

# Teacher autonomy and teacher agency: a comparative study in Brazilian and Norwegian lower secondary education

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Teacher autonomy and teacher agency are positively related to teachers' motivation and engagement in teaching. This paper combines the concepts of teacher autonomy and teacher agency to study how Brazilian and Norwegian lower secondary teachers respond to an accountability system marked by a centralised outcomes-based curriculum and testing. Teacher autonomy concerns the relations between teachers' scope of action and the state's role in providing resources and regulations that extend or constrain this scope of action. Teacher agency refers to teachers' professional action based on their perceptions and experiences of their scope of action as they navigate accountability to respond to educational dilemmas at hand. The findings show that teachers navigate policies in a variety of forms to fit their needs and beliefs and those of their students. Brazilian teachers have a constrained scope of action and possibilities for achieving agency in comparison with their Norwegian counterparts. Norwegian teachers also have their individual autonomy constrained by extended state control over the curriculum and testing. However, the practice of collective work opens up for the exercise of agency because of the possibility of reflection and collective construction of teaching plans and strategies that frame and legitimise teaching work.

**Keywords:** teacher autonomy; teacher agency; accountability; comparative research; teachers' perceptions

## Introduction

While researchers (e.g. Wermke & Höstfält, 2014; Priestley *et al.*, 2015) use teacher autonomy and teacher agency to explore teachers' work, they do not often combine these concepts. This paper combines the concepts of teacher autonomy and teacher agency to explore teachers' perceptions and actions in response to accountability in education across different cultural settings, specifically Brazil and Norway. Very few studies have combined these two concepts, especially from a comparative perspective (Erss, 2018). The goal is to explore established theory on teacher autonomy and teacher agency, using empirical data gathered in a comparative study between one European and one Latin American country.

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Teacher autonomy is a key aspect of the teaching profession (Wermke & Höstfält, 2014) that is positively related to perceived self-efficacy, job satisfaction and positive work climate (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2007; Wermke *et al.*, 2019). These factors are crucial to teachers' motivation and commitment to providing effective learning opportunities for students (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2007). The same can be said for teacher agency (Priestley *et al.*, 2012, 2015; Erss, 2018). Employing a qualitative approach, we conducted semi-structured interviews with teachers to gather their personal understandings of their experiences and relationships in classrooms and schools to observe how they respond to accountability across different cultural settings. The research questions are: How can Brazilian and Norwegian teachers' autonomy be interpreted with respect to nation-specific characteristics of the respective school settings in an accountability system? What might teacher autonomy mean for Brazilian and Norwegian teachers' agency in an age of accountability?

Accountability in education is a complex and dynamic system that comprises modes of disclosing and assessing the work of teachers through the production and use of data from large-scale studies, league tables and monitoring systems such as formal appraisals, report writing and direct observation of classroom teaching (Ball, 2003; Maroy, 2008; Ozga, 2009). At the international level, the production and use of data, such as the publication of league tables of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), have triggered countries to implement educational reforms with increasing accountability (Steiner-Khamsi, 2003; Grek, 2009). These actions give rise to complicated issues of governance, control and professional practice of teachers in national and local contexts (Ball, 2003; Maroy, 2008; Ozga, 2009) that affect teacher autonomy and teacher agency in schools.

Researchers have addressed the issue of accountability as a global phenomenon in different ways. According to world culture theory, globalisation has increased standardisation in educational arrangements, programs and policies without regard to national contexts and history (Dale, 2000). As such, accountability may be a manifestation of the broad culture in which all countries are immersed because they have similar idealised models of society around which education and curricula are built (McEneaney & Meyer, 2000). In contrast, the culturalist theory attempts to 'point to the importance and perseverance of local contexts, showing how world culture may be resisted or processed, adapted and appropriated to local conditions, leading to hybridisations and new local particularities' (Waldow, 2012, p. 413). The culturalists have argued that the mechanisms through which globalisation affects national policy vary, producing different types of responses from national governments. In this study, we align with the culturalist position, seeking to apply alternative ways to explore how the state regulates and governs teachers through more sensitive, nuanced and contextual descriptions of the restructuring of teacher autonomy, as suggested by Klette (2002), hence, lifting up the complexity of autonomy and agency of teachers. This study addresses the call by Priestley *et al.* (2012) for more theorising of teachers' agency to understand the dynamic processes that teachers navigate within educational settings, including different contexts as Brazil and Norway.

