context. This body of research is often concerned with how teacher autonomy has been reduced, particularly over the last two decades (Mausethagen, 2013b). International research tends to uphold a quite dichotomous and linear picture of changes in teachers' work and professionalism, where accountability pressure reduces teacher autonomy and typically leads to more standardisation and micromanagement of teaching (Evetts, 2008; Jeffrey, 2002; Locke, Vulliamy, Webb, & Hill, 2005). However, empirically, such tensions between autonomy and accountability are more likely to co-exist and be negotiated within the local context (Mausethagen, 2013a; Stone-Johnson, 2014; Wilkins, 2011). Although previous studies have investigated issues related to curriculum control and teacher autonomy, they have to a limited extent done so from the perspectives of different actors at different institutional levels. Moreover, autonomy is often conceptualised as ways of freedom rather than also focusing on issues of self-governance.

However, important contextual differences also exist between Anglo-American and Nordic countries, in the latter, the teaching profession has been subject to external control of outcomes to a limited extent only and has enjoyed a relatively high degree of professional 'freedom' (Hopmann, 2007; Lundahl & Tveit, 2014). Nonetheless, some cross-national studies have also highlighted interesting differences across the Nordic countries in terms of changes in educational policy and implications for teacher autonomy. For example, Carlgren and Klette (2008) found how Swedish teachers enjoyed more individual autonomy although they were also restricted by external relationships in which local authorities played an important role. The Swedish teachers also showed more willingness to accept new obligations than their Norwegian counterparts. Helgøy and Homme (2007) reported that Norwegian teachers were better than Swedish teachers at balancing traditional and new demands on teaching and seemed more in control of policy changes, primarily by relying on professional practices based on formal education. These two studies were conducted before the outcome-oriented curriculum in Norway was introduced, and the variations are interpreted as providing different conditions for the promotion of teacher autonomy in the two countries. However, more recent studies from Norway suggested that school leaders and teachers were becoming more oriented towards student outcomes and accountability for these as a result of how new ways of steering and control had influenced the patterns of interactions among national

authorities, municipalities and schools (Skedsmo, 2009). In a cross-national study of Finland and Norway, Mølstad (2015b) found that local curriculum development in Norway over the last decade had evolved into mainly focusing on the application of the national curriculum rather than its development. As such, state-based curricula frame teacher autonomy differently.

Against this backdrop, the following research questions have been pursued: How do different actors within the Norwegian educational system perceive autonomy in education, and in what ways do changes related to curriculum control challenge ideas on teacher autonomy? What central dimensions of teacher autonomy can be identified within and among different institutional levels, and how do these dimensions represent possible dilemmas and challenges for the teaching profession?

The remainder of this article is organised as follows. The next section presents theoretical perspectives on autonomy and how curriculum theory provides a fruitful lens to investigate issues of autonomy for the teaching profession. Then we describe the interview data and its analysis. Through the analysis, three prominent yet contested ideas on teacher autonomy are illuminated – as pedagogical freedom and absence of control, as the capacity and will for self-governance and as a local responsibility. We conclude by discussing how in various ways, these three perspectives on teacher autonomy are creating dilemmas for the teaching profession in Norway, following more product control.

### Multidimensionality of teacher autonomy

The multifaceted and value-laden concept of teacher autonomy is used in different ways by different actors (e.g., Ozga & Lawn, 1981). The various uses of the concept relates to different contents that can be attached to professional autonomy, mainly focusing on issues of self-governance and experiences of 'freedom' in professional practice.

Generally, professional autonomy implies that individuals control the terms and content of their work and related issues, based on their professional knowledge and moral and ethical principles (Molander & Terum, 2008). However, autonomy is also related to self-governance (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2007) and one's capacity to develop, safeguard and justify one's knowledge base. Such conceptualisations of autonomy often receive lesser focus than issues of 'freedom'. Thus, autonomy connects personal and professional accountability (Conway & Murphy, 2013), often placed in opposition to managerial accountability (Sinclair, 1995). This latter distinction can also be described as internal and external accountability, which has implications for how teachers and other actors within the field of education experience autonomy. In other words, the quest for increased external accountability can also be understood as a response to the perceived lack of internal accountability within the profession.

A common yet imprecise distinction is often made between individual and collective autonomy. While individual autonomy can be broadly defined as a person exercising a high degree of control over issues directly connected to his or her daily activities (Frostenson, 2012; Ingersoll, 2003), collective autonomy is typically how an organisation or union controls individuals' work and professionalism. Individual autonomy can be a somewhat troublesome concept within the context of education, as nowadays, it can be argued that teachers are working less as privatised educators in the classroom. However, collective autonomy can also be difficult in this context; for example, although teacher unions come closest to investigating and supporting the collective voice of teachers, the views of local groups of teachers are not necessarily in accordance with the official views of their union. Moreover, this distinction relates to how teachers' work takes place within their schools and depends on the curriculum requirements and other legal regulations; this indicates why strong leadership and the creation of organisational legitimacy have become increasingly important (Hopmann, 2003; Noordegraf, 2013). Thus, teacher autonomy is also grounded within school organisations and among colleagues.