## Brazilian and Norwegian education contexts

In both Brazil and Norway, the national government centralises curriculum development and testing. Following the international education scenario, Brazil adopted an outcomes-based curriculum in the early 2000s and national testing in 2005 (Barreto, 2012; Villani & Oliveira, 2018). Norway introduced national testing in 2004 and an outcomes-based curriculum in 2006 in response to increased criticism after the publication of the first PISA study, in which the country scored barely above the average (Karseth & Sivesind, 2011; Imsen & Volckman, 2014; Mausethagen & Mølsted, 2015).

Despite these similarities, Brazil and Norway have very different national contexts. Norway has historically had low class, gender and income differences along with few actors in private education. The idea of social integration and egalitarianism through an equal right to education is persistent in the country (Imsen & Volckman, 2014). Conversely, Brazil has historically experienced high economic and educational inequalities. The Brazilian middle class typically does not support decisions to increase taxes or implement a social redistribution system. In addition, since 1990s, the Brazilian government has adopted open market and privatisation measures in education (Barreto, 2012; Villani & Oliveira, 2018), increasing the participation of private actors and introducing measures such as target setting with bonus payments for schools that achieve performance targets. Given these differences, it is relevant to study how a centralised outcomes-based curriculum and testing have affected teacher autonomy and teacher agency in these two countries.

## Theory and previous research

### *The multidimensionality of teacher autonomy*

Teacher autonomy is a multidimensional concept that can be studied by examining who makes the decisions regarding teachers' work and who controls the outcomes of the decisions made. Specifically, researchers can examine whether teachers or other actors within the school (internal control) or outside the school (external control) make decisions (Mausethagen & Mølsted, 2015). Wermke *et al.* (2019) explained that the decisions made by teachers or other actors regarding teaching work can relate to different domains within the school setting. These domains are educational, referring to lesson planning, instruction and assessment; social, related to the development of discipline policies, tracking of students and treatment of students with special needs; developmental, regarding plans of action and decisions related to professional development of school staff; and administrative, referring to decisions concerning timetabling and use of resources (Wermke *et al.*, 2019).

In addition to being a multidimensional concept, teacher autonomy is a complex and relational phenomenon, which means that the autonomy of one individual and/or group affects the autonomy of others (Bergh, 2015; Frostenson, 2015). The context of marketisation of the school system in Sweden illuminates how the economic discourse framed by national and local groups has affected teacher autonomy and practices at different levels. For example, decreased professional autonomy can foster collegial autonomy, while decreasing individual autonomy at the level of practice (Frostenson,

2015). However, depending on the domain of decision making, individual autonomy may coexist with collegial autonomy (Frostenson, 2015). According to Frostenson (2015, p. 22), general professional autonomy of the teaching profession consists of teachers acting as a professional group or organisation to decide on the framing of their work through, for example, influencing the general 'organisation of the school system, legislation, entry requirements, teacher education, curricula, procedures, and ideologies of control'. Frostenson (2015, pp. 23–24) defined collegial professional autonomy in the teaching profession as 'teachers' collective freedom to influence and decide on practice at local level' and individual autonomy as 'the individual's opportunity to influence the contents, frames and controls of the teaching practice'.

Cribb and Gewirtz (2007) combined the professional and collegial dimensions in the concept 'collective teacher autonomy', referring to teachers acting in groups within schools or politically through trade union activity or lobbying at the national policy level. Wermke and Forsberg (2017, p. 157) used the term 'service autonomy' to refer to the concept of individual autonomy and the term 'institutional autonomy' to refer to the concept of general professional autonomy of the teaching profession.

From a governance perspective, teacher autonomy is seen in relation to how the state regulates and controls education (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2007; Wermke & Höstfält, 2014). The state can concentrate the instruments of governance at the national level or decentralise them to municipal and school levels. Examining which tasks the state assigns to municipal and school levels is crucial to understanding the effects of the redistribution of responsibilities on the autonomy of individual teachers and teachers collectively. For example, in Norway, the national government gave increased responsibilities to municipalities and principals in terms of school development and student outcomes that intensified accountability (e.g. requirements of report writing), which challenged traditional interpretations of teacher autonomy as pedagogical freedom and lack of control (Mausethagen & Mølstad, 2015).

### *Teacher autonomy and teacher agency*

Researchers have defined teacher autonomy as the capacity of teachers to make key decisions that affect the content and conditions of their work within a frame of regulations and resources provided by the state (Wermke & Höstfält, 2014; Frostenson, 2015; Mausethagen & Mølstad, 2015; Wermke & Forsberg, 2017; Wermke *et al.*, 2019). Conversely, teacher agency seems to depend on the perceptions that teachers have of their scope of action (Erss, 2018). Teachers achieve agency through their judgments and actions, considering the social, cultural and material conditions in which they work (Priestley *et al.*, 2012, 2015; Biesta *et al.*, 2017).

Although some definitions of teacher autonomy and agency overlap, it is possible to argue that teacher autonomy emphasises teachers' capacity to make decisions on their own, individually or as a group, with varying degrees of external constraints (Wermke & Höstfält, 2014; Mausethagen & Mølstad, 2015; Wermke & Forsberg, 2017; Wermke *et al.*, 2019). Teacher autonomy also refers to the relationship between teachers and the state, that is, how the state regulates and governs education, thereby reducing or increasing teachers' room to make decisions and take action

(Cribb & Gewirtz, 2007; Wermke & Höstfält, 2014). In contrast, teacher agency focuses on the capacity for professional action given the resources and limitations of their working environment (Erss, 2018). Teacher agency pays particular attention to the day-to-day work in classrooms and schools, considering teachers' personal beliefs, values and attributes as well as the local and national characteristics of the school settings, in the sense that teachers shape and are shaped by their working conditions (Priestley *et al.*, 2012, 2015; Biesta *et al.*, 2017).

Therefore, teacher autonomy includes both teachers' capacity to decide the content and conditions of their work and their will and capacity for justifying and developing practices (Mausethagen & Mølstad, 2015). In this process, they must be able to critically reflect and find alternative courses of action, provided the social, cultural and material conditions of their working environment, thereby exercising agency (Priestley *et al.*, 2012, 2015; Biesta *et al.*, 2017).

#### *Teacher autonomy and teacher agency in relation to state control and regulations*

Researchers have also studied teacher autonomy in relation to regulations and resources provided by the state, which can empower (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2007; Smaller, 2015) or de-professionalise teachers (Ball, 2003, 2010). Cribb and Gewirtz (2007) showed that restricted teacher autonomy might empower teachers and enhance teacher agency because experienced teachers know that official rules, guidance and norms are important resources in framing and supporting decisions. In consonance with this argument, Mausethagen and Mølstad (2015) found that Norwegian teachers generally experience frameworks provided by the state as helpful. Wermke and Forsberg (2017) added that teachers in Sweden may see state frameworks as forms of complexity reduction that define particular standards guiding teachers' work but that do not necessarily define the teaching profession itself. Moreover, regulations are important to frame and support the teaching profession, for example, by protecting learners from harm through delimitations of what teachers are able to do and ensuring equal access to a decent standard of educational provision through definition of academic standards and introduction of accountability instruments (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2007).

However, the increase in accountability may also reduce teacher autonomy and teacher agency, leading to a culture of performativity, where tensions between professional commitments and beliefs and the imperative to meet performative requirements affect teachers' subjectivities, causing lack of creativity, professional integrity and fun in teaching and learning. Such changes occur in very different national contexts, as noted by Ball (2003, 2010) in England and Dias (2018) in Brazil.

One can argue that teacher agency relates to teachers' capacity to mediate policy through a process of iterative bending; hence, policy mutates from one setting to the next. As such, teacher agency illuminates how teachers make sense of policy and the varied factors that affect the process (Priestley *et al.*, 2012). Further, Priestley *et al.* (2012) have identified different responses of teachers to accountability. In our words, some teachers may 'play it safe' within the system, such as teaching to the test; in these situations, such an attitude inhibits agency. Other teachers may internalise the language of accountability and 'go with the flow'. When teachers react this way,

they use words such as ‘outcomes’ and ‘measurability’ instead of responding carefully to educational dilemmas. Still other teachers may use the logic of schooling in new situations, for example, using summative feedback for formative purposes. Smaller (2015) found that, despite—or even because of—new standards and tests, many teachers become more creative and skilled in their attempts to meet new demands. One can argue that this is a way of exercising agency. Mausethagen and Mølstad (2015) added that contradictions between policies and teachers’ values and knowledge sometimes resulted in teachers’ disengagement from local development initiatives in the Norwegian case. Priestley *et al.* (2012) explained that such resistance may also be a form of agency.

Altogether, these arguments can be seen as reasons for limiting teacher autonomy, but they can also be seen as reasons for limiting or extending state control. The relation between autonomy and control is not simple, and increasing control does not necessarily decrease autonomy or vice versa (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2007). Further, autonomy does not always correlate to agency. In this paper, we apply the different ways to see autonomy for analytical purposes in the findings and use perspectives on agency to illuminate the discussion.