Autonomy can therefore be viewed as a continuum where the performative and individual aspects of teachers' work are related to the organisational and collective aspects of their profession (Mausethagen 2013c; Molander & Terum, 2008; Wermke & Höstfält, 2014). In other words, if educational policies contradict the values and knowledge of teachers, this can create tensions and result in teachers' emphasising the importance of maintaining control over classroom practices and their knowledge base. As such, these tensions can also result in teachers' lack of involvement in local development initiatives. However, the profession must also clarify in public discourse that teachers' internal control is sufficient and can protect the quality of their work (Molander & Terum, 2008). For their part, policymakers are concerned with how much control is necessary to ensure quality and efficiency in direct correlation to the degree to which teachers are entrusted with autonomy. Consequently, teachers and schools risk diminishing trust and legitimacy if they do not perform in accordance with curricula and related policies.

Since professional autonomy is often treated as a general term and used across professions, the concept of licensing is more accurate within the field of education, as it more specifically characterises the framing of teacher autonomy across national contexts. According to Hopmann (2003), the two dominating patterns of curriculum control are product control and process control. Each has a different set of vocabulary for constructing expectations towards teachers and their responsibilities. The first pattern is a product-centred system of external control that is found in the United States, for example.

Within this framework, external control of student outcomes is the main instrument of control. The second pattern is the continental licensing or *Didaktik* system, which has weak control over the educational process and almost no external control over educational outcomes. Different outcomes are allowed, depending on local teacher groups and schools, as long as they are in accordance with the national curriculum. Within this tradition, the basic claim for professional expertise is *Didaktik*, which is the art or study of teaching (Gundem & Hopmann, 1998). The use of *Didaktik* in teaching implies a considerable amount of teacher autonomy. As such, the national authorities provide teachers with a 'licence to teach', defining their degree of autonomy. Licensing can also be described as a differentiation process that distributes responsibilities (Haft & Hopmann, 1990) and is shaped by the construct of 'pedagogical freedom' or 'freedom of method' (Hopmann, 2007). Hence, this licence given to the teachers indicates the distribution of responsibility between the curriculum administration at the national level and the teaching profession.

Traditionally, there has been a contract of dividing responsibility between the state and the teaching profession, explained above as licensing. At the same time, there are different ways to develop the local curriculum, based on how the national curriculum is designed (Mølstad, 2015b). One approach is aligned with the licensing tradition; a teacher's work comprises activities that develop the national curriculum, and curriculum work presupposes that local actors possess adequate professional and curriculum language and models (Dale, Engelsen, & Karseth, 2011). However, local curriculum development can also concern determining the 'correct' and 'evidence-based' understanding of the prescribed curriculum. Such an emphasis has a stronger focus on delivery (Priestley & Biesta, 2013) than development of the national curriculum, and it is more aligned with the tradition of product control. However, these are not mutually exclusive; this approach could be a mix of curriculum traditions that implies 'delivering through developing'. This perspective is helpful for understanding the expectations of the emerging accountability policies in Norway, where the outcome dimension of the curriculum has been strengthened through new assessment policies, while teacher autonomy to implement the curriculum is also emphasised (Skedsmo & Mausethagen, 2015).

This article argues that moving beyond dichotomies is important for revealing issues related to curriculum control and teacher autonomy. A comprehensive understanding of this multidimensionality of teacher autonomy is essential to illuminate the dynamics between self-governance based on professional knowledge and ethics and the government's desire to strengthen its control over teachers' work. With the implementation of a more product-oriented curriculum, how responsibility is

distributed to the local level also seems pertinent when investigating (changes in) teacher autonomy.

### Methods and data sources

To gain more knowledge about teacher autonomy in the context of educational reform in Norway, this study analysed interviews with actors at different institutional levels: the classroom (teachers), the school (principals), the municipality (the superintendent) and the national level (the Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training and the Norwegian Ministry of Education). The data came from two different data sets (Mausethagen, 2013c; Mølstad, 2015a), where issues of curriculum control and autonomy were explored. One data set delved into the classroom, school and municipality levels, while the other covered the national level. We recognised the potential in these two data sets because of their overlapping topics and reanalysed the data so that it was possible to explore them together. Then both data sets were analysed by both authors in collaboration.