## Methods

The research sites were three public schools in one municipality of São Paulo Federal State (Brazil), one school in one municipality of Oppland County (Norway) and one school in one municipality of Hedmark County (Norway), where we gained access. Moreover, we were concerned with exploring how such different countries, which are supposed to be unrelated, may show connections regarding teacher autonomy and teacher agency in an educational context marked by global ideas, such as the relevance of testing and accountability to improve the quality of education measured by student outcomes (Steiner-Khamsi, 2003; Grek, 2009).

The research population consisted of teachers working in lower secondary education. In Norway, lower secondary education is from grades 8 to 10, ages 13 to 15. Brazilian lower secondary education has a different organisation than the Norwegian. In Brazil, lower secondary education is from years 6 to 9, ages 11 to 14, under the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCE) of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO).

The sampling of participants was purposive and heterogeneous (Thomas, 2006; Schreier, 2018) because we selected teachers with different genders, ages, years of work experience and subjects. We used this approach to provide us with rich data that gave us a sense of the multifaceted complexity of the subject under examination (Given, 2008). Previously identified group members indicated additional members of the population to generate a sufficient number of cases for the analysis, as in the snowball sampling technique (Thomas, 2006; Schreier, 2018). The sample size was 20 (11 Brazilian and 9 Norwegian teachers).

The use of semi-structured interviews allowed us to get an in-depth understanding (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015) of teachers’ perceptions on their autonomy as well as possibilities and constraints for achieving agency. The topics covered by the interview

guide were teaching practices, teachers' perceived autonomy, teaching appraisal and feedback, teaching self-efficacy, job satisfaction and work climate and participation in professional development activities and professional organisations.

The method of analysis of the interview transcripts was qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Bowen, 2009). We adopted a directed approach to content analysis, which means that analysis started with a theory as guidance for initial codes or themes; as analysis proceeded, we revised and refined the initial codes and developed additional codes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Hsieh and Shannon (2005) explained that 'the main strength of a directed approach to content analysis is that existing theory can be supported and extended' (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1283). First, the analysis started with the initial themes of the interview guide. Then, we coded the interview transcripts using theoretical concepts that address the relation between autonomy and accountability, which are national versus local governance; internal versus external control; and individual, collective and professional autonomy (Mausethagen & Mølsted, 2015). We also analysed the transcripts in light of ideas related to teacher agency (Priestley *et al.*, 2012, 2015; Biesta *et al.*, 2017).

To promote research validity during the interview process, we adopted the use of descriptions phrased very similarly to the participants' accounts to confirm their interpretations related to teacher autonomy (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Johnson & Christensen, 2017). During the research process, we engaged in peer review (Johnson & Christensen, 2017) by discussing our actions and interpretations with other researchers familiar with but not directly involved with the research, which provided useful challenges and insights.

During data collection, we asked for the consent of the participants and explained the background and purpose of the study as well as what participation in the research implied. All the responses were treated confidentially, and individuals and schools cannot be identified by any means. Maintaining confidentiality and anonymity for the teachers is crucial to avoid harm, since divergent opinions and practices could result in negative consequences to them. For example, they could experience stigma or receive formal or informal sanctions if their responses or practices could be identified and were not part of the mainstream. In this regard, maintaining anonymity preserved teachers' integrity and allowed them to openly address their beliefs, values, experiences and relations to students, colleagues, principals and others from different domains of their work. This study received ethical clearance from the Norwegian Social Science Data Services.

## Findings

### *National versus local governance*

The Department of Education of São Paulo state administers large-scale student tests in primary and secondary education in parallel with the tests conducted by the Brazilian Ministry of Education. The Department also has its own educational indicator and applies it combined with the results of student tests to determine economic incentives for all school staff from schools that achieve performance targets. It also elaborates its own curriculum guidelines, which all public state schools are mandated

to follow, with descriptions of goals, competences, teaching strategies and assessment practices. Accordingly, it charges municipalities with tasks such as administering tests and reporting test results, providing short-term courses and seminars to teachers, and monitoring daily work in schools.

The Brazilian teachers questioned the orders that came from the state, which they received from the school leadership. Such orders included the need to constantly report on teaching plans and strategies to increase student outcomes. Despite this questioning, they showed understanding of the pressure that leaders felt to produce results. They said that the leaders were overworked from external demands, as one participant indicated below:

*The pedagogical leader does a very good job. She tries to help us, [to give us] what we need, she does, to give us support, and we are always asking for help. Poor her. She is in trouble [laughing]. [...] Not to mention the bureaucratic things that we do not see, and we know that there are many. There was a lot of stuff that came from the Department of Education.*

The Department of Education also provides a booklet-based teaching system with detailed instructions for each lesson as a support material for all subjects of primary and secondary education. Regarding the use of booklets, some teachers stated that they refused to engage in this initiative for several reasons. One expressed that the content of these booklets was too basic, while another stated that the lessons were too difficult for the students. A third informant explained that the activities were disconnected from the reality of the classroom, and one simply stated that she has her own way to work with students.

The Department of Education of São Paulo state also centralises the distribution of economic and material resources to schools, including the hiring, allocation and payroll of the school staff with the support of the municipal education authority. That is, the school has restricted autonomy to make monetary decisions. The state education authority takes charge of these decisions, and this action affects teacher autonomy. For example, one informant explained she could not give printed tests to students because the state does not provide a copy machine or printer for her school. Instead, she used the blackboard to post evaluation questions or gave other forms of evaluation, such as written individual or group reports based on textbooks. Another informant explained that he paid for Internet service for his students to use with their mobile phones because the school had no financial resources to afford the Internet or computers.

In Norway, all the schools use the same national curriculum in accordance with the same laws and regulations, and they are all mandated to participate in large-scale student tests administered by the Directorate for Education and Training, agency under the Ministry of Education and Research. Three Norwegian informants talked about the school leadership's responsibility to help teachers improve student outcomes by providing additional resources when necessary. For example, the leadership may need to allocate an extra teacher in the classroom to help students with more difficulties, as the following participant explained:

*If there were very bad results [on national tests], it might put some pressure on the leadership in relation to extra resources to in a way raise them or those who needed [extra help] in the classroom.*

The school leadership also supports teachers who want to participate in professional development activities, such as conferences, seminars, courses and further education. Teachers can choose between receiving a scholarship without reduced workload or having their workload and pay reduced, while attending further education. However, the teachers expressed that they could not freely decide which activities to undertake. They had to choose amongst those offered by the municipal education authority in partnership with higher education institutions in key areas set by the national government agenda. The offerings included courses on digital competences, mathematic skills and student mentoring. Two informants felt that their opinions on certain matters (e.g. iPad use and digital tools in the classroom) were ignored in decisions that came from the municipal education authority and were passed on to them by the school leadership.

### *Internal versus external control*

*Strong internal control in Brazil and moderate internal control in Norway.* In Brazil, the schools visited had cameras in the classrooms or hallways, which is a common surveillance practice in public schools of São Paulo state. The teachers explained that the school leaders justified the use of cameras as a protective measure to avoid thievery or violence carried out by students against teachers and peers, but some teachers experienced the use of cameras in classrooms as a form of internal control, as expressed below:

*I am sure she [the school principal] says, 'Look! That one is sitting there. That one is standing there', right? But, I do not care. I am the same person.*

*I think the camera helps them to see the blind spots. For example, there is a group chatting that I could not see, because a classroom is very dynamic, all the time. So, when we are giving attention to one group, the other is not always doing what needs to be done, what has been asked [Interviewer: Has someone looking at the TV monitor come to help you?] Yes, yes, already.*

School leadership often engages in direct inspection of teaching when parents issue complaints about certain teachers. Given these findings, it seems that Brazilian teachers feel that they have pedagogical freedom, but they struggle for control over teaching practices because of the use of cameras in the classrooms and direct inspection in some cases.

Regarding internal control in the Norwegian case, the practice of direct inspection of classroom teaching by the leadership is not common. The Norwegian teachers felt that their school leaders trusted their work, as seen below:

*The principal trusts that you are doing your job, and then you have the opportunity to be flexible [in the use of working time], as long as you show that you take the job seriously and meet up when you should, then you have freedom to do, as you want, occasionally. It is not so strict. So, it fits well.*

Four informants stated that they shared teaching responsibilities with colleagues or that they invited colleagues to observe their lessons, to discuss activities and to provide suggestions for improvement. In addition, three of these informants had student teachers from higher education institutions observing and discussing teaching

practices. Furthermore, four informants also mentioned the relevance of informal practices of student assessment on their teaching as instruments guiding their work.