Both individual and group interviews were carried out (see the Appendix for an overview of the informants and types of interviews). Four group interviews that included 22 teachers from three schools (two primary schools and one secondary school) were conducted in 2011, together with individual interviews with the principals from these three schools and the superintendent in the municipality. The municipality could be described as a typical Norwegian municipality in terms of the number of its inhabitants and their socioeconomic backgrounds and its concern for school development. The principals and the superintendent had taken courses towards a master's degree in school leadership, and the municipality had initiated various professional development projects in which all the schools and teachers could participate. The three schools were selected since the superintendent described them as being in the forefront in the municipality in the area of assessment. The interview questions addressed broader aspects of the teachers' work and their views on it and the teaching profession, focusing on new expectations following the latest reform (LK06). Additionally, the findings from a survey<sup>1</sup> conducted in 2008 at the Centre for the Study of Professions (Oslo and Akershus University College) were used to inform a specific question asked in the interviews with the teachers, principals and superintendent. In the survey, the teachers reported their desire for both a high degree of autonomy in their work and more external control although it restricted their perceived autonomy (Mausethagen & Mølstad, 2014; Granlund et al., 2011). The interviewees were asked to comment on this finding, giving impetus to their answers and longer discussions that were particularly important for the analysis of this study.

<sup>1</sup>A total of 2205 teachers from 111 schools participated in this survey. The quantitative analyses of these data were presented in Granlund, Mausethagen & Munthe (2011) and Mausethagen & Mølstad (2014).

At the national level, five educational administrators were interviewed in 2013. One interview with two participants was conducted at the Ministry of Education and Research, while another interview with three participants was held at the Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training. The directorate is the executive agency of the Ministry of Education and Research. To conduct purposeful sampling, selection criteria for the participants (Bryman, 2012) were established. For example, they had to be experts with extensive knowledge in curriculum governance (Meuser & Nagel, 2009). To find these key participants, the relevant administrative leaders of the units working on the national-level curriculum were contacted and asked to identify individuals who had extensive knowledge of and experience with curriculum development at the national level. The interview questions focused on issues of governance through the curriculum and policymaking processes related to the recent reforms.

All interviews were audio-taped, transcribed and read several times. The transcripts were then analysed in several steps by using a content analysis approach. Content analysis categories often derive from areas of interest (Cohen, Manion, Morrison, & Bell, 2011), yet we conducted a conventional content analysis where categories were derived from the text (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In line with this study's focus, certain sections of the interviews were determined to be of specific interest for the analysis process. The following steps were followed to analyse and code the data, combine the codes into broader themes and make comparisons across the data (Creswell, 2007). First, a thematic analysis of the interviews with the same 'group' of actors (e.g., teachers, principals or educational administrators) and the ways that the interviews explicitly or implicitly addressed issues of teacher autonomy was conducted. Second, these data were coded across the actors, and common themes were identified. Third, similarities and differences among these themes, as well as how the actors dealt with the themes, were analysed (Creswell, 2007). A part of this analysis process included identifying instances where specific views either supported or contradicted one another. These contradictions often followed from the various perspectives present in the data and thus represented a kind of 'communication' across the institutional levels.

The analysis and interpretations of the findings were discussed with participants and other researchers as a type of communicative validity. Although the findings are not statistically generalisable, they can be considered analytically generalisable. Researcher-based analytical generalisations are made possible by ensuring transparency in the analysis and theoretical interpretations, while reader-based generalisations can be made when judging how the findings can be transferred to similar contexts (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). It can also be assumed that differences among Norwegian municipalities are not very

dramatic since all schools in Norway use the same national curriculum, abide by the same laws and regulations and are all mandated to participate in national tests and evaluations. Additionally, teacher education is guided by national frameworks, and several professional development programmes have been introduced and nationalised following the Knowledge Promotion Reform. However, quality assurance systems in Norwegian municipalities can differ quite substantially, suggesting the possibility of differences in local actors' beliefs regarding teacher autonomy.

## Findings

This section presents prominent issues related to teacher autonomy and curriculum control that were addressed by actors at the different institutional levels. These issues included protecting the more traditional style of autonomy (as pedagogical freedom and absence of control), questioning the new expectations regarding teacher autonomy (as the will and capacity to justify practices) and attempting at the local level to manage issues related to teacher autonomy within the context of accountability and local responsibility for development work and outcomes (autonomy as a local responsibility).

### *Autonomy as pedagogical freedom and absence of control*

A prominent idea of autonomy identified in the data was that of protecting the more traditional style of autonomy, which we describe as pedagogical freedom and absence of control. This study's participants all agreed that the freedom to choose teaching methods was highly important in allowing teachers to do their jobs. Protecting this freedom was perceived as desirable and valuable across all institutional levels, yet it was articulated in different ways. The local level first and foremost addressed individual autonomy, while the national level was concerned with how autonomy was also a collective responsibility for the profession.

In the four group interviews, the teachers were asked for their opinions regarding the survey's findings about teachers' desire for both freedom and a high degree of control over their work. The teachers in all four groups immediately began to discuss aspects of the curriculum. In one of the focus groups, the conversation started as follows:

Hans: It is particularly important to have freedom to choose methods. We are different people, and we know that we teach content in different ways and what we are best at. So freedom to choose methods is the most important. That it is relatively clear what kind of content we should teach, that is a different matter. That is something that I consider a straightforward limitation. We have to decide ourselves what to emphasise.

Interviewer: So in terms of content, that could largely be decided upon?

Hans: Yes, content specific, it can very well be decided by others. But I think it is important that there is a certain extent of freedom in terms of methods. Because if the methods are 'strung down our heads', then you experience stress and feel that you are being overridden.

The same response pattern repeated itself in the other three group interviews with teachers; in response to the survey question, the teachers primarily discussed the relationship between the Didaktik categories of methods and content. In short, the teachers commented, 'Steer us on the content but not on the methods'. Hence, the teachers also communicated their desire that the content of their lessons be prescribed and decided on in the curriculum.

The principals and the superintendent largely agreed on this construct of autonomy – that the teachers should have a high degree of freedom and individual autonomy in terms of choosing how to work in the classrooms. However, they also stated that this would go hand in hand with the need for control and leadership, as demonstrated by the following excerpt from a principal interview:

[. . .] yes, freedom, or I would rather say that it has to do with delegation of responsibility. Teachers can experience it as freedom to do their jobs, or I would rather say that it is delegation of responsibility, that they are given a responsibility – this is what you are going to do. And yes, they are professional teachers who know their jobs, and they must have this responsibility. If not, we are not utilising their knowledge. But you also let go of some control, that is, some school leaders would say that you are losing control. But I find that the risk is worth taking.

The principals found the issue of what teachers wanted control over to be somewhat confusing, yet they agreed that teachers needed to be in control over their pedagogical choices in the classroom. In other words, both teachers and principals agreed that teachers, to a limited extent, needed support and common guidelines when choosing teaching methods. As such, the principals situated the teachers in line with the licensing tradition, delegating this responsibility to teachers according to their knowledge of Didaktik. However, the principals also argued that it was important to discuss methods and that this should, to a greater extent, be a collective responsibility within the schools. However, this was an area where they would tread carefully, and they acknowledged that it was the teachers' responsibility.

The educational administrators were also concerned with the construct of freedom to choose methods and how this had changed from the previous curriculum (L 97), which was more content oriented. For example,

the informants from the Ministry of Education described the main ideas behind LK06 as follows:

It is a part of the original idea that the state is concerned with aims that should be reached, but it is the local level that best knows how to do it and has better conditions for understanding how to enact the aims. That is why you should not steer the actual implementation.

Moreover, the informants from the Directorate of Education and Training were quite clear about the reform's intentions and the division of responsibility among the state and the local actors, emphasising the teaching profession:

I1: We think that the curriculum is developed in such a way that it gives superior aims from the state's side. And then it is a local responsibility to enact the curriculum and make choices in terms of content and methods [...]; they must be operationalised locally.

I2: So this means a longer line in terms of, should we say, a complication that makes school owners accountable, but also as a way of professionalising teachers.

I3: There is an intention here [of the reform] to increase the local leeway and the professional autonomy [...]. So the professional autonomy is important, and the local leeway is strong; this is a central intention [of the reform].

The emphasis on the local operationalisation of the curriculum and protection of 'pedagogical freedom' is related to the professionalisation of teachers by delegating the responsibility of curriculum implementation to the teaching profession. Examining these statements regarding the importance of teacher autonomy and its discursive relationship with the professionalisation of teachers shows them as somewhat contradictory. However, despite the relatively strong agreement on the construct of pedagogical freedom, the difference here involves issues of individual versus collective autonomy. While the local actors are more concerned with their individual freedom and the absence of control over their daily teaching, the informants at the national level address this issue more in a collective sense – this is a responsibility that the teaching profession should take – yet they do not relate it to an absence of control. Rather, the control over outcomes is strengthened in LK06. Thus, although all actors are concerned with the importance of protecting the teachers' pedagogical freedom, there is a tension around the issue of control that must also be viewed in relation to how the profession is expected to take responsibility for its development in line with the curriculum developments.