*Strong external control in Brazil and Norway.* The Department of Education of São Paulo state implements standardised student tests in primary and secondary education. The Department also provides a digital platform with test results that teachers are expected to use in the planning and development of teaching strategies, as one informant explained below:

*So, there are the results, and then, for example, they ask me to make a timeline with the skills and competences according to this here. So, here on top of the results, I plan the activities I want to develop with them, focusing on the skills that I need to deepen with them, right?*

In Norway, the Directorate for Education and Training organises national testing and a digital platform with test results that help teachers to locate competences for development, especially for those students who are in the ‘danger zone’ or ‘the weakest ones’, which seems to constrain teacher autonomy in terms of pedagogical freedom over teaching practices. Nevertheless, some teachers reported that they do not rely on tests results when planning teaching activities, as in the following:

*I do not need the national test to tell me at which level my students are because I can see here in my lesson. I can see when he writes an adventure and fails to write in English. I believe this testing is unnecessary.*

This informant planned her teaching based on her own judgments, informed by her daily relationships with students.

### *Individual, collective, and professional autonomy*

*Constrained individual autonomy in Brazil and Norway.* Brazilian teachers stated that they are satisfied with the freedom they have to decide content and methods of instruction, despite requirements to adapt to a curriculum predefined by the Department of Education. For example, one informant explained:

*Each teacher can choose the topics to teach, and can choose the way to teach. So, I find this autonomy very interesting, having this freedom. I cannot choose the topics that I am going to teach in a general way, but within what is obligatory, I can choose what to teach, what to teach more, and how to teach.*

Norwegian teachers are also required to adapt to a curriculum predefined by the state. They expressed that it is important and part of the teaching profession to relate to school frames and curricula, as seen here:

*I am really free to decide on approaches within the framework that is set. Everyone has to apply the curriculum; everyone has to apply the regulations of the Education Act; everyone has to apply the general part of the curriculum overriding part that has now come. So, I have some frames, but within those limits, I experience quite a lot of freedom, both in the way I plan instruction and how it is implemented.*

Norwegian teachers perceived that they have freedom to decide on their classroom practices, as illustrated above.

*Constrained collective autonomy in Brazil and extended collective autonomy in Norway.* Brazilian teachers stated that they work mostly individually because they do not have time to meet and plan together with other teachers due to their intensive workload. Whenever they want to work together, they suggest collective projects (e.g. sport competitions, cultural fairs) to the school leadership, which provides some space for discussion and organisation of these events in the collective meetings that happen once a week. Nevertheless, these meetings are generally held to relay instructions and recommendations from the municipal school authority and to discuss school projects and the status of students in general, leaving no room for discussions in small groups or about specific topics.

The Brazilian informants perceived working together to discuss and plan pedagogical activities as sporadic and generally occurring in quick meetings in the hallway or in the staff room in the interval between classes, as stated here:

*In the hallway, sometimes in the planning, there is a little time for us to discuss, right? Here at this school a little more; in most schools it does not work, it does not work.*

*So, in the interval we use a little space to do this, but we end up never doing the activities, making a project happen.*

In the case of Norway, the school leadership organises meetings by school grade and subject, so teachers take part in weekly meetings to discuss and plan pedagogical activities together. Teachers, especially beginning teachers, experienced this arrangement as positive because it allows them to plan and share good practices, as described below:

*It is a very good environment here. We work a lot in teams, and I think we have a good working environment where we are open to new ideas and accept the feedback from each other. We have a good tone at school.*

Three beginning teachers explained that they also adapted and supplemented teaching plans already developed by experienced colleagues according to their needs and those of the students. However, in some cases, teachers perceived teamwork as control and as restrictive to their work, as this informant explained:

*I had a meeting yesterday, and it was not good at all. We were going to talk about the next period in Norwegian. It was as if the easiest is just to run the same as we did three years ago, the two others think. So, I thought that maybe it was a little simple; the plan was quickly finished somehow. They were very clear about what we were going to do. It was like two against one in a way. So, sitting there was quite a bad feeling.*

Nevertheless, one informant pointed to collective control as a way to avoid 'private practitioners' or 'that one [teacher] that does not relate to anything other than what oneself thinks'. In addition, such control may protect learners from harm, according to three other informants.