### *Autonomy as the will and capacity to justify practices*

Another prominent issue in the data was that of questioning new expectations regarding teacher autonomy and

which we describe as having to do with the will and capacity to justify practices. The topic of assessment criteria represents such a new aspect of the curriculum for the teachers and illuminates a case where autonomy in different ways is put into question. This case also sheds light on internal versus external control over assessment, a central aspect of teaching. Assessment criteria are descriptions of student achievement that are used to analyse and divide competence aims in the curriculum, introduced as being part of the local curriculum development in LK06. The study participants were all concerned with this issue of assessment criteria but disagreed on who should assume this responsibility. Many teachers brought up the issue of assessment criteria and at what level these should be created and decided on, which could serve as a case to illuminate the issue of teacher autonomy. Should the assessment criteria be created by the individual teachers, by the school or within the municipality, or should they be decided on by the Directorate of Education and Training and thus be the same for the whole country? All but one teacher who discussed this topic stated that they wanted the assessment criteria to be given to them by the directorate. For example, one teacher said:

It would have been great if we had had a common set of assessment criteria so that you could have gone straight in [...]. If each municipality, and not to talk about each school, will have different criteria or various measures of them, that [will] certainly [be] strange.

The other teachers expressed similar concerns; for example, some thought that the assessment policies were not specific enough. The teachers emphasised three main reasons for centrally developed assessment criteria: (1) they should be the same for all students (thus enabling a greater degree of justice), (2) it was time-consuming for the teachers to develop them, and (3) the teachers lacked the needed competence. The teachers questioned why the creation of assessment criteria was part of their main responsibilities although they regarded assessment in general as an integrated, sustainable part of teaching (by making statements such as 'but we have always assessed [...]'). Thus, most of the teachers who participated in this study did not consider assessment criteria a part of their professional responsibility and within their area of self-governance.

The principals, superintendent and educational administrators also brought up the issue of assessment criteria as an especially sensitive matter. Two principals directly cited this issue as an example of the relationship between control and support, on one hand, and teacher autonomy, on the other.

P1: Many or very many teachers want clear instructions in terms of assessment, and they need help with assessments and to understand the circular letter, so they ask for help.

P2: I see it when it comes to the issue of assessment criteria. Because in a way, they want clearer signals as they are easier to relate to.

However, the principals tended to agree with the teachers regarding assessment criteria creation:

To develop those criteria is stupendous work, and we have experience that it takes a lot of time. So they must be developed more centrally, yes. And I think that the directorate must be involved. But it is, of course, our job to teach the teachers how to use it. [...] But we must get something that is more streamlined; I hope so. [...] We are not trained to do it, but we will use it on the students, and we must be able to use it. But to make the tool is not our job, I think.

The participants from the Ministry of Education were also concerned about the issue of assessment criteria and at what level they should be created. They referred to discussions around this issue and concluded:

What we saw was that the assessment criteria were actually a new curriculum. And we said that we [did] not dare to decide this nationally. [...] That [was] a deliberate choice from our side.

In this discussion regarding the assessment criteria, the educational administrators also referred to experiences in Finland and Sweden, where the criteria were decided nationally. The main reason for their stance was that they did not want the criteria to become a 'second' curriculum, which would be linked to the issue of professional discretion. They mentioned that it was 'not any kind of discretion but professional discretion that [was] being used in the interpretation of the curriculum', communicating a quite strong degree of trust in the teaching profession and the local level in this specific case.

A similar perception was prominent among the Directorate of Education participants, highlighting the importance of teacher autonomy and teachers' use of discretion and relating these to the reform's intentions, that is, providing more freedom to the teachers while controlling the outcomes of the curriculum. Therefore, the authorities at the national level considered assessment criteria a part of the teachers' professional self-governance, for which they should take responsibility – supported and managed by the municipalities. However, the teachers who participated in this study did not regard the matter as an internal responsibility. As such, this aspect of autonomy involved a tension with internal control, where the teachers' reluctance to take on responsibility could lead to an increase in external control.

### *Autonomy as a local responsibility*

A third issue has to do with attempts at the local level to manage issues related to teacher autonomy within the context of accountability and local responsibility for

development work and outcomes (autonomy as a local responsibility). The actors brought up the municipalities' role several times, primarily when they were discussing ways to solve some of the perceived dilemmas in teacher autonomy related to the shifts in curriculum control, thus shedding light on the tension between national and local governing. This situation illuminates how municipalities and schools currently become important actors for managing teacher autonomy. The superintendent was explicitly concerned with these dilemmas and how to solve them. Although the teachers were asking for more guidance and action (in relation to the assessment criteria), this request was more often directed towards the state rather than the municipality. On the contrary, the municipality was often viewed as interfering with teacher autonomy despite the teachers' varying opinions on this issue. They were primarily sceptical about development initiatives that they perceived as restricting their autonomy in the classroom. They found the initiatives that provided clear guidance on methods to be used as problematic (yet examples of such initiatives were unclear) although some teachers also described the importance of their developing similar practices in the classrooms.

Randi: It is the freedom to choose methods that is so important, really, that we must do what we are best at and what works for us. And now, the present curriculum gives us this freedom. But then, when we get orders from our own administration and from municipal sources [...]. And then the freedom to choose methods is dead in practice. It's just someone else that decides. So freedom to choose methods is for the principal and superintendent, we might say, instead of the ones [who] teach.

The superintendent gave an example of how the municipality-level authorities had taken on their new responsibilities by initiating the development of common guidelines in reading instruction:

We are about to implement a new plan where we are actually saying, 'Now we are all going to do it this way', but at the same time, there is a certain freedom there. But we force them [the teachers] into a smaller path, at least [rather] than it being full freedom. Because someone wants to do as they wish or as they have always done it. But at the same time, you have got the cry for 'yes, but then you have to decide' [referring to the teachers]. So that fluctuation related to the assessment criteria, for example, has been like this, 'This must come from the directorate, from the ministry'. Okay, when it doesn't come from them, then we have to decide. Okay, now we have decided, but we do not want to do it like this way after all. [referring to the teachers]

The superintendent said that this was the first time that they had this concrete approach in terms of methods even though they did not provide 'doing receipts'

through the reading plan. This was an example of attempts to take on responsibility that had been assigned to the local level yet where the teachers were protecting their autonomy in its more traditional sense. It also illustrated how the superintendent was in a somewhat difficult position in having to negotiate between the new expectations of control and development and being 'loyal' to the profession.

On the other hand, the Ministry of Education representatives were concerned with the importance of giving ownership to the municipalities in this kind of development work:

The challenge is, for example, to formulate the competence aims in ways so that they cannot be understood directly, but that they must be interpreted, and they must enhance their discretion [at the] local level. Through research, some believe that the more precise, the better, but if it becomes too precise, then we are restricting the autonomy [at] the local level. [...] But to find the right balance for us, that is a challenge.

There was a relatively strong belief among the study participants regarding how teachers' professional knowledge would increase and school development processes would take place through the initiatives that had been implemented. This can be regarded as being in line with the tradition of curriculum as product control yet where the new roles of the state and the municipality are negotiated with process control. Thus, these developments also relate to the challenges of balancing national steering and control with protecting local autonomy. Such challenges of the national-level experience must be related to what appears as an increasingly contested 'contract' between the state and the teaching profession.

## Discussion

This article has addressed how recent changes in curriculum control in Norway are perceived at different institutional levels and how the emerging accountability policies challenge and alter ideas of teacher autonomy. However, these ideas are contested, depending on one's perspective, as a central question for the study participants refers to what types and degrees of autonomy the different institutional levels should have. This section pays specific attention to three dimensions of autonomy that have been identified through the study's analysis – pedagogical freedom and absence of control, the will and capacity to justify practices, and a local responsibility – to provide an understanding of how ideas about teacher autonomy are altered as the curriculum and curriculum control change. The different ideas of autonomy are interrelated and must be viewed in relation to one another to provide a more comprehensive understanding of teacher autonomy, following the implementation of an outcome-based curriculum.

Furthermore, we argue that these ideas of teacher autonomy address the relationship between autonomy and managerial accountability, which can be discussed along the following dimensions: individual versus collective autonomy, internal versus external control, and national versus local governance. Thus, this section also discusses how traditional ideas of teacher autonomy are challenged by the new responsibilities assigned to municipalities, principals and teachers regarding outcomes and development that interfere with the contract and division of responsibility that have historically existed between the state and the teachers.

The first dimension, autonomy as pedagogical freedom and absence of control, is closely related to the licensing tradition, where the state defines and controls the aims of education, while the teachers control the methods. This more traditional view of teacher autonomy emphasises a limited use of prescriptions for practice and highlights the teachers' 'pedagogical freedom'. It includes a relatively high degree of agreement among the various actors that teachers should have the freedom and thus the responsibility to implement the curriculum, based on their professional knowledge. However, this more traditional idea of teacher autonomy has been put under pressure with the shifts in curriculum control. On one side, it can be argued that this is not really a contested idea in the Norwegian context, and this agreement among the different actors can be interpreted within the licensing tradition. On the other side, while the teachers are mainly concerned with their individual autonomy and the importance of remaining in control of classroom practice, the national-level authorities address this issue primarily as a collective responsibility of the teaching profession. Although all actors build their arguments around *Didaktik* as the 'core of professionalism' (Hopmann, 2003), this is also contested by the national-level authorities who also emphasise the need for steering and control of professional practice. As such, it can be argued that the developments in Norway are turning towards an emphasis on delivering the curriculum rather than developing it (Mølsted, 2015b; Priestley & Biesta, 2013), arguably narrowing teachers' classroom autonomy based on *Didaktik*. However, these developments should be discussed in relation to how practitioners in the profession show the will and capacity to justify and develop their core practices.