*Constrained professional autonomy in Brazil and extended professional autonomy in Norway.* Regarding participation in professional organisations, 7 out of 11

Brazilian teachers were disillusioned or indifferent to trade union activities. Only one informant knew who the union representatives at school were. The Brazilian informants described the union as immersed in power struggles and concerned about meeting its own interests as an organisation, not fighting for teachers' rights. For example, one informant stated,

*I do not even know if the union is very concerned about what happens in the education system today. [...] I see many personal interests. This is my view. In my daily life, I do not see them acting. I do not see that the union's activity changes my work. For this reason, I do not engage with them.*

Three other teachers defended the trade union's work, questioning, on the one side, teachers' lack of interest in political issues and, on the other side, the lack of opportunity for union representatives to meet teachers collectively within school settings, as seen here:

*There is no space for the union. [...] Because the representatives come either in the break time, or during the pedagogical meetings. But, in these meetings, there are also bureaucratic issues that the leadership has to pass on to the teachers, and there is little time left for them to talk, to discuss. [...] What I see about the union is the lack of space and time so that they can act more.*

Norwegian teachers knew who their union representatives at school were, and two of them described situations where they asked for the representatives' intermediation to solve workload and salary issues. However, two teachers, who also have leadership positions in the school, criticised the union's role, as demonstrated by the following informant's statement:

*I am very dissatisfied with the local trade union. They do not focus on the pupils, only on the rules that teachers can or cannot do. [...] For me, who plans the schedules, I see that, if everybody wants to take the day off after each extra activity they do, it will not work. And this affects the pupils because we cannot offer extra activities.*

According to this informant, the extremely protective role of the teachers' union undermines learning situations.

## **Discussion**

We set out to explore teachers' perspectives on their autonomy and agency. The findings indicated that teachers in Brazil are highly controlled compared to their Norwegian counterparts.

As previously illustrated, Brazilian teachers have restricted individual autonomy (Frostenson, 2015) because they must comply with a standardised state-based curriculum and testing when developing practices. In addition, they seem to achieve limited agency (Priestley *et al.*, 2012, 2015; Erss, 2018) because they adapt to the curriculum defined by the state, as illustrated by the teacher who explained how she adjusts to the topics provided by the curriculum. Despite few collective meetings due to time constraints and a vertical school culture that does not facilitate teamwork and participation in professional organisations, Brazilian teachers seem to navigate the system to find opportunities to meet and discuss practices. One example of such an

opportunity occurred when teachers asked school leaders to consent to the organisation of collective projects.

Norwegian teachers also adapt to a standardised curriculum provided by the state, reflecting constrained individual autonomy. They believe that it is part of their work to apply state acts and regulations, revealing a constrained agentic response to curriculum frameworks. However, they use collective working to construct and legitimise practices, as when they described how working teams share, discuss and agree upon teaching plans. These practices foster reflective responses, as illuminated by beginning teachers adopting and supplementing these plans according to their needs and those of their students. The will and capacity of these teachers for reflecting on and developing practices (Mausethagen & Mølstad, 2015) can be seen as their achievement of agency (Priestley *et al.*, 2012, 2015; Biesta *et al.*, 2017).

Nonetheless, collective working can be restrictive, as demonstrated by a teacher who wanted to do things differently but encountered resistance from his working team who wanted to keep the same practices that had worked for years. In general, Norwegian teachers perceived collective working as positive because it helped them to define particular standards, guiding their work and protecting students from harm, as explained by some informants. Cribb and Gewirtz (2007), Mausethagen and Mølstad (2015), and Wermke and Forsberg (2017) have also observed these positive perceptions of teachers regarding professional frames in different contexts.

Brazilian teachers face strong internal control (Mausethagen & Mølstad, 2015), illustrated by the use of cameras in classrooms. Even so, many of them negotiate this work climate of low trust by showing indifference to surveillance practices, as in the case of the teacher who explained that these practices do not affect her way of being and teaching. Brazilian teachers also endure strong external control (Mausethagen & Mølstad, 2015) through obligatory participation in student tests. In addition, they are required to use test results to plan strategies to improve students' outcomes and to write reports on these strategies and students' progress, manifesting a working environment with increasing accountability (Steiner-Khamsi, 2003; Grek, 2009). Brazilian teachers who meet performance targets receive economic incentives from the state, which may be why many of them internalise the language of accountability and 'go with the flow' or even 'play it safe' (Priestley *et al.*, 2012) to guarantee their bonus payments. One informant explained how she uses the digital platform and test results to plan teaching strategies, illustrating the internalisation of the language of accountability. The external control also extends to the regulations framed by the curriculum and the resources provided by the state in the form of a booklet-based system. Regarding the use of booklets, some teachers resist or refuse to engage in this initiative for several reasons, as mentioned in the findings, showing the Brazilian teachers' sense of agency.