The second dimension of teacher autonomy, the will and capacity for such self-governance, becomes prominent when teachers' ability to take responsibility for their knowledge base and performance is questioned through policymakers' quest to increasingly control the outcomes of education in order to raise 'quality' and 'efficiency' (Aasen, Prøitz, & Sandberg, 2013). However, this development relates to the idea of autonomy as 'pedagogical freedom', as it consequently questions the teachers' will

and capacity to self-govern and requires them to justify their actions based on their professional knowledge (Molander, Grimen, & Eriksen, 2012). As such, this involves questions of internal or external control of teachers' work; if the profession does not convince them that they have sufficient internal control or 'keep order in [their] own house', external control will usually increase (Molander & Terum, 2008). This question of internal and external control becomes particularly evident with the introduction of the new assessment policies, which appear to be an element of the new curriculum for which the participating teachers are reluctant to take responsibility. This stance is partly based on their perceived lack of knowledge regarding the development of assessments, as it is a new form of assessment that the teachers are not used to. Moreover, developments within the field of assessment that have followed LK06 and the NQAS are viewed as policy tools in addition to assessment tools (Mausethagen, 2013a; Welner, 2013). Even though the profession should provide good reasons that can be evaluated, accepted or rejected by others, it can be argued that from the teachers' side, there is a crucial difference between reporting on actions, on one hand, and justifying judgements, decisions and actions, on the other hand (Mausethagen, 2013a; Molander et al., 2012). When the capacity to take on responsibility in the field of assessment is questioned by other actors, it seems to result in an increase in local and central steering and control. Somewhat paradoxically, the teachers also ask for it. This development also sheds light on how maintaining autonomy can be demanding, as it expects one to both act and justify one's practices. This idea of autonomy thereby raises questions of how teachers approach new expectations related to their work, whether they are in a position to demand autonomy in the more traditional sense, and how practising autonomy can be challenging for teachers, with the changing expectations regarding their knowledge base and outcomes.

The third idea of teacher autonomy as a local responsibility focuses on what kind of autonomy should be afforded to the local level and how it should be managed. National versus local governing is thus a central dimension. This idea of autonomy also highlights how changes in curriculum control interfere with the historical contract between the state and the teachers although the principle of local autonomy has been regarded as a vital part of the Norwegian political system over time (Aasen et al., 2013). The current shift towards giving municipalities increased responsibilities, as well as the emphasis on documenting their successful fulfilment of these responsibilities, thus represents more recent ideas about autonomy – in addition to reinforcing this local responsibility for governance and development. However, this change is contested by both teachers and educational administrators, as the introduction of governing instruments can be

interpreted as a response to the local actors' reluctance to act on the new reform, hence also signalling a diminishing trust in the teaching profession (Mølstad & Hansén, 2013). For example, when the teachers did not acknowledge their capacity and responsibility to fill the 'empty space' that was created with the introduction of the curriculum, the state<sup>2</sup> moved in and reduced aspects of teacher autonomy. It can also be argued that the control dimension of the current reform is causing local governing to be contested. Hence, it can be said that the teaching profession regards these new local responsibilities as partly being beyond the teachers' will and capacity for self-governance, consequently altering the local responsibilities for control and development.

These three ideas of teacher autonomy are important for understanding what is at stake for the different actors in their quest to improve the quality of the educational system. Rather than focusing on dichotomies around autonomy, these ideas point to the dynamics between self-governance based on professional knowledge and ethics and the government's desire to strengthen its control over teachers' work. However, despite the curriculum's structure that somewhat weakens the contract between the state and the teachers, the teachers themselves may also have contributed to this diminished relationship through their emphasis on the construct of 'freedom of method'. To a certain extent, teachers have been positioned and have positioned themselves as curriculum deliverers rather than developers. Although the teachers in this study strongly focus on maintaining control over their classrooms, they seem to partly accept their position as deliverers of prescribed content. Arguably, this emphasis on protecting 'pedagogical freedom' represents the more traditional notion of autonomy as established through the system of process control (Hopmann, 2003). However, if and when teachers' knowledge of Didaktik is questioned, this can become a somewhat troublesome position for the profession because it can lead to more external control. On one hand, the teachers' responses can be considered valid in terms of the importance to protect 'what is left' when their autonomy is under pressure from the emphasis on assessment, outcomes and accountability. On the other hand, it needs to be determined whether this strong focus on protecting individual autonomy can also contribute to diminishing autonomy at a more collective level. By partially situating themselves as curriculum deliverers, teachers might be contributing to external actors increasingly defining standards for work and professionalism, which has taken place in England and Australia, for example (Goepel, 2012; Mulcahy, 2011). If such standards were introduced in the Norwegian context, it would

<sup>2</sup>This move away from decentralisation towards increased centralisation should also be viewed in the context of the change in government in 2005, when a red-green coalition government took power (Labour, Socialist Left and Centre Parties).

imply a quite distinct break from the licensing tradition and differentiation processes around the distribution of responsibility.

Furthermore, the different ideas of autonomy suggest that the licensing contract is still a prominent frame of reference for the teaching profession, whereas the municipalities' new role appears to be more contested. Through these changes in curriculum control, the relationship between the state and the teaching profession has been weakened; thus, the licensing 'contract' has also been undermined. Therefore, a relevant question to ask is what position the teacher union takes on issues of teacher autonomy. The teachers in this study collectively acknowledge that they should become more proactive in retaining their autonomy, such as by highlighting research-based knowledge and professional ethics (Mausethagen & Granlund, 2012; Nerland & Karseth, 2013). However, as addressed in public discussions, the union has been reluctant to discuss the methods that teachers use in classrooms or to define professional standards that interfere with the 'pedagogical freedom' of teachers. This can be viewed as a viable position since there are many reasons why this 'freedom' is necessary and particularly important to enable teachers to maintain control when external control increases. Nonetheless, it can also be questioned whether the protection of teachers' classroom autonomy can lead to a reduction of collective autonomy in the sense of the profession's seeming involvement in discussions over standards, assessment and feedback loops, to a limited extent. A possible interpretation is that the teaching profession partly situates these changes in the curriculum within the logic of external, managerial accountability rather than representing pedagogical tools. By doing so, the profession also partly situates these new developments outside their area of self-governance.

Finally, it can be asked whether protecting teachers' autonomy in a more traditional sense is a sufficient strategy for the profession to take on today's knowledge societies. New sources of knowledge and data (Coburn & Turner, 2011) based on research and student testing become available, and arguably, there is a need to build collective knowledge practices within teaching that also include such sources of knowledge, as well as knowledge about how these can be used for organisational learning. To a limited extent, the emphasis on knowledge sharing within organisations has been discussed in the literature on teacher autonomy, licensing and Didaktik, and it should be taken into account when studying shifts in curriculum control and ideas of teacher autonomy. Moreover, as it is unrealistic to assume that teachers can independently develop and safeguard their knowledge base (Hermansen, 2014), collegiality and differentiation of responsibilities within schools should be addressed when discussing teachers' capacity for self-governance in the current, complex work context.

## Conclusion

This article has analysed and discussed how the introduction of a more product-oriented curriculum has challenged and altered ideas of teacher autonomy. As such, the study has also contributed to the knowledge about ways in which the concepts of autonomy and accountability relate to each other in the context where the outcomes of education have been controlled to a limited extent, and the teaching profession has enjoyed a relatively high degree of classroom autonomy. Attending to the interrelatedness among ideas of teacher autonomy, as well as the relationship between autonomy and accountability (through dimensions such as individual versus collective autonomy, internal versus external control and national versus local governing), can provide a more comprehensive understanding of teacher autonomy. In this regard, dichotomous conceptions of autonomy are insufficient to grasp the complexity of recent educational reforms.

To a certain extent, there is a continuation in the historic views on teacher autonomy in terms of the division of responsibility between the state and the profession regarding teachers' control over their classrooms. However, this is also a question of perspective, and the introduction of an outcome-based curriculum, combined with an increased emphasis on local responsibilities for outcomes and development, somewhat conflicts with this 'contract'. It is also reasonable to ask whether the teaching profession might be risking a loss of autonomy through its attempt to protect the more traditional approach, particularly through the construct of 'pedagogical freedom'. Addressing autonomy as an issue of the will and capacity for self-governance and how this relates to both the more traditional notion of autonomy (understood as pedagogical freedom and absence of control) and the recent emphasis on local responsibilities for outcomes, poses a challenge for teachers to involve in both individually and collectively.

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## Appendix

### Overview of informants and interviews

| Informant source  | Type and number of interviews               | Number of informants |
|---|---|----------------------|
| National level, the Norwegian Ministry of Education                 | One group interview                         | 2                    |
| National level, the Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training | One group interview                         | 3                    |
| Municipality level, superintendent                                  | One interview                               | 1                    |
| School level, principals  | Three individual interviews (three schools) | 3                    |
| Classroom level, teachers   | Four group interviews (three schools)       | 22                   |