Norwegian teachers experience moderate internal control because of a school culture of trust combined with collective control through group meetings, shared teaching and classroom observations by colleagues or student teachers. This lighter level of control allows them to navigate the system and be flexible during their work time if they behave in the ways expected of them, as one teacher explained. In addition, Norwegian teachers experience strong external control since they have to implement

the state-based curriculum goals. They also have to participate in national testing, and they are supposed to use test results to locate competences for improvement. Nevertheless, some teachers experience teaching to the test as something negative, and some do not use test results to plan teaching because they feel that their daily contact with students is the best way to know students' needs and potential. These responses revealed resistance or lack of engagement as expressions of agency (Priestley *et al.*, 2012; Mausethagen & Mølstad, 2015).

Brazilian teachers seem to adapt to state regulations and the need to constantly report on teaching strategies to improve students' outcomes. They are also affected by the centralisation of the provision of financial and material resources to schools. In this regard, they navigate the system by manipulating skills and using creativity to achieve their educational goals. As previously mentioned, one teacher paid for Internet access to use with the students' mobile phones during lessons.

In Norway, teachers are also responsible for improving student outcomes, and the school leadership has an important role in providing resources (e.g. extra teachers, iPads) and facilitating participation in professional development activities. However, local municipal authorities outside the school determine the content of these activities and the use of technologies in instruction with the goal of meeting the national education agenda. As such, the redistribution of responsibilities by the state affects teachers' capacity to make decisions without external constraints (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2007; Wermke & Höstfält, 2014; Mausethagen & Mølstad, 2015). Even so, Norwegian teachers are able to manipulate the demands made on them to get extra help or to participate in professional development activities when they feel such activities are needed. This iterative process of bending in relation to policy demands shows their exercise of agency (Priestley *et al.*, 2012). Norwegian teachers also turn to the union, which has an active role in school, to solve issues related to their working conditions, indicating an extended general professional autonomy, according to the definition by Frostenson (2015).

In summary, in both countries, teachers' perceptions of their scope of action in relation to curriculum frameworks lead them to 'play it safe' (Priestley *et al.*, 2012), often adapting to curriculum policies. Compared to their counterparts in Brazil, teachers in Norway have more possibilities to process and appropriate the curriculum, achieving agency through collective working. Both Brazilian and Norwegian teachers mediate or even resist the internal and external dimensions of accountability (Mausethagen & Mølstad, 2015), manifesting agency in instances such as the different uses of national tests results by Norwegian teachers and of the booklets by Brazilian teachers. Norwegian teachers also mediate policy through attending to expectations to gain some benefits, such as flexibility in the use of working time in school. In addition, Brazilian and Norwegian teachers manipulate skills and information, using creativity to achieve their goals and meet their needs despite the different working conditions extending or restricting teacher autonomy and the possibilities for exercising agency for both groups. The exercising of agency is especially creative in the Brazilian context, as opposed to the findings of Dias (2018).

## Final reflections

In this paper, we showed that teachers navigate policies in a variety of ways, resisting or processing, adapting or appropriating the logic of accountability to fit their needs and beliefs and those of their students. Brazilian teachers have a constrained scope of action and limited possibilities for achieving agency in comparison with their Norwegian counterparts due to a school culture of power, low trust and surveillance practices as well as the requirements of adopting a state-based standardised curriculum and testing. Even so, they manage to respond to accountability in different ways. Norwegian teachers also have their individual autonomy constrained by extended state control over the curriculum and testing; however, the practices of collective working open up for reflection and construction of teaching plans and strategies that frame and legitimise their work. As such, even though Brazilian and Norwegian teachers experience similar accountability policies, which may indicate a global trend, they perceive and respond to these policies in different ways because of the different social, cultural and material conditions in which they work. Hence, one pattern of teacher autonomy may suit one system but not be fit for a different system, and this discrepancy affects teachers' potential to achieve agency.

The concept of teacher autonomy allowed us to discuss teaching practices as regulated and controlled by actors within and outside schools, including the resources and regulations provided by the state. Conversely, the concept of teacher agency enabled us to explore the capacity and will of teachers to construct their agency within these frames by adopting and adapting policies to justify some practices and change others. The analytical framework had some limitations. For example, it revealed that teachers' perceptions of their autonomy differed from the constraints placed on their work, as both groups of teachers perceived that they had freedom to decide the content and methods of instruction despite the centralised outcomes-based curricula, testing and increasing requirements for reporting results. The concept of teacher agency provided us with different perspectives on how the teachers described their work. Our findings reveal that teachers act on and construct their professional identities and practices within the boundaries of accountability, which constrains but also informs their roles and practices as professionals.

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